

Christmas

AT THE

*GUEST
HOUSE*



SNOWY PINE RIDGE

FIONA BAKER

CHRISTMAS AT THE GUEST HOUSE

SNOWY PINE RIDGE BOOK FOUR

FIONA BAKER

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CHAPTER ONE

Colette Hillis stood in the middle of the large house, surrounded by boxes and her own bittersweet memories. She swallowed past a lump in her throat as she took in the empty walls, and rooms that had been stripped of their personality. A stray piece of blonde hair fell from the bun she had secured on the top of her head, and she paused for a moment to tuck it back into place.

The house had once belonged to an incredible, inscrutable, and until a few weeks ago, seemingly indestructible woman named Emma Cleaver. Emma had changed Colette's life. She had moved into Emma's guest house many years ago, when she'd taken up the role of housekeeper and caretaker for the aging woman.

It had been awkward at first, but Emma's tenacious and caring demeanor had worked its magic on Colette. Eventually, she had become closer to Emma than she had been to her own mother, with the old woman slowly becoming a maternal stand in for her. When Emma had passed away three weeks ago, it was uncovered that she had left the property, and everything on it, to Colette. No one had been surprised—no one besides Colette, that was.

With a sigh, Colette took a few additional steps across the room to an open box. As she took a peek in through the open flaps, a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. It was filled with photograph after photograph of a smiling, beautiful Emma throughout varying stages of her life. Her eyes roved over all of them until one in particular caught her attention.

Colette's hands shook slightly as she reached into the box and plucked the picture off the top of the pile. She remembered the precise moment that picture had been taken, since Colette herself had been the one to take it. Emma sat on a white couch, clad in a beautiful red dress with a shawl thrown over her narrow shoulders. Her white hair twisted into a chic chignon, and her cane propped against the arm rest. Her lips were pressed to those of a man her age, dressed in a sharp, black tux, while mistletoe and twinkling, white Christmas lights hung above them.

Colette wished that she could go back in time and talk to the two people who looked so in love in the photograph she now held in her hands. She thought of that love, of how, even though Nicholas and Emma had not gotten together until very late in their lives, their love had been sweet, and beautiful, and pure. Colette hoped that she would find a love like that someday, although she didn't want to wait quite as long as they did.

Running her fingers over the picture, it made her think of another Christmas party, one that would be coming up in just a few weeks. After Nicholas had passed away, he had left his mansion to his estranged granddaughter, Lacy. When Lacy had arrived in Snowy Pine Ridge, all she had had was misguided information about her grandfather. In fact, it had been Emma herself who had assisted the young woman in tracking down the money that Nicholas had left her, and it had been Colette's own cousin, Derek, and the amazing people of the town, that had helped Lacy learn the truth about the incredible and generous man her grandfather had been.

Lacy still owned the house and had spent quite a while renovating it to its former glamour. Even going as far as to take over hosting the Christmas parties that her grandfather had loved so much. And with Christmas lingering just on the horizon, it wouldn't be very long when everyone from town would be packing themselves into St. Nick's Place and enjoying a night of holiday festivities.

For a moment, Colette considered putting the photograph back in the box with the others. But for some reason, she could

not bring herself to part with this particular one. There were so many memories tied to that one, small, square piece of paper. And she didn't want for it to sit in a box to be forgotten.

"Maybe Lacy will want it," Colette said to herself as she walked to the other side of the room and placed it atop the wooden mantel. "And if not, I'll just add it to the album."

The sound of a car door slamming in the direction of the driveway grabbed Colette's attention, and she walked over to the large bay window at the front of the house and peered out into the snowy landscape beyond.

A bundled-up form trudged through the tall snow drifts carrying a white paper bag and a Styrofoam cup. The bag swayed as the figure swung its arms in time with their steps, and Colette caught a glimpse of a red, curling logo on the front. Her face immediately broke out in a wide, excited smile as she realized who was making their way to her front door.

She rushed through the maze of boxes, careful not to tip anything over, and pulled open the door right as Louise Thomas raised her fist to knock.

"Oh," Louise gasped loudly, her voice muffled against the fabric of her scarf.

The hood of Louise's winter coat was pulled up, hiding her brown hair. She had a scarf wrapped around her neck and the bottom half of her face, so only her eyes were visible. But Colette could see the shock written clearly in them, and she couldn't help but chuckle.

"Hey there! Come on in," Colette greeted her, taking a step back to allow the short statured woman to trudge past her.

Louise waddled through the threshold, stopping momentarily to kick the snow from her boots.

"Hold this for a moment, dear." Louise commanded in her firm but kind demeanor as she thrust the bag and the cup in Colette's direction.

Colette did as she was asked, stepping forward to grab the items in Louise's hands as the woman unwound her scarf and took off her coat, hanging them on the hooks directly by the

front door. Colette waited as the woman unlaced her snow boots and kicked them off, pushing them into the corner so she wouldn't track any of the water from the now melting snow across the hardwood floors of the house.

"That's for you," the woman said, nodding to the bag and cup in Colette's hands.

"Oh." Colette's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Thank you! Here, let's take these to the kitchen and I'll put on a pot of tea for you."

"That works." Louise agreed with a brisk nod.

They didn't say much as Colette set the bag on the table and began filling the kettle with water before putting it on the stove. Louise pulled out a chair and plopped down into it, watching Colette as she moved. When Colette finally joined her at the table, Louise studied her wearily and Colette had to fight not to squirm under the scrutiny of the other woman's gaze.

"How are you holding up?" Louise finally asked, not bothering to sugar coat the delivery.

When Colette had first moved to Snowy Pine Ridge right out of high school, she had found the woman terrifying. Louise was the owner of Frosty's Shack, one of the best restaurants in town. When Colette had first gone there, she had fallen in love with their house burger and fries and was all but living off of them for her first few months. One day, she ended up meeting Louise, and her brusque manner and blunt way of speaking had made Colette want to run for the hills. But after spending a little more time around her, she learned that while Louise may have a bit of a sharp exterior, she also cared immensely about her customers and her fellow townsfolk. And now, years later, Colette couldn't help but appreciate Louise and her tough love.

"Better than I was a few weeks ago, that's for sure," Colette said honestly.

The other woman just nodded, then, spying the untouched bag of food and cup, she reached across the table and pushed it

toward Colette.

“Eat up, girly. You’re looking thin.”

Colette laughed, but the heavenly smell coming from the contents made her stomach rumble loudly, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten all day. She opened the bag, and a heavenly scent tickled her nose, and she took a moment to breathe it in before glancing inside.

“You remembered!” Colette exclaimed as she reached into the bag and pulled out the burger and fries that were nestled inside.

“Of course I remembered.” Louise shook her head, offended that Colette doubted her abilities. “I remember all of my favorite customers’ go-to orders.”

“So I’m your favorite?” Colette asked, wiggling her eyebrows and earning an eye roll from Louise.

She bit into the burger and had to fight off a moan as the taste exploded across her tongue. She had no idea what Louise had her cooks do to elicit so much flavor in her burgers, but she prayed she never had them switch the formula. Reaching across the table once more, she grabbed the Styrofoam cup and punctured the lid with a straw. Bringing it to her lips and taking a quick swig, the taste of a peppermint chocolate shake made her sigh.

“Perfect.”

Louise chuckled at her but didn’t say anything as Colette took a few more bites, savoring each one.

“You know,” Colette said thoughtfully, “this is a big step up from the casseroles people usually bring.”

“Did you get a lot of those?” Louise arched an eyebrow in question.

“I could probably feed all of Snowy Pine Ridge with what’s in the fridge in the guest house.” Colette chuckled, thinking about all the people that had stopped in over the last few weeks.

“Well, at least there’s someone taking care of you.”

She felt a blush rise in her cheeks as she took another bite. Louise didn't press further though, opting instead to look around the space. Colette had gotten a lot done over the last few days as the haze of grief had slowly started to lift. The only thing really left for her to do was schedule for the storage company to come and pick up Emma's things and then give everything a good scrub down.

"Are you moving in here?" Louise asked and Colette shook her head.

"I can't." Her voice came out hoarse, betraying just how much the thought distressed her. "I thought about it, don't get me wrong. But I couldn't do it. It doesn't feel right."

Louise nodded. "Makes sense. So what are you gonna do with the place?"

"Rent it," Colette explained. "I figured I'll continue living in the guest house, and renting this out will provide me with income as I try to figure out what to do next."

"Good. That's a smart move."

"Yeah." Her voice trailed off a little as she contemplated what to say next. "I just want to find the right person, you know?"

"What do you mean?" Louise cocked her head in question.

"It's hard to imagine anyone else living here. I know Emma wouldn't want it to stay empty, but I just can't be the one to live here. Not for a while, anyway. It still feels too much like hers. But I don't want to rent it out to just anyone either. I want to take my time and choose someone that I know will cherish it as much as Emma did."

"I don't know if you'll ever find anyone that loves this house as much as Emma did."

Colette nodded, finishing the last bite of her sandwich.

"Thank you so much for this." She nodded her head toward the empty wrapper and container of fries. "I really needed it."

“I know you’ve been working almost non-stop on the house, and I know you well enough that I figured you’d forgotten to eat.”

“You’re not wrong.” Colette shrugged, drawing a laugh from Louise.

They sat for only a few more moments before Louise patted her thighs and announced that she needed to head back to the restaurant to prepare for the dinner shift. Both she and Colette pushed themselves back from the table, and Colette walked with her to the door.

Once Louise had wrapped herself back in her coat and secured her scarf and boots, she trudged back out into the snow. Colette stood for a moment watching her, thankful for the family that she had created here in Snowy Pine Ridge.

“Sometimes it’s the family that you make, and not the one that makes you, that really counts,” Colette said aloud, repeating the phrase that Emma used to say all the time when she’d catch Colette feeling sad about her past.

And as she stood in the doorway, watching as Louise fought her way through the snow to her car, and she thought of the way the townsfolk of Snowy Pine Ridge had shown up for her over the last three weeks, she felt as if she finally starting to truly understand what Emma had meant.

CHAPTER TWO

Zach McKnight jolted awake as he cast a panicked look around his room trying to identify the source of the shrill screeching that had pulled him from his dreams. He rubbed his eyes in an attempt to clear them of the sandpaper feeling and to bring the room into better focus. It was only when his gaze landed on his nightstand and his phone, that he realized where all the noise was coming from.

He lurched forward, his joints still clumsy with the heaviness of sleep, and jerkily pulled the phone from where it rested on his bedside table and glanced at the screen. Dread unfurled in his stomach as he read the name GAVIN in bold, bouncing letters. Zach blew out a hard breath as he tried to expel his nerves before he finally pressed “Accept” on Gavin’s call.

“Hello,” Zach said as he pressed the phone to his ear.

Throwing back the covers, Zach pushed himself up off his mattress and began pacing his large, Rochester apartment. The space was impressive, with large, floor-to-ceiling windows and an open concept that allowed for a lot of natural light. He’d kept the décor simple, not wanting to cloud his creative process by making his environment too cluttered. Now, however, in the cloudy morning light, he realized it just made the place look desolate and un-lived in, even though he had been living there for years.

“Hey there, Zach! How are you this morning?” Gavin’s voice drifted to him through the speaker, loud enough that it made his head pound.

Zach briefly wondered how much sleep he had been able to get. If his aching, sluggish body was any indicator, he knew that it couldn't have been much. He paced through the living room and then on to the kitchen, glancing at the clock on his stove. It was just after 8 A.M. Zach hadn't gone to bed until after 5, so he was running on only three hours of sleep, and the realization made him have to fight back a groan. But at least it explained his muddled thoughts.

"Zach?" Came the voice on the other end of the line, making Zach remember that he had been asked a question.

"Yeah, Gavin," Zach mumbled groggily. "I'm doing all right. What's going on?"

He knew that if he was receiving a call this early, it couldn't be good news. Gavin Bagley was the owner of an art gallery that currently was the only place Zach was selling his paintings. His canvases had been displayed and selling there for five years now, and up until recently, it had been quite lucrative. But for the past nine months or so, Zach had been unable to find inspiration or motivation to create anything worthwhile.

"I'll be straight up with you, Zach." Gavin's voice was brusque, and he was speaking quickly, as if he wanted to get the information out of him as fast as possible. "Your canvases haven't been selling very well as of late, which I'm sure you're aware of."

"I am," Zach said in a low, cautious voice.

"Right, well, we thought that perhaps it was just a lull. But everything you've turned over for almost a year had been just a shadow of your previous work. It's almost like someone is trying to impersonate you, and they're doing it badly."

Zach winced at Gavin's words, but he couldn't quite refute the truth of them. He could hardly remember the last time he had felt inspired enough to sit down and really create. When this particular batch of painter's block had hit, he'd had a few works that hadn't been displayed yet. So he'd given those to Gavin and hoped that by the time they had sold he'd have clawed his way out of the funk. But now it was nine months

later, and all Zach had was an apartment filled with half-finished canvases and no hope of being able to create anything else.

It hadn't been for a lack of trying. In fact, it was the reason he had been up so incredibly late the night before. For the entirety of his life, the middle of the night had always been the time where Zach had felt the most inspired. There had always been something about the quiet of the moon and feeling like you were the only person in the city that was awake that had filled him with a vigor and an urge to paint. So he'd stayed up night after night, staring at the blank canvases and praying for inspiration to strike, only to be let down when the first rays of sunshine began lightening the sky.

Running a hand through his auburn hair, Zach blew out a frustrated breath.

"I know. I'm just having a bit of trouble finding that spark, you know?"

"I'm aware." Gavin's voice was firm, but not exactly unkind. And it made the blow that came next hurt Zach all the more. "I've tried as hard as I can to get the new paintings to sell, but they just aren't. And everything that you've been giving me is even more uninspired than the last batch. I hate to do this, bud, I really do. But we have to drop you from the gallery."

Zach had expected it for a while now. Honestly, he had been surprised that Gavin had held out as long as he did. But it didn't stop the words from hitting him like a punch to the gut.

"I understand," he said in a low, dejected voice.

"I don't want to do this, man. You have to understand. And if you can get me stuff in the future that's up to your standard, I'd love to have you on my walls again. But I just can't keep going with what you're producing right now."

"I understand." Zach repeated the words as he hoped for the conversation to end.

"Okay. Well." Gavin's words trailed off awkwardly, and a few seconds of silence lasted between the two men. "If things

change, just let me know. Take care, bud.”

“Thanks, Gavin.” Zach hung up the phone and his heart pounded wildly.

He turned in a circle, his eyes roving over the canvases pressed up against walls, leaning against furniture, stacked by his workstation. Each one was more depressing than the last. Suddenly, that room, the apartment, the entire city felt like it was too small and was pressing in on him.

He walked over to his workstation and raked his eyes over what he'd been trying to paint the night before. But he felt absolutely nothing as he looked down on the swirls of paint that covered the white background.

Zach sighed heavily as he walked over to the large, floor-to-ceiling windows on the far side of his apartment and looked out at the city beyond. With a flutter in his chest, he realized that there was nothing for him there. Somewhere along the way, he had lost himself. And that was now being reflected in his art. He needed to figure out a way to reconnect with who he was, his inspiration, and why he fell in love with art in the first place. And there was one thing that he knew for sure, he wouldn't be able to find any of that if he stayed in Rochester.

* * *

Lacy Morse had never met a problem that she couldn't solve. She had ventured out on her own and studied abroad in France before earning her business degree. She had become one of the highest regarded consultants in St. Louis, and then again in Snowy Pine Ridge. She had renovated her grandfather's beloved mansion and turned it into the go-to event space, and had even taken on the task of hosting the annual Christmas party for the townspeople.

But now, as she wobbled on the rungs of a ladder and struggled to maneuver around her growing belly to hang the Christmas lights, she feared that she had finally met her match.

Letting out another stubborn huff, Lacy pushed herself a bit farther up on the ladder, reaching for the hook she'd had

her husband, Derek, place in the ceiling the other day to drape the string of lights across. The ladder wobbled unsteadily under her, making a little squeak of surprise fall from her lips, and a worried voice rang out from down the hall.

“Oh, hey,” Derek said as he rushed toward her with a worried look on his face. “What are you doing up there?”

“Trying to hang these lights,” she explained, reaching once more for the hook. As she did, the ladder gave another tiny wobble.

“Well, get down from there! That’s what you have me for. You shouldn’t be climbing ladders right now.”

Lacy turned to glance at Derek, who shot her a pointed look before glancing down at her swollen stomach. Begrudgingly, she made her way down the ladder, and when her feet found solid ground once again, she gave him a quick kiss.

“I’m not made of porcelain, you know.” She passed him the string of lights that she’d been working with, and then stepped back so he could try to finish what she had been working on.

“I know you aren’t,” he answered. “But you’re growing something incredibly precious. And you don’t have to do it all yourself. That’s what you have me for.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Lacy waved her hand in dismissal, but the smile that she gave her husband let him know that there was no actual malice behind her words.

She watched Derek as he worked, her heart swelling with love as she rubbed her pregnant stomach. Lacy directed him on where to string the lights, telling him the vision she had for the decorations for the upcoming Christmas party. There was so much left to do to get St. Nick’s Place ready for the people that would come streaming in for the holiday festivities. She knew that if Derek had his way, he would wrap her in bubble wrap and have her stay still until their daughter was born. But sitting still wasn’t in her nature.

She gave Derek a few, additional adjustments for the lights, and when he climbed down, he wrapped his arms around the small of her back and they stood to look around the space. Even after all this time, Lacy still couldn't believe that St. Nick's Place was hers. After she had found out the truth about her grandfather, she had felt so connected to this house and to Snowy Pine Ridge, and she adored the home and the life that she and Derek had created there.

They broke apart, taking a few steps back to admire their handiwork. The lights they had just finished twinkled above them merrily, weaving back and forth across the ceiling. Garland wrapped around the staircase banister on the far end of the hall, with giant poinsettia blooms nestled inside the greenery. Mistletoe hung in doorways and in intervals throughout the space. Lacy reached down and grabbed Derek's hand, threading their fingers together and leading him through to the other rooms.

In the main ballroom, there was sprayed, fake snow misting the gilded mirrors. Red Christmas balls hanging from transparent wire dangled from the ceiling at varying lengths. And at the far end, a large, fluffy Christmas tree that was just begging to be decorated.

"Not too shabby," Derek mused.

A sharp, swift movement in her belly grabbed her attention and Lacy let out a gasp.

"Derek!" she exclaimed as she brought her hand to her stomach, feeling around for another sign of movement.

"What? What is it?" Derek's eyebrows were raised, and a look of worry flashed across his face.

"The baby," Lacy explained as a wide, happy smile tugged at her lips. "She kicked."

She reached forward and grabbed Derek's hand, bringing it to her protruding stomach. The baby kicked again, right underneath the pressure of Derek's palm. They held each other's eyes as joy bounced between them. And Lacy couldn't imagine anything being more perfect than that moment.

CHAPTER THREE

Colette laughed heartily as the large husky laid down with a harumph across her lap, and she stuck her hands into the dog's thick, warm fur.

“Oh, Bart,” she said with a sigh as the dog glanced at her lovingly. “What are we going to do with our time now?”

Bart's tongue lolled out of the side of his mouth, making Colette laugh again. Over the last couple of days, the boxes and items that wouldn't be remaining in the home had all been moved into storage, and Colette had scrubbed everything from top to bottom.

There was a room that Emma had wanted to paint, and a couple odds and ends to finish up. But other than that, the to-do list for the main house had dwindled down to almost nothing. And all of the free time was making Colette go a little stir crazy.

To help herself pass the time, she'd taken to coming out to her cousin's dog sled company and spending time with the huskies. Being surrounded by their energetic, fluffy bodies had been the highlight of her day, and it also helped to make her feel like she was actually doing something.

The sound of the door to the kennel opening and closing had Colette pushing herself off the floor. Tufts of Bart's white fur clung to her dark jeans, and she tried to brush it off before deeming it a lost cause. Bart sat on his haunches, watching her and panting. The other dogs were out playing in the snow, and

Colette had been glad when Bartholomew had come in to visit her.

Walking through the spacious kennel that had been decorated for each individual dog, and with Bart trotting along at her heels, Colette made her way toward the office workspace at the front of the building. She pushed open the large, wooden door and took a peek into the room beyond. A heavily pregnant Lacy was rifling through papers that sat on the desk, and her head popped up at the sound of the door opening.

“Oh! Hi, Colette,” Lacy said as her face broke out into a wide, welcoming grin. “Derek didn’t tell me you were coming today.”

“Just needed a little bit of time with the dogs. Getting my mind off of things, you know.”

Lacy nodded at Colette’s words as the two women closed the distance between them, wrapping each other in a warm, welcoming embrace. The hug was made difficult by Lacy’s stomach, and they both laughed as they maneuvered themselves into the correct position.

“How are you doing, by the way?” Lacy asked when they finally drew away from each other.

“There are ups and downs. I’m doing okay today, though,” Colette answered, and Lacy gave her arm a sympathetic squeeze.

“I know I’ve told you this about a thousand times, but if you need anything, just let us know. From Derek or from me.”

Colette smiled at her friend, incredibly thankful that her cousin had found such a phenomenal woman to settle down with.

“So,” Colette said, in an effort to change the subject. “What brings you this way?”

“Oh, Derek brought an invoice out here that I want to look over.” Lacy took up rifling through the pile of paper once again, and Colette chuckled.

“You don’t know how to slow down, do you?”

“I absolutely don’t. So don’t you dare go expecting it from me. I can’t take the overprotectiveness from you too.”

Colette smiled. “Has Derek been hounding you about taking it easy?”

Lacy chuckled, rolling her eyes. She seemed to give up looking through the pile on the desk and instead took a seat in the desk chair, swiveling it back and forth. “I love my husband, I truly do. But if he had it his way, I’d be living in a bubble.”

“He’s just protective of you and your baby girl.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Colette laughed too as she imagined exactly how much of a Mother Hen Derek had become since the announcement of the pregnancy.

“Anyway, since I’m here, I’ve got a few other things to do as well. It’s dinner time for the dogs,” Lacy said, leveraging herself out of her chair and walking toward the door to the kennels.

An excited Bart yipped at their heels, spinning in circles. The sound of the barking alerted the others, and soon their furry bodies came bounding through the doggy door at the back of the building. Lacy cooed to them enthusiastically as she walked over to their bowls and started doling out food from the bin.

“I can do that, you know.” Colette extended her hand in offer, but Lacy quickly waved her away.

“It feels good to be active,” Lacy explained, brushing a strand of honey brown hair back from her face. “Plus, this little girl is gonna have to get used to the dog sled life.”

Lacy winked at Colette as she filled the last bowl, and Colette rolled her eyes. Stepping forward and grabbing the water bowls, Colette ignored Lacy’s protests as she began to fill them. As she placed the bowls back in their spot and the dogs rushed over to drink their fill, she turned back to Lacy.

The other woman had her hand on her belly, massaging it as a delighted expression crossed her face.

“She’s kicking again,” Lacy explained. “I think she’s decided that she likes playing soccer with my bladder.”

Colette laughed. “You think you’re ready for her to be here?”

“I mean, we’re already dog parents.” Lacy gestured around them to the multitude of dogs drinking, eating, and playing happily. “What’s a human child to add to the mix?”

Then she stopped, pointing a finger at her stomach.

“Don’t get any ideas though, little one,” she commanded. “You still have a little bit of cooking to do.”

Colette shook her head at her friend as they stood and watched the dogs play for a minute. She glanced sideways at Lacy, letting a small rush of gratitude roll through her. Colette wished that she could go back in time and talk to her younger self and let her know how her life was going to play out. Her childhood had been incredibly tumultuous. Her father had been an alcoholic, and she’d been estranged from him for years. Her mother had done her best, but she had also been in survival mode as she had tried to raise a child on her own after they had separated.

When her mother had remarried, Colette had been in high school, and her stepfather hadn’t been particularly fond of teenagers. So she’d left home almost immediately after graduating and had moved to the only other place where she had family—Snowy Pine Ridge. She and Derek had always been close, and the sleepy, beautiful, New Hampshire town had welcomed her with open arms. It had been home for her ever since.

Colette couldn’t help but feel incredibly thankful for the family that she had created here, and Emma’s words about the family you create drifted through her mind once more. As she looked at Lacy and then down at her belly, she couldn’t hide her grin at the thought that soon, her family would grow by one more person.

“How are things going with the baby shower?” she asked.

“The plans are coming along well. Sarah and Louise have it all under control.” Lacy’s face softened, a sympathetic expression crossing her features.

“I’m sorry that I haven’t been able to help much,” Colette murmured, feeling warmth rising up into her cheeks.

Lacy shook her head and took a step closer toward her friend. She extended her hand, resting it reassuringly on Colette’s shoulder. “You don’t have anything to apologize for. Losing Emma has been terrible for everyone in town, but for you most of all. We all understand.”

Colette felt her throat grow thick with emotion, and she swallowed past it.

“Thank you,” she choked out.

“You don’t need to thank me.” Lacy gave her shoulder a squeeze, her green eyes shining. “Just having you here to be involved in little Belinda’s life will be enough.”

She patted her belly, and Colette chuckled.

“So the name is Belinda now?” She raised an eyebrow in question.

“For now.” Lacy shrugged one shoulder, a grin tugging at her lips. “But we change it almost every single day. So who knows what it will be tomorrow?”

Colette laughed again, and the two women turned and strode toward the exit of the kennel. They secured everything for the night, and then Colette walked with Lacy back to her car.

“Want me to drive you home?” Lacy offered, but Colette shook her head to decline.

“It’s a nice evening,” she explained. “I think I’d like the walk.”

Lacy nodded before pulling Colette into a hug. They said their goodbyes, and Colette stood to watch as Lacy pulled away. They didn’t live far from the kennel, but with the ice

and snow posing a threat to Lacy now that her center of gravity was almost entirely off balance, Colette knew her cousin had insisted that his wife drive instead of risking the walk.

Tucking her hands in the pockets of her winter coat, Colette began her walk back home. Despite the snow-covered lawns, the sidewalks had been shoveled and salted until they were clear. The sound of her footsteps on the pavement and the hush of a winter evening wrapping around her calmed the bits of her that had begun to ache. Being with Lacy in the dog kennel had staved off some of her loneliness, but now it was settling on her all over again.

She missed Emma. She knew that the ache would dull over time, but Colette couldn't imagine a time where she wouldn't miss the old woman that she had loved so much. She wished that Emma could have been here long enough to meet Derek's daughter.

As Colette's boots crunched over the salt covered sidewalk, she made a silent promise to herself to love the little girl a little extra for Emma too.

CHAPTER FOUR

Zach drummed his fingers on the steering wheel while “*Carol of the Bells*” played on the radio. His head swiveled from side to side as he tried to take in the beautiful, picturesque town. From the moment he had pulled off the highway, he’d been bombarded with sight after sight that looked like it would fit perfectly on the front of a Christmas card.

The small buildings were painted bright, cheery colors, and they were all decorated with beautiful, lush wreaths. The sparkling, multicolored lights twinkled in the sunshine, and the fine layer of snow that had fallen the night prior was mostly undisturbed where it lay across charming front lawns. And as small, perfect snowflakes started to fall from the sky for the second time that day, he felt like he was inside a snow globe.

Zach’s stomach gave a loud, insistent growl. He hadn’t planned much of his trip to Snowy Pine Ridge. In fact, his plan had consisted of one step and one step only—get there. Now that he was on the main road that ran through the center of town, he didn’t quite know where to go next. Zach looked around him, taking in the names of businesses as he passed.

About half a block away, a lit up white sign with red writing caught his eye.

“Frosty’s Shack,” Zach said as he read the scrawling crimson script. “Of course it’s named after Frosty the Snowman.”

Zach chuckled as he turned into the parking lot and turned off the engine to his car. He glanced toward the building,

taking in its brick exterior and large, welcoming windows. His stomach gave another loud rumble in protest, and he knew he wouldn't be able to wait much longer. Pushing the door to the car open, he stepped out into the cool, snowy air. His shoes crunched over the flattened snow of the parking lot as he made his way toward the door.

The moment he grabbed the handle and tugged, a bell chimed merrily, announcing his arrival. The space was relatively small, but well decorated. It reminded Zach of a classic diner, with black and white floors, red leather booths lining the walls, and red stools pushed up to the short counter by a vintage cash register. The stools at the counter were filled with people, as were two of the booths, and people turned to look at him as he stepped into the warm, inviting space.

A woman stood beside the counter. Her brown hair was swept back from her face, and he could see the tip of a pencil sticking up behind her head from where it secured her hair. She gazed at him with curiosity as he approached, her eyes a startling hazel that he was able to make out even at a distance. And they watched him like a hawk, not missing a step.

“Take a seat anywhere,” the woman called out.

Her tone was brusque and frank, but somehow didn't seem unkind. Zach didn't know why, but he found himself immediately thinking of the kind of teachers he had growing up that were always described as “tough but fair,” and how you always knew they were the ones that cared the most.

He made his way over to one of the empty booths and cast another glance back to the woman, who was now locked in conversation with one of the older men sitting at the bar. From his distance, Zach couldn't make out the name tag on the apron that she wore.

Drumming his fingers on the table, he turned to glance out the window to try to pass the time while he waited for a server to approach him. People were milling about the sidewalk, making their way from business to business. But somehow, no one seemed to be in any particular hurry.

People stopped to talk to one another, they smiled, and they laughed. From where he sat, he could spot what appeared to be a town square just beyond the row of buildings across the street. A large, gleaming Christmas tree stood in the middle, its lights twinkling merrily even in the daylight, and Zach was almost overcome by how charming everything was all over again.

His friend Dennis, a fellow artist, had told him about this place. How during the times when he had struggled most with creating and with painting, he would escape to Snowy Pine Ridge, and somehow, his inspiration would always return to him. Dennis had once said that he wasn't sure if it was the town itself, or the people, but there was something magical about it that would have him feeling excited to create in no time at all.

Zach had been skeptical any time he'd heard Dennis talk about it. And even last night when he was packing up his things and preparing to make the trip himself, he had doubted it would work. But although he hadn't even been in the town for an entire thirty minutes, he was already starting to think that Dennis might have been on to something.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there, staring out the window and watching the people of Snowy Pine Ridge go about their daily lives, but it was enough time that his stomach gave three more loud grumbles. Finally, he saw someone moving toward him out of the corner of his eye.

Turning to glance in that direction, Zach spotted the same woman he'd seen earlier approaching. He gave her a quick, broad smile as his gaze flicked downward to her name tag as she got closer, glimpsing the name LOUISE stamped in bold black letters.

"Hello there," Louise said in the same brusque voice she'd used when he'd walked in the restaurant. "How are you doing today?"

"I'm doing well, thank you." Zach gave her what he hoped was a charming smile.

"What can I get started for you to drink?"

“Just coffee please, and a glass of ice water.”

Louise nodded at him and then passed him a menu.

“Take your time and look that over. I’ll be right back with your drinks.”

Zach gave her another smile as she retreated, then let his eyes wander over the laminated menu she had given him. The menu wasn’t large, just one sheet with only a few offerings printed on it for appetizers, burgers and sandwiches, and then a full list of varying flavors of milkshakes. He laughed to himself as he read their names: things like Rudolph’s Rocky Road, Santa’s Favorite Milkshake, and Mrs. Claus’s Cookie Shake listed on line after line.

As he perused the menu, his mouth began watering. There may not have been a lot of options, but the food looked phenomenal. And if the smell coming from the kitchen was any indication, it would taste just as good.

Louise returned to the table after a couple minutes, setting a mug of coffee and a glass of ice water down in front of him.

“Decided what you want?” she asked, and when he nodded, she raised a small pad of paper and a pen.

Zach just told her he’d take the Frosty’s Burger with the chili cheese fries, and she nodded, her lips tilting upward a little. “Good choice.”

Louise lowered the pen and paper, but she didn’t walk away like he’d expected. Instead, the woman’s eyes crinkled a little at the corners as she took him in from head to toe, and Zach had to fight not to squirm under her perceptive stare.

“Are you staying in town? Or just passing through?” she asked with a tilt of her head.

“Staying, hopefully.” Zach took a sip of his coffee, and let the rich, heavenly taste roll across his tongue. “Although I’m not sure where yet.”

Louise’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You didn’t think about that ahead of time?”

“No.” Zach shook his head and chuckled. “I kinda just wanted to get here and figure it out as I go. Do you know of any place that has a room for rent?”

“You could always try the Warm and Bright Hotel. It’s about a mile up the road. Has a big red sign out front, you can’t miss it.”

Louise used her pen to point in the direction he had been heading earlier, and Zach gave her a nod of thanks.

“I’ll give that a try, thank you.”

Louise smiled at him, the first full smile he’d seen on her face since he’d arrived, and it made him feel like he’d earned a seal of approval. She tucked her notepad into her apron and then turned to walk away, but she didn’t get far before she spun back around to face him.

Her bright, hazel eyes were alight with something that Zach couldn’t place. Excitement, maybe?

“Or,” she said, the corners of her mouth drawing up into a grin. “If you’re going to be staying for a while, at least past Christmas, there’s a house available to rent. Really nice, fully furnished.”

Zach sat a little straighter, intrigued by the idea of having that much space at his disposal to lay out his canvases and relax instead of being cramped into a hotel room for the duration of his stay.

“That sounds lovely, actually. I don’t know for sure how long I’ll be here, but it should definitely be past Christmas. Who can I call?”

Louise shook her head. “No need to call. Just stop by.”

She took her notepad back out of her apron and scrawled something on a fresh page. When she was finished, she ripped the piece of paper out and handed it to him.

“Just knock on the door and ask for Colette. She’s the owner, and she’ll get you set up.”

Zach studied the piece of paper, reading the address. Based on his limited knowledge of the town, he didn’t think the

house in question was very far away. He glanced back up to thank Louise, but she had already wandered back to the counter to put in his order and continue her conversation with the man that still sat there.

Stuffing the piece of paper into his pocket, Zach turned once more to look out the window. Louise seemed a bit eccentric, but very sweet. If she was any indication at all of the types of people who lived here, he had a feeling that he'd have quite the interesting time in Snowy Pine Ridge.

CHAPTER FIVE

Colette turned another page of the photo album and brought her mug of tea to her lips. The fireplace in the corner crackled merrily, and she ran her fingers over the fluffy, furry blanket she had draped across her lap as a cozy, warm feeling filled her chest.

The blanket had been one of Emma's, one that she and Colette had sat under in the family room on more nights than she could count while Emma had told Colette stories. They'd sat under the blanket while the old woman had taught her to crochet, and while they had watched terrible reality television together and gossiped over the people on the screen. Having it over her now, as she looked at the pictures she'd decided to keep that detailed Emma's life, Colette felt better than she had in weeks.

She stopped on the next page, looking at one of a group of women all sitting on the sofa in Emma's living room. Lacy, Louise, Colette, Emma, and Sarah were all piled on the couch, grinning like mad as they held up one individual red rose apiece. It had been *The Bachelor* finale, and Emma had wanted to host a viewing party. So they'd all crammed into the living room, Colette had made everyone hot chocolate and bought them roses, and Louise had brought everyone food from Frosty's.

Colette could remember how in the middle of the finale, Emma had reached over and patted Colette's leg.

"You should go on this show," the old woman had whispered.

Colette had laughed her off, saying that she had everything she needed right here in Snowy Pine Ridge. But now, she couldn't help but wonder if she should have taken Emma a little more seriously. Not necessarily about going on reality TV, but maybe she should've taken finding love a little more seriously. There were plenty of eligible men in town. The problem was that Colette knew all of them already and had no interest in dating a single one of them.

When Emma had been alive, taking care of her had filled Colette with a sense of purpose and companionship. Now, she felt lost in a swath of endless time with nothing to do.

Colette had never been someone who felt lonely. Alone, yes. But never lonely. Not until now.

She sighed and took another sip of her tea, draining the last bit from the mug before she flipped another page that led her down a different path on memory lane.

A loud *bang* followed by a string of cursing outside grabbed her attention, and her heart began to race.

Pushing herself to her feet, Colette crept toward the window. She pulled back her heavy, green plaid curtain and peered into the yard and at the main house beyond. A car she didn't recognize was parked in the drive, and a large, bundled up form was stumbling around on the front porch. Crime wasn't something that many people concerned themselves with in Snowy Pine Ridge, but there was a first time for everything.

For a moment, Colette glanced at the phone and wondered if she should call 9-1-1, but she quickly dismissed the idea. The town wasn't even large enough to have its own dedicated police force. And she couldn't imagine that the sheriff, a stout man with a round belly due to his fondness of eggnog and other sweets, would be in a much better position than she was to stave off trouble.

Colette threw a hurried glance around her cottage for anything that could be used as a weapon. Spying a wrought iron fire poker, she grabbed it, threw on her boots and her winter coat, and strode out into the snowy day.

She tried as hard as she could to be quiet, but the sound of the crunching snow under her weight announced her arrival. She kept the fire poker behind her back as she approached cautiously, and the figure ahead of her turned with a jolt.

Confusion and surprise washed through Colette as she took in the man standing before her. A tendril of auburn hair had fallen onto his forehead and was peeking out from beneath the hood of his coat. His eyes were startlingly green, even at a distance. And he had a jawline that Colette couldn't recall seeing outside of old Hollywood movies. Now that she was closer to him, she realized he was taller than he had looked from the safety in her cottage, and his broad-shouldered frame loomed over her.

“Hello,” Colette said, swallowing past the nervous lump that had formed in her throat. “How can I help you?”

The man pushed back his hood and blinked at her with those disconcertingly attractive eyes. “Louise said to knock, but I only realized when I got here that she didn't say on which door.”

“Louise sent you?” Colette furrowed her brow in confusion. “I'm sorry, but who are you?”

She winced at the last sentence, realizing that it had come out harsher than she'd intended.

“Sorry,” he said, shaking his head and chuckling at himself. “I guess that information would have helped. My name is Zach McKnight. I'm going to be staying in town for at least a month, and Louise mentioned you had a house that might be available to rent for that time?”

Now it was Colette's turn to blink at him. Louise's visit hadn't been long ago, only a few days. The woman moved quickly, Colette had to give her that.

“Or maybe she was mistaken?” Zach's eyebrows knitted together, and he looked at her warily.

It was only then that Colette realized she had been staring at him with her mouth slightly agape as she tried to process the

fact that Louise had sent him to her to rent Emma's house. She shook her head to clear, affixing a smile on her face.

"No, Louise was right. The house is available for short- or long-term rental. If you want to follow me, we can go over the details."

Colette hooked a thumb over her shoulder toward her cottage, and a feeling that was half gratitude and half anxiety washed through her when Zach nodded. She turned and began making her way back through the yard toward her front door.

"Were you going to bludgeon me to death?" Zach's voice came from behind her as he followed the path she was carving through the snow.

"What?" She glanced over her shoulder and shot him a bewildered look. But when he shifted his focus down to the hand that still clutched the fire poker, she flushed as she remembered she was still holding the poker. "Oh, that. Well, I didn't know what was causing all the noise, so I thought it was better to be safe than sorry."

"Yeah, sorry. I didn't mean to be so loud. Did you know you have a metal bucket by the door that's really hard to see when it's covered in snow?"

Colette laughed as she finally put together the pieces of exactly what had occurred, picturing Zach tripping over it and the resulting noise that had grabbed her attention. When they arrived at the cottage, she pushed open the door, and the warmth from the fire rushed forward to greet them. She kicked the snow from her boots and left them by the door as she walked over to the kitchen.

"Can I get you anything to drink? Water, tea, hot chocolate?"

She fully expected him to say no, so when Zach answered her with a, "I'll have whatever you're having," a small shock zipped through her. She hurriedly threw together two hot chocolates topped with whipped cream and peppermint sprinkles and then padded across the hardwood floor to where he'd sat in a plush chair by the fire.

He'd taken off his coat when he'd come in the door, and the sleeves of his long-sleeved shirt were pushed up, exposing muscular forearms. He was probably about her age, she surmised, although there was something energetic and confident about him that made her feel like an old woman in comparison.

Don't be silly, Colette, she reminded herself. You're a woman in your prime, and you have plenty of living to do yet.

Shaking herself from her thoughts, she passed him one mug, keeping the other for herself.

"Here you go," she murmured.

Zach eyed the drink in his hands, and then shook his head with a laugh.

"What?" Colette asked, glancing at her own hot chocolate to see what was so funny.

"It seems like everyone in town likes their festive, decadent drinks. Frosty's Shack had a milkshake menu a mile long, and almost all of them were some kind of Christmas flavor."

Colette shrugged, a grin tugging at her lips. "Why wouldn't we like a festive drink? Christmas is the best time of year, after all."

"I'm not judging," Zach said, raising one of his hands in mock surrender. "It's just everything here is so different than where I come from."

"And where is that?"

"Rochester, New York." He raised his mug and took a quick sip. Colette watched as his eyebrows darted up in approval. "This is excellent."

She gave him an appreciative smile. "What brings you all the way from Rochester?"

Zach took another quick drink and then glanced into the fire. A silence stretched out between them, and for a moment, Colette wondered if he was going to answer her. Then, finally, he sighed.

“I just needed a change of scenery.” His voice was clipped, and she could tell that he didn’t want her to press the issue further, so she didn’t.

“Well, Snowy Pine Ridge will definitely give you that. There’s nowhere like it in the world,” she told him with a hint of pride.

“You know, I think you might be right.” Zach chuckled. “This place looks like the inside of a snow globe, or a Thomas Kinkadee painting.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Colette arched an eyebrow at him.

“Not at all,” Zach answered quickly. “It’s nice. Quiet. I need some quiet.”

She nodded. “Snowy Pine Ridge definitely moves a little slower than most towns. So you’ll find plenty of quiet here. And you said you’d be staying for at least a month?”

Zach nodded, and Colette paused to take a sip of her own drink. She watched as Zach’s eyes roved over the contents of her cottage and then stopped to study something. Following the line of his gaze, she spotted the photo album she had been leafing through before she’d gone outside and found him standing in the snow. The album was open to a selfie that she had taken with Emma, both of their cheeks smushed together as they smiled broadly at the camera. A flush rose in her face, and her hand darted down to close the photo book.

“Your grandmother?” he asked, his voice gentle.

“No.” Colette shook her head. “She owned this property. She passed away almost a month ago.”

A pregnant pause filled the air, broken only by the cracking of logs on the fireplace and the ticking of the clock above the mantel. Colette didn’t want Zach to see how much saying those words aloud hurt her, and she worked her jaw back and forth as she tried to keep her expression neutral. But when her gaze met his, his green eyes softened with something like understanding.

“I’m very sorry for your loss.”

His words hit her right in the chest. It wasn't like plenty of other people hadn't said that to her over the past few weeks. In fact, she'd heard that exact phrase so many times recently that the words had begun to lose all meaning. But there was something about them coming from a stranger, from someone who didn't know her and who hadn't known Emma, that made her feel seen. As if her hurt and her grief was more valid now that it wasn't being tied in with the loss that everyone else who'd loved Emma was experiencing.

"Thank you." Colette blew out a shaky breath. "Anyway, in regard to the house, I'd be happy to rent it to you. To be honest with you, I wasn't expecting someone to be interested in the property so quickly. I have a few things that I need to finish inside, but I can have it ready for you to view by tomorrow evening."

Zach gave another quick nod. "That's faster than I was expecting, so it won't be a problem at all."

"Before you sign anything, I'll let you check the place out. I want to make sure you actually like it, obviously. If you do, we can go from there and discuss price and all of that?"

"Sounds more than reasonable." Zach gave her a quick, reassuring smile, and she wondered if her conflicting emotions about renting Emma's place were beginning to show on her face. He shot another quick glance around the room before lifting his mug to his lips again.

Colette told him a bit about Emma's old place, listing off a few special things about the house that he would get to see tomorrow. Things like the fireplaces, the drawing room, and the large windows. She also mentioned that in the spring—should he stay that long—the backyard had a giant, beautiful flower garden.

"That's great. I noticed the bay window at the front of the house. What about the rest of it? How is the lighting?" Zach asked.

"Oh, it gets tons of natural light. Emma loved the sunshine, and a few years ago, she paid to have all of the windows on

the back part of the house widened to let more in. So you'll get amazing south sun throughout almost the entire home."

"Perfect." He nodded, sounding excited.

"That's all I have about the house until tomorrow, unfortunately," she explained, taking the final sip of her hot chocolate. She glanced over to Zach's mug and noted that his was empty as well.

"Then I'd better get going. Louise told me about the Warm and Bright Hotel, so I'll head that way for the night." Zach stood, passing his empty mug over to Colette when she held her hand out for it.

She walked him toward the door, setting the mugs down on the kitchen island as they passed by. Zach put his coat back on, then stepped out into the snow before turning to face her once more.

"I'll see you tomorrow then?" he asked.

"See you tomorrow," Colette confirmed as she gave him a quick smile, and he turned and strode across the snowy lawn back toward his car.

Colette closed the door behind him and then walked into the kitchen. Grabbing the mugs off the island, she took them to the sink and began to rinse them. She heard his car door shut with a snap, followed by the crunch of Zach's tires driving over the snow as he left her driveway. As he drove away, all the weight of the emotions warring inside her started to descend.

She hadn't expected Emma's house to be rented so quickly, and if she was being honest with herself, she wasn't sure if she was ready to see someone else living there. Colette knew that she needed to do it, knew that she couldn't allow the house to remain empty and that she would need to rent it eventually. But when she closed her eyes and tried to imagine someone who wasn't Emma residing within those walls, she couldn't make the image come.

Blowing out a breath, she cast a glance around her kitchen.

"I know just what will help," she said to herself.

Pulling open the pantry, she rifled through it until she found all of the ingredients for one of her favorite comfort meals. She got to work cooking, and when she was done, Colette piled a heaping serving of spaghetti and meatballs into a bowl, then walked to her living room. She turned on the television and quickly pulled up the show she was looking for.

As the opening of an old season of *The Bachelor* started to play, she cuddled under Emma's old blanket and began to eat. The familiar food and show helped wash some of her nervous energy away, and as the evening faded and the moon began to rise, she found herself accepting—and even getting a bit excited about—what was to come.

CHAPTER SIX

Sarah Langston stood in front of the large, industrial oven with her hands on her hips as the smell of pumpkin and gingerbread floated around her. She blew a tendril of blonde hair that had escaped from her ponytail out of her eyes as she counted down the final seconds until the scones she was working on would be done.

The door to the kitchen opened, and her boyfriend, William Parks, popped his head through the doors. They had been together for over a year now, but it still didn't stop Sarah from getting a small thrill every time she saw him. His close cropped light brown hair, his bright blue eyes, and his dimpled chin gave him a handsome, boyish appearance, and that was only enhanced by the smile he now wore.

“How are the scones coming along?” he asked.

“Almost ready.”

“They smell delicious.” He sniffed the air appreciatively, and she rewarded him with a bright smile.

Just then, the timer began beeping, announcing that the scones were due to come out of the oven. Sarah slipped on her mitt and pulled down the door, and a blast of heat and pumpkin scented goodness rushed out at her as she reached forward and grabbed the tray.

“Oh, also,” William said to Sarah's back, “the breakfast rush is over. I need to run to the store to grab some more eggnog. The new eggnog lattes have been a huge hit.”

“That’s great!” Sarah beamed as she walked through the kitchen toward the display case.

She grabbed a pair of tongs from the counter and began placing the warm scones one by one on a tray within the glass case that spanned the front of the bakery.

“While I’m gone, there’s an invoice in the back that I want you to take a look at. Once you’re done with the scones, could you go grab it for me?”

“I sure can, love.”

“Thanks. You can’t miss it. There’s a sticky note with your name on it on the top of it.”

William walked over and placed a quick kiss on her cheek before turning and striding toward the hallway that led to the rear exit. After Sarah finished loading the last of the scones into the display case, she stood for just a second to glance around the now empty bakery and appreciate it.

When Sweet Thing Bakery had first opened, it had been run by Sarah, her sister, Michelle, and their parents. They had worked tirelessly to turn it into the go-to bakery in Snowy Pine Ridge, and they had succeeded. But when Sarah’s parents had decided to move to Arizona in search of warmer weather, and Michelle had married an Olympic skier who whisked her away all over the world, Sarah had taken over owning and operating the shop.

She adored baking, and at first, she had enjoyed running the business aspects as well. But her lack of organizational skills had caught up with her, as had her lack of a budget. That was where William had come in to save the day. He and Michelle had actually dated throughout high school, but Sarah had always had a secret crush on him. When he had returned to Snowy Pine Ridge years later, sparks had flown between him and Sarah, and they’d struck up a relationship. They had been together ever since.

Some days, Sarah still found it hard to believe her luck and that Michelle had not only given her and Will her blessing but had been ecstatic to hear the news. William had come into

Sarah's life, helped her organize the bakery's budget, and had helped her develop a full menu of café drinks to offer, some of which had become their best sellers. She owed a lot to William, and Sarah knew that there would never be a time when she wouldn't be grateful for all he had brought into her life.

Sarah gave a contented sigh before closing the display case and making her way to the office. It was a small, cozy room at the back of the building with only a desk and a puffy reading chair in the corner. As soon as she opened the door, she spotted a pile of papers sitting right in the center. She walked over and began thumbing through them, trying to find the one that William had been referencing. The itemized lines and numbers that she caught glimpses of as she flipped through the pages made her head spin, and she once again sent up a quick prayer of thanks for William taking over the business's finances.

Finally, a flash of pink caught her eye with SARAH scrawled in black ink, and she let out a relieved sigh. She picked it up and eyed the document, her brow creasing in confusion as some of the words began to take root in her mind.

Invoice for a Proposed Marriage, Sarah read, and her heart began to pound. Her gaze continued on, looking over the itemized list.

1. Marriage Certificate \$75.00
 2. Wedding Ceremony \$7,000.00
 3. Wedding Reception \$10,000.00
 4. Saying "Yes" to Lifelong Happiness
- Priceless

Sarah's hand fluttered up to her lips as she smiled, tears welling in her eyes as she realized what he was saying. There was fine print at the bottom, and she laughed as she read it aloud.

"Lifelong happiness is not guaranteed, but results are probable. Terms and Conditions may apply."

Was this really happening? Was William proposing? Sarah's pulse, which was already racing with joy, kicked up another notch as she clutched the paper to her chest and strode from the office back out to the dining area where she had last seen him. As soon as she pushed open the stylized swinging doors that separated the kitchen from the counter, there he was.

William was down on one knee, a small box held out in front of him with a beautiful, glistening diamond ring nestled inside. The tears that Sarah had been fighting since reading the invoice finally spilled over, trailing paths down her cheeks as she approached him.

"I love you, Sarah Langston," William began, his voice shaking with emotion. "Coming back to Snowy Pine Ridge was the best decision I have ever made. Our life together, everything that we've created, the way that we've loved one another... all of it is so much more than I ever could have dreamed."

Sarah choked out a teary laugh as she stepped forward, William's words washing over her and filling her with love. Her heart felt like it was going to beat out of her chest as she dropped to her knees with him, bringing herself to his eye level as he continued to speak.

"I never thought it would be possible for me to love someone this much, but every day, you prove me wrong. And I'd love for you to keep proving it every day for the rest of our lives."

Sarah was speechless as William pulled the beautiful, emerald cut diamond ring out of its box and took her hand.

"Sarah Langston, will you give me the absolute privilege of calling you my wife?"

She could barely choke out a "yes" past the lump in her throat, but William still heard it, and he beamed at her. His blue eyes shone with happiness as he slipped the ring onto her finger, a perfect fit. She stared at it for a second, at the way the beautiful, perfect diamond glittered in the wintry sunlight that

filled the café, before she leaned forward and pressed a soft, sweet kiss to William's lips.

"I love you." She half laughed, half sobbed as they both climbed to their feet.

The bell above the door to the café chimed merrily, announcing the arrival of a customer, and Sarah peeked around William's shoulder to see her friend Colette standing in the doorway. Colette's pale eyebrows shot up in question as she took in the scene in front of her and the tears still streaming down Sarah's face.

Sarah wiped the back of her hand across her cheeks. She thought that she was likely smearing her makeup, but she was too happy in that moment to care.

"We're engaged," she called out in a high, excited voice as she raised her hand in the air and flashed her new ring to Colette.

Her friend's face lit up with joy, and she bounded forward, taking Sarah's hand in hers and turning it this way and that to get a good look at the ring.

"Oh my goodness," Colette gushed. "Congratulations! I am so incredibly happy for you both."

Sarah smiled at her before Colette dropped her hand and then wrapped her in a tight, warm embrace.

"Thank you," Sarah said, her chest feeling so filled with happiness that she thought it might explode.

Colette let go of Sarah and then bounded over to wrap William in a hug as well, all of them chatting excitedly as Sarah recounted the events that had just unfolded to her friend. They only stood talking for a moment before William leaned forward to kiss Sarah on the cheek.

"We actually *are* almost out of eggnog," he whispered to her with a chuckle. "So I do need to go to the store. We'll go out later to a fancy restaurant to celebrate, okay?"

Sarah nodded at him, then leaned up on her toes to press her lips to his in a quick kiss before he turned and walked out

the door. She watched him as he went, her mind still whirring with the fact that he was no longer her boyfriend, but her fiancé.

“So when’s the wedding gonna be?” Colette asked, giving Sarah a soft, happy smile.

“I literally just got engaged.” Sarah laughed with a wave of her hand. “It’s a little bit too early to have things planned out just yet.”

“Like you haven’t been dreaming about it since the first day you told him you loved him,” her friend joked, and Sarah couldn’t help but grin. Partly because Colette was right.

“I’m assuming you came in for something to drink?” Sarah asked, shaking her head at the other woman as she walked back around the counter.

“I absolutely did. Can I get a gingerbread latte with whipped cream and peppermint sprinkles, please?”

Sarah raised her eyebrows. She had never combined peppermint sprinkles with a gingerbread latte before, and she grinned as she said, “That’s a new one for me. But let’s give it a shot!”

“Thanks.” Colette grinned. “I’ve been craving something sweet and festive. We’ll see if it’s any good.”

Sarah rung up the order and then turned around to begin making it. The two women fell into easy conversation over the whir of the espresso machine, providing each other with brief updates about one another’s lives outside of the engagement.

“So,” Colette said sheepishly as Sarah handed over the drink. “I have a little bit more news, if you’re ready for it.”

“Of course I am.”

“Someone’s thinking of renting out the main house.”

“Already?” Sarah’s mouth popped open in shock as Colette nodded.

“He’s coming to potentially sign the contract this evening.”

“He?” Sarah leaned over the counter, tilting her head. “Is *he* handsome?” Colette rolled her eyes, but Sarah didn’t miss the blush that crept into her friend’s cheeks. “Ah, so he is handsome,” she confirmed, nodding with certainty. “Tell me all about him.”

“I don’t know much, really.” Colette wrapped both hands around the to-go cup that held her latte. “Only that he’s from Rochester and is looking to stay in Snowy Pine Ridge for an undisclosed amount of time. At least a month, is what he said. But who knows what the time frame will actually end up being?”

“Did he say why he left Rochester?”

“No. I asked him, but he didn’t answer. Seemed to be a touchy subject.” Colette shrugged.

“Interesting.”

Sarah watched as her friend held the drink to her lips and took a sip and then mulled over the taste.

“You know,” Colette said as she smacked her lips together appreciatively. “This is actually quite delicious.”

“Maybe we’ll put it on the menu. We’ll just have to come up with a name.”

“How about the Gingerbread Breath Freshener?” There was a moment of silence where Sarah blinked at her friend, and Colette’s cheeks flushed. “You know,” she explained. “Because of the gingerbread and the peppermint?”

Sarah chuckled and shook her head. “Maybe. We’ll work on it. Now go on and get back to that hot tenant of yours.”

She wagged her eyebrows at Colette, who immediately became flustered, making Sarah laugh again. She wondered if perhaps this handsome stranger would end up being a good thing for Colette, someone to get her out of her comfort zone, and if everything went well, perhaps even provide her with a little bit of the love she knew her friend craved.

Colette’s eyes narrowed at Sarah as if she could read her thoughts.

“Don’t get any ideas,” she said, pointing an accusing finger at Sarah, who held her hands up in the air in feigned innocence. “I know you, little miss matchmaker. But Zach is only in town for a short period of time. And, like you said, he’s my tenant. I don’t want things to get messy.”

“Understood.”

Sarah kept an innocent expression on her face as Colette studied her for a moment before seeming to accept her answer. But despite Sarah’s best efforts, all through their goodbye and as she watched Colette walk out the door, she couldn’t pull her thoughts away from the fact that it had been a really long time since she had seen her friend flustered by someone like this.

Maybe she just had love on the brain, given the fact that she’d just gotten engaged. But as a small smile tugged at Sarah’s lips, she couldn’t help but hope that a little bit of Christmas magic would find its way into Colette’s life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“There,” Colette said to the empty room as she fluffed the final decorative pillow on the sofa. “Perfect.”

She had been in the main house ever since arriving back from Sweet Thing Bakery earlier in the day, working hard to get everything ready for Zach’s visit that evening. She’d spent the last few hours making sure the beds had fresh sheets, and that everything was perfectly tidy for when the man in question arrived.

The thought of someone living in the house still made her a bit queasy, but Colette couldn’t figure out if it was a good or bad feeling. She looked up from her work to check the clock—and right on cue, a knock sounded at the door, echoing through the house.

Rushing toward the foyer, she stopped for only a moment to check herself in the hallway mirror to smooth down her hair and make sure she looked presentable.

“Not that I care if he finds me attractive,” she whispered to herself as she strode toward the front door.

She pulled it open with a flourish, and as expected, Zach was standing on the porch. Her memory of his handsome face had not done him justice, and she was almost awestruck all over again as she gazed up at his face.

“Hi,” she said, and embarrassment flooded through her when the word came out light and a bit breathless.

“Hey.” One corner of Zach’s mouth pulled up in a lopsided, confident grin, and her stomach did a somersault.

Colette stepped back and waved her hand in front of him, inviting him in. When he stepped past her, she got a whiff of his cologne. It was something deep and woodsy, and she had to fight the urge to raise her nose in the air and sniff again. He smelled amazing.

She closed the door behind him, hoping that he didn't notice her hands shaking just slightly.

"I made sure everything was cleaned and ready for you," she explained, walking past him and farther into the house. "I can show you around, and then if you like what you see, I already have a contract drawn up."

Zach nodded, his eyes roving over the space around him, taking it all in. Colette tried not to talk too much, not wanting to annoy him as he tried to decide if he really wanted to live there, but she made sure to check in from time to time to see if he had any questions. She wrung her hands together nervously as they walked through the large house, nerves filling her.

But the problem was, Colette wasn't sure if she was nervous that Zach would take the house, or if he wouldn't.

She tried not to focus too much on him, because every time she looked at him for too long, her mind began to wander in a direction that she didn't want it going. He had a relaxed, comfortable air about him that she couldn't help but find intriguing. His dark jeans, slouchy, relaxed t-shirt, and worn boots gave him a casual appearance that somehow still looked put together on his muscular frame.

"It's a beautiful home," Zach said as they walked up the stairs to the second floor. "I can tell the woman who owned it before you really loved this place."

"She did." Colette nodded, her heart warming a little at his kind words and the obvious respect in his voice. "Emma loved this house, this town, and the people in it."

"She sounds like an incredible woman."

"She was." Once again, Colette found an unexpected lump rising into her throat, and she hastily swallowed past it.

Memories swirled around her as they walked into each room, but she tried her best to see the house from Zach's eyes, in a way that wasn't clouded by the rose-colored tint of the past. Objectively, she knew the house was beautiful. Zach wasn't wrong about that. Emma had done a lot to make sure that the house was maintained and cared for. But even when she tried to strip away the memories, Colette still felt like the house was special.

A few more moments passed in silence while she and Zach walked from room to room. Finally, when only one door remained, she walked in front of him and put her hand on the doorknob.

"This is the primary bedroom," she said. "I told you before that Emma loved natural light, and a few years ago, she had this room completely re-done to accommodate that love."

She opened the door with a flourish, revealing the sunshine pouring into the room as she and Zach stepped over the threshold. While he had been relatively stone-faced throughout the tour aside from a few random, appreciative nods, now his mouth popped open in surprise. Colette's lips tugged up in a satisfied smile.

He walked over to the large, panoramic windows that overlooked the side and back yards.

"That's the flower garden I told you about," Colette said, pointing toward a section of snow that was lumpier than the others. "In the spring, this view is really spectacular."

"This room is amazing." Zach's voice was filled with awe. "Don't get me wrong, the entire house has been great. You weren't lying when you told me there would be plenty of natural light, even on the first floor. But this? I can definitely work with this."

Her heart skipped a beat at his words, and she tried to keep her face neutral when he turned to look at her.

"So you'll take it?" Colette asked, and despite her best efforts, a hopeful smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

"Absolutely." Zach grinned down at her.

“Great! The paperwork is downstairs, then.”

“Lead the way.” Zach nodded toward the door and began following after her when she passed.

She focused on her footsteps as she walked in front of him, trying her best not to trip over her own feet as she so often did. The last thing that Colette wanted was to fall in front of this gorgeous, confident man whose presence had her feeling so off-kilter. They made it back to the kitchen without incident, and Colette sent up a quick prayer of thanks.

Grabbing the contract from the kitchen table, she held it out to him.

“Here’s what I’ve had drafted up,” she explained, pointing to the varying parts of it that she knew he’d want to take extra care reviewing. “Pricing is here, expectations, utilities, trash, it’s all in there. Take all the time you need to look over it.”

There was a pause as Zach’s eyes took in line after line of the paper he held.

“The move-in date is blank,” he said at last, his captivating green eyes moving from the contract to Colette’s face.

“I figured we could fill that in with whatever date works best for you.” She shrugged one shoulder. “It’s available immediately, so we can add the date that you’ll take up residence. It’s up to you.”

“How about tonight?”

Colette’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “That quickly?”

“Don’t get me wrong, the Warm and Bright Hotel is great. But it would be nice to have more space.”

A chuckle escaped her. “Okay, then. Yeah, tonight would work. I have a key I can give you immediately.”

She searched around the kitchen for a pen before finally finding one in a drawer along with a pad of sticky notes.

“Also,” she said as she jotted something down on a piece of paper. “I figured you should have this in case you need

anything. Calling or texting both work for me, so whichever is best for you.”

She extended a hand with the sticky note, and Zach plucked it from her fingers before examining it.

“Is this your way of giving me your phone number?” He arched a brow, and Colette’s stomach fluttered.

“No... I... it... I figured it was easy... but...” She began stammering, unable to form a coherent sentence as heat rushed to her cheeks.

Zach laughed, a real laugh this time. And Colette realized that it was the first one she had heard from him. It was throaty and deep, and she found that she wouldn’t mind hearing it quite a bit more.

“I’m sorry,” he said once his laughter died down. “I was just joking.”

“Right.” Colette gave a quick nod of her head before turning her attention back to the paper Zach still held in his hand. “Well, the bottom of the page is where we both need to sign.”

Zach walked forward, setting the paper down on the table and holding out his hand for the pen she still held. Colette placed it on his palm, careful not to touch him. She wasn’t sure if she could handle any physical touch between the two of them at that moment.

He scrawled his name on the indicated line and stepped back for Colette to do the same. When she bent over the table, she couldn’t help but notice Zach’s proximity. When he’d taken a step away, it had only been a small one. And he was still close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from his body and smell the cologne that she had noticed earlier. It was a heady mixture, and Colette had to try hard not to let it go to her head.

She signed her name quickly and then stood up, putting distance between them as she reached for a ring of keys.

“This will be yours,” she said, taking two keys off the ring. “The silver is for the front door and the gold is for the back.”

Zach watched her with amusement as she rattled off everything she could think of. No doubt it was a stark contrast to how quiet she had been during the tour of the house. But Colette couldn't help it. Everything about this day was leaving her a bit jittery.

“Trash is picked up on Tuesdays. I try to remember to wheel everything to the end of the drive on Monday night, but just in case I forget, if you could keep an eye out that would be lovely. And, well, I think that's it.”

“Wonderful.” Zach flashed her another lopsided grin.

“Yup. Well, I'll leave you to it and just let me know if you need anything.”

He nodded, and Colette turned to leave. It didn't take long before she heard footsteps behind her, and she turned to find Zach following her through the house.

“My bags are in my car,” he explained when she shot him a questioning look.

“Oh,” she breathed. “Right. Carry on.”

Colette turned back around and made her way to the front door, the floorboards creaking slightly underneath her weight. But they weren't loud enough to drown out the sound of Zach's amused chuckle.

In the entryway, Colette pulled on her coat and slipped her feet into her snow boots before thrusting open the door to the snowy landscape beyond. She stepped out onto the porch and down the stairs, the snow crunching with every step that she took. She didn't look back at Zach, but she could have sworn that she felt his gaze on her as she made her way back to the guest house.

Once she was nestled safely inside the little cottage, with her door closed and locked tight behind her, she let out a soft sigh of relief. Her stomach growled loudly, and she made her way to the fridge and began heating up a leftover bowl of spaghetti and meatballs.

She hummed “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” as she prepared her food and poured herself a glass of wine. And

as she curled up on the couch with her dinner, she let herself truly start to reflect on the fact that Emma's house was now occupied by someone else. She had thought she'd feel upset by the notion. And sure, there was a part of her that found it strange. But for the most part, Colette just felt relieved.

It was as if a weight that had been on her shoulders since she'd discovered that Emma had left her the property had lifted at long last.

* * *

Zach reached for his second bag, pulling it across the bed in the primary bedroom and unzipping it to reveal his clothes within. He grabbed a shirt from inside the bag before spinning to face the closet. From the corner of his eye, he caught another glimpse of the snowy landscape beyond those amazing windows, and he had to fight the urge to walk over there and gaze out of them for at least an hour.

He'd done just that after Colette had handed him the keys and he'd gotten his bags inside. The first thing Zach had done was taken them upstairs and stared out those windows in awe. He'd never seen a view quite like this one. With the beautiful, softly falling snow capping the brightly colored roofs of the houses beyond the backyard, the stunning mountains in the distance, and the fluffy pine trees that lined the property, it was so picturesque that Zach had trouble believing it.

It wasn't hard for him to see why Dennis had found this place so inspiring. Within moments of arriving, Zach had felt a twinge in his hand that usually preceded him falling into a fit of madness that only painting could cure. As he grabbed another shirt from his bag and placed it on a hanger in the closet, he felt the twinge again.

He knew that if he closed his eyes, a painting would begin to take shape in his mind. He'd be able to see the exact brush strokes, the way he'd layer blues and yellows to create the effect of the sun glistening on the blanket of snow. He'd even be able to see himself on the other end of the paintbrush,

making it all happen. But Zach also knew that once he tried, once he actually sat down to actually create the thing his brain was seeing, it would all leave him.

It had happened to him too many times over the course of the last year. Zach would find inspiration when he was out on a walk at night, while a neon sign reflected in a rain puddle, or in a crowded park when a brightly colored jacket caught his attention. But then, once he tried to take that inspiration and harness it, it would slip through his fingers like sand.

No, Zach knew that he needed to put himself in a hiatus for a little bit. It was what he'd come to Snowy Pine Ridge for, after all. To finally get some rest and to not worry about creating for a little while. As far as Zach could tell, it was the only way he'd be able to truly find his way back to who he used to be. And he didn't want to risk it.

Blowing out a breath, he hung up another item of clothing and turned back toward his suitcase. The bright, gleaming white of the snow taunted him from just beyond the pane of the glass. The pull to admire it grew stronger and stronger, until eventually, he couldn't give in.

What would it hurt? he asked himself. It wasn't as if he was going to paint. He was just going to look. And there wasn't any harm in that.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Colette stirred the pot she had simmering on the stove as the potent smell of apples and cinnamon wafted up around her from the warming cider. Looking out the window directly behind the sink, she couldn't help but allow her eyes to flick toward the main house in the distance.

The snow fell down around it softly, and she noticed smoke drifting up from the chimney spout on the roof. She smiled slightly, liking that she could now look across the lawn for a glimpse at another life. It made her not feel so alone on the large property.

When the apple cider was piping hot, she poured some into a mug and then pondered over what to do with the rest. A thought occurred to her, and she glanced back out the window to the house in the distance. She remembered how Zach had talked about other drinks he had tried during his short time in Snowy Pine Ridge, and she couldn't help but wonder if maybe he would like apple cider too.

An image rose into Colette's mind, one of a handsome face surrounded by unruly auburn hair, and she quickly shook her head to banish it.

"I'm only doing this because I want to be a good landlord. He's my first tenant, and I want to get this right," she said to herself out loud, but even to her own ears, the words sounded false.

Trying not to dwell on it too much, Colette poured the remaining cider into a thermos, slipped on her coat and boots,

and stepped out into the snow. Holding the thermos in one hand and her own mug of cider in the other, she made her way toward the main house.

The lights inside the house glowed warmly from behind the curtains, glimmering on the snow along with the wintry midday sunshine. Ever since Emma's death, every time Colette had looked across the lawn toward the main house, it had seemed empty and desolate. It made her happy to finally see it brimming with life, even if she found it strange that it wasn't Emma making it seem that way.

She raised a hand and gave three quick knocks to the front door, then waited. A few seconds passed, and she didn't hear a single sound from within the house. Colette's brow furrowed. She wondered for a moment if perhaps Zach wasn't home and had just accidentally left the lights on and the fire going.

Just as she had come to the conclusion that no one was going to answer, the front door opened, startling a little yelp out of her. She tilted her head to look up at Zach, who stood in the doorway. He was in jeans, a t-shirt, and a thick, fluffy wool cardigan, looking so handsome that it should've been illegal. On anyone else, the outfit might have seemed disheveled, possibly even sloppy. But on Zach, it looked cozy and effortless.

She shook away the slack-jawed expression on her face and gave him what she hoped was a wide, friendly smile.

"I have cider," she said by way of greeting, nodding her head toward the thermos and mug that she held in her hands.

"Oh, thanks. Come on in." Zach returned her smile and stepped back, motioning for her to step into the house.

As soon as the door closed behind her, warmth washed over her as the smell of the fire crackling in the other room floated up to greet her. There were knickknacks and personal items on the shelves in the entryway that hadn't been there before. Sweaters and coats hung on hooks by the door, and below them sat a pair of overturned snow boots that had clearly been kicked off and left to dry.

Her eyes roved over all of these small glimpses into Zach and his life, making a casual note of each of them.

“The place looks great,” she said, shifting her focus back to him.

“Thanks. Here, let me take those.” Zach reached forward and lifted the sealed thermos and steaming mug from her hands, allowing her to take off her coat and hang it on one of the empty hooks.

He motioned his head toward the kitchen, and Colette followed after him. She took a seat at the table while he grabbed an extra mug from the cabinet and brought it over. She lifted her mug from where he had left it on the kitchen table and pressed it to her lips, sighing as the warmth and taste flowed across her tongue. They were silent as Zach filled his mug with cider and did the same.

“This is great,” he said with a sigh after swallowing his first sip, and Colette beamed at him.

“I figured you’d like it.”

Her eyes darted down to the table, noting an open sketchbook in front of a seat at the far end. From where she was perched, she could see it clearly, and a flash of awe danced through her. It was a beautiful, realistic rendition of the mountain that bordered the town. The mountain was like a silent sentinel that she frequently thought of as watching over them with its snowcapped eyes, and the picture before her captured it perfectly.

“Did you sketch that?” she asked, nodding her head to the sketchbook.

“I did,” Zach said, a bit of pink dotting the tips of his ears.

For a moment, she wondered if he was embarrassed by her question, but for some reason she didn’t think that was the case. Curiosity rushed through her.

“It’s really good,” she told him. “It captures the scenery so well. If that one picture is any indication, you’re incredibly talented.”

“Thank you.” He dipped his head in acknowledgement.

Colette brought her mug back to her lips, taking another quick drink.

“So,” she began as she set it back down on the table. “I know you said you’d be here for at least a month. But do you have any idea how long you’ll be staying past that?”

He arched an eyebrow at her, a look of amusement passing over his handsome features. “Trying to get rid of me so soon?”

She chuckled. “Nothing like that. You’re just my first tenant, so I’m curious how much time I’ll have to make a plan for getting this place listed when you leave.”

He nodded and then blew out a quick, frustrated sounding breath. “Honestly, I have no idea.”

Colette scrunched up her face in confusion. “You don’t know how long you have until you need to be back in Rochester?”

“No.” Zach ran a hand through his hair. “It’s not like I have anything to go back to.”

The words struck a chord in Colette, and she had the sudden urge to reach across the table and take his hand, although she quickly stifled that impulse.

“You don’t have a job or anything waiting for you back home?” She kept her voice low and kind, doing her best to make sure he didn’t feel as if she was judging him, regardless of what his answer was.

He nodded his head toward the sketch on the table. “I’m an artist. Or I was. But as far as a job waiting for me back home? Not at the moment. No. I used to work with a gallery, but they dropped me recently.”

The words fell from his lips hesitantly, like it was the first time he’d voiced it all out loud. She got the feeling that he was uncomfortable talking about it. So despite the curiosity running through her, she didn’t press any more, opting instead to give him a soft smile and a genuine, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

He shook his head. “You don’t need to be. Honestly, it’s probably for the best.”

His words sounded sure, but the stooped curve of his shoulders and the dejected tone of his voice told her that what he was saying may not be the entire truth. It was as if he was saying it only to try to assuage his own misgivings or feelings of doubt about the entire situation. That was something Colette herself was all too familiar with, and she felt a sudden rush of empathy toward him.

Zach cleared his throat and locked eyes with her. “So tell me about the woman that owned this place.”

Colette could sense what he was doing, grasping at straws to change the subject so he wouldn’t have to keep talking about his career. And she was more than happy to oblige.

“Emma was amazing,” she told him honestly, a smile tugging up the corners of her lips. “Fierce, loyal, kind. And so funny. She loved to watch corny reality television, specifically *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. I’ve lived in the guest house cottage and on the property since right after I came to Snowy Pine Ridge after high school. And she was like a mother to me.”

Her words got a little choked up at the end, and Zach’s eyes lit with something like sympathy.

“She sounds incredible.” He gave her a small, encouraging smile and Colette nodded.

“She was.”

“Did she have any family left around here?”

Colette shook her head. “Just me. She was also really close with my cousin, Derek. He’s married now, and he and his wife are expecting a baby. Emma was so excited for the baby to arrive.”

Sadness filled Colette all over again as she thought about the last time she and Emma had talked about the baby. The woman’s entire face had lit up as she’d talked about how much she was going to spoil the new bundle of joy.

“Derek owns a dog sled business here in town,” Colette continued on, pushing past the small kernel of grief that had unraveled in her chest. “It’s a lot of fun. You should check it out!”

“Dog sledding?” Zach’s eyes widened in surprise. “That’s not something you hear every day.”

“Doesn’t stop it from being something everyone should do at least once.”

“Fair point well made,” he said, raising his mug to her in a little cheer. “All right. Maybe I will check it out. It’d be nice to get out of the house a bit, no matter how cozy it is here.”

“If you go, let me know. I’ll tell Derek to look out for you, and I’m sure he’ll give you a good deal.”

“I appreciate that.” Zach dipped his head, his matter-of-fact tone at odds with the smile tugging at one side of his mouth.

They talked for a while longer, and after several minutes, Colette raised her mug once more and was surprised when she found there was nothing left in it. She’d been chatting with Zach long enough to finish the entire cider, and she hadn’t even noticed. She hadn’t meant to stay this long, but she’d been so wrapped up in her conversation with him that she’d lost all track of time.

“I should probably get going,” she said, suddenly worried that she had overstayed her welcome.

“Sure, yeah.” Zach nodded, pushing himself up to stand. “Let me walk you out.”

He started to gather the thermos, but she waved him off.

“Keep that and the rest of the cider. I’ll grab it from you later.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, and when Colette nodded, he set the thermos back down. “All right then.”

He stepped back, motioning for her to lead the way as they walked toward the door.

“Thank you for coming over, and for the cider,” he said as they walked.

“No problem at all.” Colette grabbed her coat from the hook by the door and pulled it onto her slender shoulders.

She turned to cast another glance at Zach as she placed her hand on the ornate iron doorknob. She could have sworn that there was something like regret flashing in his eyes as she gave him a small wave, pulled the door open, and stepped out into the cold. As she walked, her boots leaving fresh tracks in the snow that was still coming down in small, serene flakes, she shook the notion from her mind, telling herself not to let her imagination run away with her.

When she pulled open the door to her cottage and stepped back into the warm, cozy space, she glanced once more at the main house. Colette was shocked to find Zach silhouetted against the window, watching her as if to make sure she had made it home all right. She gave him another little wave, and he grinned and returned it before disappearing from view.

Colette chuckled to herself, closing the door and shaking the snow off her boots.

Zach kept on surprising her in little ways.

There was just something about him that drew her in. She hadn't been sure she would like him at all when they had first met, but although sometimes his demeanor could be quite brusque and more than a little brash, she also found him quite funny. And at times even charming and sweet.

Her stomach fluttered a little at that thought, and Colette cleared her throat, reminding herself not to get too attached. After all, regardless of whether he stayed a short time or a long time, he was just a visitor in her sleepy, cozy little town. So it would be better—and safer for her heart—to not get too accustomed to having him around.

CHAPTER NINE

Lacy waddled toward the couch in the living room of the house she and Derek lived in, hand on her protruding belly as she rubbed it softly. Her feet were killing her, and she breathed out as she carefully lowered herself down onto the cushions. She sank deeper into the embrace of the comfortable piece of furniture, exhaling a long, ragged breath.

Over the last week, she felt like she had been trying to keep the whole world turning on its axis. Between consulting with her clients in St. Louis, keeping up with consulting in Snowy Pine Ridge, helping Derek as much as she could with the dog sledding business, and planning the annual holiday party at St. Nick's Place, she felt like she was constantly doing something. And the tiny human growing inside her made her constantly feel like she was in need of a nap.

Grabbing her iPad from beside her on the couch, she tapped the screen to bring it to life, figuring that while she was sitting to rest her swollen ankles, she could at least respond to a few emails and get a little bit more work done.

She clicked through a few of the items that had come in over the last few hours, not even noticing that her eyelids had begun to grow heavy. She only made it through one and a half emails before she blinked and forgot to open her eyes again. Sleep stole over her, lulling her so gently that she barely even realized it was happening.

One moment, she was tapping on her screen, responding to a recent inquiry... and the next thing she knew, the dogs outside began barking, yanking her out of her accidental nap.

The sudden loud sound made her head pop up from where it had dropped to her chest when she'd nodded off, and it took her a second to orient herself as her sleepy brain struggled to catch up.

Lacy blinked rapidly, glancing around as she tried to make sense of what was causing the dogs to bark so loudly. She placed a hand behind her, still groggy with sleep, as she tried to push herself off the couch. A moment later, she heard the garage door open and close, and then heard Derek's voice calling her name.

"In the living room," she announced, hearing him striding through the house toward her.

He came into view a few seconds later, and she sat up straighter, struggling a little to adjust her position on the soft, fluffy sofa.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said with a smile, pulling his wool coat from around his shoulders and draping it over the back of a chair. "You doing all right over there?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine. I just nodded off," Lacy replied, giving up on standing to greet him and sinking back into the cushions.

She rubbed a hand over her eyes, trying to clear them of sleep and their sandpaper feel. Derek shook his head at her as he walked through the room and plopped down onto the couch beside her.

"Give me those." He pointed to her feet, and a grateful sigh escaped Lacy's lips.

She swiveled a little on the couch, shifting herself into a position where she could pull her swollen feet up and place them on her husband's lap. Derek began massaging them, and she dropped her head back and groaned with relief.

"That feels wonderful." She sighed as some of the aches faded from her body.

Derek chuckled, giving one of her feet an extra squeeze. "You're doing too much, you know."

She met his gaze and gave him a hard, long stare. “No, I’m not. I’m doing just fine.”

“Come on. You know that isn’t true.” He arched an eyebrow at her. “You’re running yourself ragged. You aren’t super woman, you know. No matter how much of a miracle woman you are.”

She rolled her eyes, but still, she couldn’t stop herself from pondering his words. Ever since finding out she was pregnant, Lacy had pretended it wouldn’t impact her life. To the best of her abilities, she had tried to continue on exactly as she’d been doing before the discovery that they’d be having a baby. Sure, most of her consulting in St. Louis had been transitioned to being remote, so she didn’t have to travel back and forth as much. But other than that, she had still continued on full steam ahead. That was the only way that she knew how to be.

Now though, as her daughter gave another swift, obstinate kick to her bladder, she had to admit that maybe her husband was right.

She blew out a breath, chewing on her lower lip. “What do you want me to do about it, though? There’s so much to get done.”

Lacy’s eyebrows knitted together as she stared at her husband’s handsome, kind face. She knew that Derek wouldn’t have brought this up if he didn’t already have some kind of proposal for her. He was pragmatic in that way. And he knew how much Lacy loved everything that she did with her job and with the annual Christmas party for the town. So he wouldn’t have brought up slowing down unless he had some suggestion for how she might accomplish that.

“Maybe,” Derek began, his voice low and hesitant, “it might be a good idea if we forgo the Christmas party this year.”

The suggestion rocked through Lacy, sending her thoughts whirling immediately. Derek must’ve seen the panic spreading across her face, because he raised up a hand to try to stop the spiral she was about to fall into.

“Breathe for just a second.” He gave a soft laugh, shooting her an affectionate smile. “Skipping for one year isn’t the end of the world. And we can resume next year when little Belinda in there is out here with us.”

“Lazy Susan,” Lacy corrected, shaking her head as she brought a hand up to rest on her swollen stomach.

“What?” Derek tilted his head in confusion, his hands still working at the tight spots in her feet.

“She’s Lazy Susan now,” Lacy explained. “Because all she does is lie on my bladder and kick me.”

His head fell back on a laugh. “Fine, when Lazy Susan in there is born, it’ll be a lot easier for us to get back in the swing of things.”

Lacy blew out a breath, considering her husband’s words. She hated to admit it, but she knew that he was right. She felt a lump rise in her throat at the thought of letting go of something that she and all the people she cared about had been looking forward to so much. The lump turned into tears pricking at the backs of her eyes, and she blinked hastily, trying not to let them fall.

“Oh, hey.” Derek leaned closer, placing a hand on her thigh in comfort. “It’s gonna be okay. It’s just a year, my love.”

“I know,” Lacy replied, still blinking furiously. “It’s not the end of the world. It’s Lazy Susan and the hormones making me so emotional. And I’m just disappointed.”

She blew out another breath and pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to get the emotional side of her brain to understand that everything the logical side had just said was right. There was no point in crying just because the Christmas party couldn’t happen this year. Turning into a sobbing mess was the last thing she needed.

“It’s all right to be disappointed.” Derek’s voice was gentle and full of understanding. “You love the holiday party. The whole town does. So it’s normal to be upset. But it’s not for forever. It’s only for now.”

She met her husband's gaze, gratitude rushing through her for this man whom she loved so much.

"I know." She nodded, swiping a finger under her eye to rid herself of the one stubborn tear that insisted on falling. "I guess it just helps me feel closer to Dad and Grandpa Nick."

She rubbed her belly again. The baby inside her gave another soft kick, and she smiled at the feeling of it.

"I hate that they won't get to meet her," she added quietly. "I've always regretted that I wasn't able to make things up with them while they were still here. So the Christmas party just always feels like a way for me to be close to them. You know?"

Derek nodded. He moved her feet off his lap and stood, stretching her legs out gently on the couch before taking a few steps to stand in front of her. He sank to his knees beside the couch, holding her gaze.

"They're always here with you, not just at Christmastime." His voice was warm, the deep rumble of it soothing the ache inside her chest. "And you can be close to them even without the party. They would have loved little Lazy Susan, I'm sure of that. And now we get to love her a little extra for them too."

Lacy held his gaze for a moment, reaching out to trail her fingers over the strong line of his jaw. She was still disappointed, but Derek was right. As they were getting closer and closer to her due date, she couldn't deny that it was getting too hard to keep up with everything. And it made sense for the Christmas party to be the thing that they had to let slip away for now.

"Okay," she said as she nodded. "We'll skip it this year. But next year, I'm making it extra big and extra special. We're going all out next Christmas."

"That sounds like a good plan to me." Derek leaned up, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Now for some better news: there's Indian food in the kitchen."

Lacy's face lit up, and as if on cue, her stomach grumbled. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until that exact

moment, and she was grateful that her husband had thought to stop and pick up her favorite.

He stood, holding his hands out for her to take to help pull her off the couch. When she was situated in the kitchen and the takeout counters were arranged, she loaded up her plate with the Palak Paneer and fragrant Jasmine rice that had been her one, overwhelming craving throughout her entire pregnancy. She bit into the food, letting out a happy, contented sound as the flavor exploded across her tongue. As disappointed as she was about having to cancel the Christmas celebration at St. Nick's Place, at this moment, all was right in her world.

* * *

Sarah puffed out a breath as she leaned forward to grab the remote off the coffee table in front of her. It had been a long day at the bakery, and she was incredibly glad to finally have a bit of a respite. She could hear William in the kitchen behind her, preparing dinner for the both of them. She'd offered to help him when she'd gotten home, but he had waved her off, telling her to get a bit of rest.

Glancing over a shoulder, she shot a sweet smile to the man that she loved so very much. The man she was now set to marry. She smiled to herself as she tore her gaze away from him and glanced down at the beautiful ring nestled on her finger. She turned her hand this way and that, looking at the way the diamond sparkled and gleamed in the light, showing a brilliant prism of tiny rainbows dancing within the gorgeous gem. Ever since he'd slipped that ring on her finger, Sarah had had a perpetual smile on her face.

She pushed a button on the remote, shifting her attention back to the TV as she changed the channel, wanting to catch the tail end of the local news segment. When she got to the right program, she pulled her favorite pillow—one that was shaped like a croissant—onto her lap and settled in to watch. She had come in right at the end of the weather forecast, and she was glad to see that the snow would be tapering off soon.

She loved snow, but she didn't want it to accumulate too quickly and cause problems that the town couldn't keep up with.

As soon as the forecast wrapped up, the local newscaster's smiling face filled the scene. He was on location somewhere, smiling a toothy grin at the camera. Sarah's eyes flicked down to the chyron at the bottom of the screen, and as she registered the words scrolling past, her stomach fluttered.

New Bakery to Open in Snowy Pine Ridge.

Sarah pressed the volume button to turn it up as she scooted to the edge of the couch, her gaze glued to the screen. The camera panned away from the newscaster's face, showing more of the scene. He was inside a space that had ornate wrought iron tables and chairs spread out across it. Everything was decorated to look like an Elizabethan era tearoom, but with more pizzazz and bright colors.

The woman standing beside the newscaster was smiling at the camera. She had short, curly blonde hair that was adorned with clips to hold the wild curls in place. She wore a white and pink polka dotted dress, and dangly cupcake earrings in a matching color. The chyron ribbon at the bottom of the screen read: *Mindy Harvey, Owner.*

Something inside Sarah bristled a little as her gaze stayed fixed on the screen. The anchor began speaking, and Sarah listened with rapt attention.

"I'm here today with Mindy Harvey, who just opened Baking Fiend, located on the far side of Main Street as you get to the overpass," the news anchor said as he glanced away from the camera to look directly at Mindy. "So tell our viewers, Mindy, what made you want to open up a bakery here in Snowy Pine Ridge?"

"Well, Tom," Mindy said with a wide smile. "I've always dreamed of owning a bakery, ever since I was a little girl. When I graduated from culinary school, I..."

Mindy continued speaking, but Sarah couldn't quite get the words to make sense in her head.

Another bakery in Snowy Pine Ridge?

For years, Sweet Thing Bakery had been the only shop of its kind in the little town, and Sarah couldn't help but wonder if this would affect her business.

"Will," she said, waving him over without looking away from the TV. "Come look at this."

He must've picked up on something in her voice, because William immediately stopped what he was doing with dinner and turned to face her.

"What is it?" he asked, stepping into the living room.

"There's another bakery opening up in town."

"Oh, really?"

He glanced from her to the television, where Mindy was still being interviewed. They watched in silence for a few moments, and as the camera panned around the space again, Sarah chewed on her lip, worry twisting inside her.

"Do you think Snowy Pine Ridge has room for two bakeries?" she finally asked, her voice quiet.

She couldn't bear the thought of losing her family business. She loved the bakery, loved its history and the fact that now it was all hers. It had turned her passion into a career and a livelihood, giving her a chance to do what she loved every single day. She couldn't imagine anything jeopardizing that.

William sat down next to Sarah on the couch. The newscaster was still interviewing Mindy, but William ignored the television for the moment, all of his focus on Sarah. He took her hand, lacing their fingers together and squeezing reassuringly.

"We've been almost busier than we can handle lately," he pointed out. "So yes, I think it's safe to say that this town has room for two bakeries. There will always be someone who needs a sweet treat or a pick-me-up coffee drink to give a little boost to their day."

His voice was soft and steady when he spoke to her, and his unshakeable calm immediately started putting Sarah's worried mind at ease.

"But what if they steal all our customers?" she pressed, unable to completely let it go. "What if no one wants to come to Sweet Thing anymore?"

"There's no way that could happen." William chuckled lightly, shaking his head. "People love Sweet Thing! Just because a new bakery is opening up, that won't change. I mean, look at it." He gestured to the TV screen. "It's completely different than what we have going on. So it isn't like they're copying us or anything. It's just that now, we'll have a little bit of friendly competition. And I don't think that will hurt us one bit."

Sarah kept her eyes locked on William's, studying his face for any sign that he might be exaggerating or underplaying his feelings on the matter. He wasn't typically one to lie to her, even to keep her calm. Actually, she couldn't recall a time where he had *ever* lied to her.

And in this moment, his handsome features were calm and steady. When he spoke again, his shining blue eyes were filled with nothing but honesty, support, and love for her.

"You have built something truly amazing with Sweet Thing," he said proudly. "The people of this town not only love your drinks and your baked goods, but they love *you*. And no other bakery will ever be able to compete with that."

Sarah blew out a breath, the knot in her stomach unwinding. She leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder as she closed her eyes.

"Thank you," she murmured. "I guess I needed someone to talk me down. So thank you for being my rock. You're always so calm, and you help me see things from a different perspective."

She felt William nod, and then he turned his head and pressed a kiss to her hair.

“Thank you for being my light,” William said, and gratitude washed through Sarah all over again. He pulled back to look at her and gave her a small smile. “Are you feeling better? If you are, I’m going back into the kitchen and finish up with dinner.”

“Much better. Thanks.”

Sarah sat up, but before he could stand, she leaned in to steal a quick kiss. As William returned to the kitchen, she grabbed the remote again and changed the channel, deciding that it would likely be best for her to find something entirely different to watch. She could catch up on the local news stories some other time.

She flipped through the channels until she spotted a rerun of one of her favorite sitcoms and settled on that.

Nestling back into the fluffy couch cushions, she blew out a contented breath.

William is right, she told herself. People love Sweet Thing.

And she knew that if she continued to pour her whole heart into her work and to treat her customers like family, then there was nothing that could ever truly compete with the business and home she had created.

CHAPTER TEN

Zach jiggled his leg impatiently, the sofa creaking underneath him as he continued to shift restlessly. He glanced out the large bay window at the front of the house, taking a quick look at the weather. For what felt like the first time since he'd arrived in Snowy Pine Ridge, the sky was a bright, cloudless blue, and the sun was glinting off the snow.

Wanting to get a better look at the town and the landscape surrounding it, Zach pushed himself up off the sofa and began walking toward the front door. He pulled on his coat and draped his scarf around his neck before slipping on his boots and striding out into the brisk winter day.

The moment the front door shut behind him, he turned to lock it and then stood on the front porch for a moment, breathing in the cold air as the smell of snow filled his nostrils. He couldn't stop himself from casting a quick glance toward the guest house on the other side of the yard. Smoke floated out of the chimney and trailed upward into the sky, and he could smell the scent of the burning cedar. The old-fashioned little building combined with the blanket of snow and the smell of the wood all came together to form a beautiful, cozy picture. Zach wondered if Colette was nestled inside.

Shaking that thought from his mind, he started to walk toward his car before stopping and pursing his lips.

Maybe I'll walk instead, he thought to himself. While the air around him was cold, he felt completely protected inside his thick coat, and everything was so beautiful. He couldn't think of better weather for a winter walk through town.

He stopped at his car just long enough to pull a pair of warm gloves from the center console and pull them on before starting on his journey toward the town square.

He tucked his hands into his coat pockets as he walked, his breath floating up before him in tiny little puffs. It wasn't long before he reached downtown Snowy Pine Ridge, and he found himself enchanted all over again by the charm that the town held.

The white-capped mountain in the distance loomed over them, silently watching as the sun gleamed down upon the peaks. The snow on the ground glistened in the early afternoon light, glistening in an array of crystals and varying hues of blue and white. People walked from shop to shop as they chatted merrily, some of them nursing hot drinks with a pink, polka dotted coffee sleeve.

He turned down one street, catching sight of a large town square that was dominated by a massive Christmas tree. It was such a lovely, quaint sight that his hands nearly twitched with the urge to paint it. Instead, he satisfied himself with snapping a picture on his phone before walking farther into the town. After another few blocks, he spotted a sign for an ice-skating rink and followed where it pointed.

He passed by the outside of the rink, watching as kids and adults alike teetered on the blades and struggled to keep themselves upright, while others performed tricks that seemed to defy the laws of physics.

Everywhere Zach turned, he felt like there was something new that he ached to paint. A mother and daughter building a snowman beside a gazebo wrapped in twinkling lights, the front of a house decorated in an ornate Christmas wreath that hung under a large piece of mistletoe, the rosy-cheeked children with red noses who ran by him pulling sleds, racing to the nearest hill so they could begin a snowy adventure.

It was a bit overwhelming, how different things were here in comparison with Rochester. He had always thought of himself as belonging in the city and had found himself

enamored with a fast-paced life and late nights filled with neon lights.

But here in Snowy Pine Ridge, time seemed to move differently. It was slower, somehow. People stopped to greet each other on the street, they smiled at strangers and told them to have a lovely day, and they all seemed to be filled with a perpetual Christmas cheer that he couldn't help but be impressed by.

A large white sign with emerald green letters caught Zach's attention, and he came to an abrupt halt. The building in front of him was red, with large bay windows showing shelves and shelves of home improvement and hardware items. He glanced back at the sign, which read *Mitchell's Hardware*, and the sight jogged something in his memory. He had been thinking earlier about trying to find a hardware store in town, and now he had stumbled upon one by chance.

Grinning at how easy it had turned out to be, he reached out a gloved hand, pulling the door open and striding inside. He needed to find a few pieces of hardware for hanging some paintings, as well as some raw materials for a couple of projects that he had in mind.

He rifled through the merchandise, collecting the items on the list he'd made in his head, and when he had everything he needed, he walked up to the front counter. A man about his age stood behind it, and he greeted Zach with a warm, friendly smile as he approached.

"Hey there," the man said as Zach placed his items on the counter. "Find everything you need?"

"I did," Zach said with a quick nod.

His gaze dipped down to the name tag the man wore on his long-sleeved gray t-shirt. The name Clark was emblazoned on it, in the same emerald script that was on the sign at the front of the store.

"Are you new around here?" Clark asked, cocking his head in question.

“Just staying for a little while. I’m actually renting a house for a bit.”

“Colette Hillis’s place?”

At that question, Zach’s eyebrows shot up. “You know her?”

“Of course I know her.” Clark looked at Zach like he should have been able to piece that together, and in reality, he likely should have. “That would make you Zach then, right?”

Zach nodded. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“Well,” Clark said, extending a hand to him over the counter. “I’m Clark Mitchell.”

“Ah.” Zach nodded, gripping the man’s hand in greeting. “So you’re the owner then?”

“Sure am. So how are you liking living at Colette’s place?”

“How do you know all of this?” Zach laughed and shook his head.

“I’m friends with Derek, Colette’s cousin. He buys a lot of the things he needs for his dog sled business here. Came in the other day, and we got to talking. It happened to come up that Colette had rented out Emma’s old place.”

When Clark spoke the woman’s name, a brief flash of sadness danced across his features. It was gone quickly, and Zach almost doubted that he’d seen it at all, but then he recalled that Colette often did the same thing. So did everyone else he’d met who seemed to have known the old woman who’d owned the house he was now living in. Colette’s previous words about Emma flitted through his mind—about the type of woman that she’d been and the way she’d enriched the lives of the people in the town—and he found himself wishing that he could have known her.

He made easy conversation with Clark as the hardware store owner finished ringing up his purchases and placed them in a bag. Zach handed over some cash to pay for it, and then said his goodbyes before walking back into the cold but sunny day.

Once again, the moment he stepped out onto the street, a weird craving to paint fell over him at the sights and the charm that seemed to blanket everything around him. As he walked, his hands once more tucked firmly in his pockets as the bag from the hardware store swung back and forth from his arm, he caught sight of another sign that grabbed his attention.

It wasn't big or gaudy, and if asked, Zach wouldn't have been able to pinpoint exactly what it was that had jumped out at him. The building was a lovely, pale lilac that complemented the colors of the snow around it. Zach stepped closer to it, peering through the windows, and was surprised to find loads and loads of craft supplies.

Almost immediately, his gaze landed on a set of beautiful, vibrant oil paints in one of the display cases, and he felt that familiar tingle in his hand. Before he could put too much thought into it, he pulled open the door and stepped inside.

A bell chimed merrily overhead, announcing his arrival, and he chuckled under his breath as he wondered how many of the stores here had hung jingle bells above their doors for the holidays.

Zach navigated his way along the shelves before he found the spot by the display window that he'd been looking at earlier. He gazed down at the beautiful box filled with tube after tube of glorious, vibrant colors. In his mind's eye, he could picture the exact way he might blend the varying shades and hues together, playing them off of one another to create a completely unique palette.

His gaze shifted back up and out the window. From the shop's location, the mountains were perfectly framed behind the charming, snow-covered town. He closed his eyes, imagining the way he could mix the colors to capture the way the sunlight hit the snow and the way the Christmas lights that seemed to be hung up all over town sparkled.

Zach had rarely been one to paint landscapes, more often opting for impressionism and portraits that grabbed the viewer in a wash of emotions and pulled them in. But now, as he

stared out the window, he thought that maybe landscapes could be the change of pace he had been needing.

Before he could second-guess himself, he bent over, grabbed the case of paints from where it rested, and tucked it under his arm. He walked to the counter and hurriedly paid for it before stepping outside into the cold. And with the weight of the paint case tucked firmly under his arm as he walked back to the house, it felt as a different, much heavier weight had been lifted off his chest.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Oh, wow,” Colette breathed as she stepped through the open door of the nursery. “This is beautiful.”

Sarah and Lacy filed in behind her, with Sarah making similar awed sounds and Lacy waving away their praise.

“Thank you. Honestly, I’m just glad it’ll be completely finished soon.” Lacy rubbed her hand over her rounded belly as she looked around the space.

Most of the walls had been painted a pale, blush pink—so pale that in certain lighting, it almost appeared white. But one wall had been transformed into a mural of wispy, beautiful clouds of varying shades and hues of pink and blue, with a spattering of gold flakes artfully dashed around to add a bit of interest. It was complemented by pine furniture, beige throw pillows, and a soft rug and rocking chair.

Typically, Colette found the color pink overwhelming and too much. But the shade that Lacy had chosen for her little one was quite the opposite. It was muted and almost entirely neutral, adding the perfect amount of serenity with just a touch of color.

“Your little girl is going to be so happy in this room,” Colette murmured as she turned in a circle, trying to take all of it in at once.

Her eyes landed on Lacy, who was beaming at her.

“I sure hope so,” Lacy said, pride shining in her eyes.

As they turned and filed out of the nursery, Lacy asked both Colette and Sarah if they wanted to stay for lunch.

“The menu is grilled cheese and tomato soup,” she explained as the three of them walked into the kitchen. “It’s the only thing that little Harriet the Spy wants these days.”

“Harriet the Spy?” Colette arched an eyebrow at her friend as she pulled out a chair and sat at the table.

“We’re still trying out new names. And that was my favorite movie when I was little.”

Lacy shrugged before heading to the fridge and taking out everything she would need in order to start working on their lunch. Sarah and Colette tried to help her, but Lacy waved them off and insisted that they sit and relax. Knowing how stubborn their friend was, Colette and Sarah exchanged a grin and allowed her to play hostess, knowing it wasn’t straining her too much.

The women chatted comfortably as Lacy heated up the soup and fixed up the grilled cheese sandwiches, making the scent of tomatoes and melted cheese fill the kitchen.

“So how are things going with the new tenant?” Sarah asked, resting her chin in her hands as she looked across the table at Colette.

“Oh, yes!” Lacy’s excited voice floated over from where she stood near the stove. “Word around town is he’s quite the looker.”

“Word around town?” Colette scoffed, glancing between the both of them. “Have people been talking about him?”

“Of course they have.” Sarah shot her a glance, as if that much should have been obvious. “It’s Snowy Pine Ridge. You know everyone talks about newcomers.”

“Especially when they’re hot.” Lacy glanced at the other women over her shoulder, wagging her eyebrows and making Sarah laugh.

“Well...” Colette twisted her fingers together, blushing slightly. “Things are going well, I guess. He pretty much keeps

to himself. I brought him some apple cider the other day, just to be a good landlord, you know.”

“Oh, sure. I bet that was all it was.” Sarah grinned at her friend knowingly, prompting Colette to roll her eyes and Lacy to chuckle.

“We talked for a while,” Colette admitted. “He told me that he’s an artist, and that he had his work displayed in a gallery until recently. There was a sketchpad open on the table, and he had been drawing the landscape around the town. It was incredibly good. But when I asked him about it, it seemed to be a sore subject for him.”

“Artists. They can be a bit temperamental, I’ve heard.” Lacy shrugged as she ladled soup into three bowls, then placed each bowl on a plate alongside a grilled cheese sandwich.

Colette pushed her chair back from the table and rushed over, waving off Lacy’s protests as she grabbed two of the plates and helped her carry them to the table.

“Tortured artists are so romantic though,” Sarah commented as she took the plate Colette offered her and set it on the table.

The kitchen grew quiet for a few moments as the women began to eat. Colette dipped her sandwich into her soup before taking a bite, and a rich, robust burst of flavor exploded over her tongue.

“Mmm, this is delicious. I can see why Harriet the Spy was craving grilled cheese and tomato soup.” She laughed, dipping her sandwich once more and taking another bite.

“Thanks.” Lacy dipped her grilled cheese into her soup. “I’m lucky she’s been craving this and not pickles and mint chocolate ice cream at the same time, or something like that! I won’t mind eating this for lunch as long as I have to.” Then she grinned and added, “Now, back to the handsome, tortured, romantic artist.”

“You all are really running away with this story you’ve built up in your heads.” Colette laughed as she eyed her friends.

“Who wouldn’t?” Sarah tore off a piece of her sandwich, the gooey cheese stretching before she popped the bite into her mouth. “It’s a great story!”

“We just want you to be happy, Col.” Lacy gave her a quick glance, and the use of the old nickname Emma had called her by made Colette’s heart squeeze.

She glanced between the two other women at the table. They had become amazing friends to her—her best friends, truthfully—and she knew that what Lacy was saying was true. But she also knew that the two of them perpetually had love on the brain.

Not that she could blame them. With Sarah being newly engaged and Lacy expecting her first child with a husband she adored, Colette guessed she would be the same way if she were in their shoes.

She blew out a long breath. “I just don’t want you two to get your hopes up that anything will happen between me and Zach. He’s only in town for a short while, so it’s not like it could become anything real.”

“I was also only supposed to be in town for a short while.” Lacy shot Colette a pointed look while Sarah nodded.

“Maybe you could try asking him out?” Sarah offered, but Colette shook her head.

“I’m not sure that would be appropriate, since I’m technically his landlord. And I don’t want to make him uncomfortable.”

Colette took the last bite of her sandwich as she looked down at the table, hoping that would be the end of the talk about Zach. Fortunately, her friends weren’t the type to push her too far out of her comfort zone. Lacy, seeming to sense that Colette didn’t want to continue the conversation, leaned back in her chair and turned to Sarah.

“I saw something about the new bakery on the news the other day,” she said. “I’m assuming you’ve heard about it by now too. How are you feeling about that?”

“Well, you know me.” Sarah waved a hand in front of her face dismissively. “I was cool as a cucumber.”

Colette shared a grin with Lacy. “So what you’re saying is, it freaked you out a bit.”

“Just a little,” Sarah admitted with a sheepish grin. “But William came in and convinced me that it’s best to just keep my head down. Mind my business and just keep doing what I do best. And that’s just what I’m gonna do.”

Colette studied her friend, picking up a hint of nervousness in Sarah’s voice despite the calm and logical way she was speaking.

“You know this town loves your treats and your drinks,” she assured her friend, smiling fondly. “Trust me, your customers aren’t going anywhere. At the very least, you’ll always have the two of us as regulars.”

She gestured between herself and Lacy, who nodded emphatically and added, “With the way I’ve been craving sweets lately, I bet Colette and I could keep you in business single-handedly if it comes down to it.”

That drew a laugh from Sarah, who shot them both a grateful look as she used the last bit of her sandwich to sop up the remainder of her soup.

“Thanks,” Sarah said. “That means a lot.”

“Aside from intriguing new tenants and new bakeries, I have a bit of news,” Lacy tossed in, resting a hand on her belly.

“What is it?” Colette asked.

She and Sarah both turned, watching Lacy expectantly. Before her friend even spoke, Colette got the feeling that whatever Lacy was planning to say wasn’t something she was excited about. A little line had appeared between her brows, her lips turning down at the corners.

Then Lacy sighed, pushing her plate away. “I’m not gonna be able to pull off the Christmas party this year.”

Sarah made a little noise in her throat, and Colette grimaced sympathetically. She could see several emotions flit across Lacy's face, including regret and a touch of sadness, before her features settled into a look of resigned acceptance.

"What happened?" Sarah asked, reaching across the table and laying a hand across one of Lacy's.

"There's just too much going on right now," Lacy explained. "Between getting everything ready for the baby, work, and helping Derek with his business, it's just all a little too much. And something had to give. I was running myself ragged, tired all the time, so I had to find a way to ease up a little."

"We totally understand," Sarah promised, rubbing Lacy's hand.

"Everyone will understand." Colette gave Lacy what she hoped was a comforting smile. "All anyone wants is for you and Harriet the Spy to be healthy and happy. There's always next year."

Lacy nodded, but the glimmer of sadness didn't leave her eyes. Colette knew that the holiday party meant a lot to her. Ever since that first holiday she had spent in Snowy Pine Ridge, Lacy had embraced the job of creating a magical holiday celebration for the people of their little town. It was about more than just the party—it was about celebrating family and community, a way for Lacy to reconnect with her roots.

"Derek says the same thing." Lacy blew out another breath, tucking a lock of honey brown hair behind her ear. "And I know he's right. I can't keep doing it all, especially not when I'm trying to successfully grow another human." She pointed a finger at her belly, her eyes warming. "But I was looking forward to it. Looking forward to one more night of normalcy before all of a sudden, we're responsible for this whole other life."

Colette nodded. Not having had any children of her own yet, she couldn't quite relate to the pressure that Lacy must be facing with motherhood looming overhead, but she could

empathize with Lacy's feeling that she was letting people down.

"It's all gonna work out," Sarah said with a soft smile, meeting Colette's eyes and then Lacy's. "And next year's party will be extra wonderful, because everyone will have been looking forward to it even longer than usual."

"Thank you both." Lacy smiled, and Colette was glad to see the tension around her eyes ease a bit. "It helps to hear that from more people. It's still a disappointment, but it's good to know that no one in town will hold it against me."

"They definitely won't. Everyone knows how much you've got on your plate. And you've always got someone to listen or a shoulder to cry on as long as we're around," Colette said. "That's what friends are for."

They talked for a little while longer as they cleaned up from their lunch and did dishes, discussing a few interesting tidbits that Sarah or Lacy had heard going on around town. But when Lacy let out a loud yawn and stretched her arms over her head, Colette let out a chuckle.

"It sounds like someone needs a nap," she said pointedly.

"Yeah, I probably should rest for a bit. That was the whole point of taking something off my plate. And Harriet definitely makes me tired these days," Lacy admitted, grinning sleepily at her friends.

Sarah and Colette both nodded their understanding before pushing their chairs back from the table and standing. Lacy walked them both to the door, and the women said their goodbyes, wrapping each other in warm hugs before Sarah and Colette stepped out into the snow.

As they walked to their cars, Colette couldn't let go of the thought that Lacy shouldn't have to give up the joy of the Christmas party—not when it was so important to her. An idea struck her, and she grabbed hold of Sarah's hand just as they made it to the end of the driveway.

"What's going on?" Sarah asked, a few blonde tendrils of her hair blowing across her cheek as a gust of wind picked up.

“What if the Christmas party could still happen?” Colette asked, excitement building inside her.

Sarah pursed her lips, giving Colette a confused look. “What do you mean? Lacy said she wouldn’t be able to do it.”

Colette nodded, feeling more and more certain that her idea could work. “Exactly. *Lacy* can’t, but *we* can. What if we do it for her?”

Sarah’s face lit up as understanding dawned in her expression. “Oh, I see. We could! I could also call some of the other gals in town to see if they could help out. Shelley, Louise... the whole gang.”

Colette nodded. “Exactly. And I can talk to Derek. I’ll see if he knows anything about what Lacy was planning this year so that we can bring her vision to life. And since he lives with Lacy, he can make sure we have access to St. Nick’s Place and everything.”

The two women grinned at each other enthusiastically as Colette’s mind began racing, turning her thoughts for the party as a plan began to take shape. A light, happy feeling spread through her chest, and she found herself determined to pull off this surprise for Lacy.

She couldn’t think of anyone who deserved it more.

CHAPTER TWELVE

That following Sunday was one of the busiest that Sarah had seen at Sweet Thing Bakery in quite some time.

Once the morning rush hit, she felt as if the customers just never stopped coming. She spent the entire morning darting between helping customers at the counter, running drinks, desserts, and pastries out to tables, and making new batches of all their offerings. William was also tending to the counter and greeting customers, but with only the two of them, it was almost too much to keep up with.

Fortunately, they worked amazingly well together as a team, so despite the hecticness, they made it through without ever losing their cool.

Every table in the place was full, but finally, they reached a lull in new customers with no one else waiting in line. Sarah let out a sigh of relief as she slumped against the counter. She adjusted the ponytail she kept her hair tied back in, trying to come down from the high and ultra-focus required for keeping things moving in the busy shop.

The bell above the door tinkled brightly, announcing the arrival of another customer. Sarah straightened up behind the counter, fixing a smile on her face as she prepared to greet the new arrival. But her smile faltered a bit as she took in the woman who had just stepped into her shop.

The newcomer was someone she instantly recognized.

Mindy Harvey.

She looked exactly the same as she had when Sarah had seen her on the local news. Her tight blonde corkscrew curls were secured close to her head with several small hairpins, and she was wearing another bright and eye-catching outfit—this time, it was a pair of light blue pants and a coat with an orange floral pattern.

Sarah watched as Mindy walked through the shop, her gaze roving over the tables where customers sat, then over to the art on the walls and the black and white tiled floor, before ultimately settling on the display case. Since the morning rush had been so busy, Sarah hadn't gotten the chance to restock everything yet. All the shelves were usually chock full, but at that moment, there were missing rows and empty trays, with only a smattering of products here and there.

Sarah knew that back in the kitchen, the oven was full of fresh batches of more than a few items just waiting to be brought out and placed in the case, but there was no way for Mindy to know that. She couldn't help but notice a slightly judgmental look on Mindy's face as the other woman eyed the sparsely filled pastry case, but she decided to ignore it, remembering William's reassuring words from the other night.

"Welcome to Sweet Thing Bakery," Sarah called, making sure her smile stayed plastered on her face. "What can I get for you today?"

Mindy returned the greeting with a smile of her own, stepping up to the counter. Her gaze dropped to the counter, and Sarah's stomach dropped as she wondered if Mindy was searching for signs of dust or crumbs.

Well, she can keep looking, she thought to herself, because there's nothing here for her to find.

"This is quite the place you have here." Mindy's voice was friendly, but there was something slightly forced about it. "Although it's a bit smaller than I had anticipated."

Sarah's jaw tightened, and she worked as hard as she could to make sure her smile didn't drop.

“It isn’t really about the size of the bakery,” she said with a little shrug. “It’s all about the contents of it. The magic is in the things we bake.”

“I know that’s right.” Mindy chuckled lightly, shaking her head. “My name is Mindy Harvey. I’m the owner of Baking Fiend, the new bakery that just opened at the other end of town.”

She hooked a thumb over her shoulder as she spoke, indicating the direction of her shop, and Sarah nodded.

“I’m well aware. I saw the news segment about your bakery.”

A smug look flitted across Mindy’s face, and Sarah was sure that the other woman was glad Sarah knew who she was—as if having the other baker in town already know who she was and the name of her shop was some type of victory for Mindy. Sarah tried her best to stifle the competitive spirit that rose up in her in response to that thought, but it was difficult.

She had always been driven to produce the best pastries and treats she could, to make her business the best it could be... and until Mindy’s arrival in town, she had felt certain of her success. But now it was hard not to question everything she had built, and to get drawn into the urge to one-up the other woman.

“I’m glad to hear you’ve heard of me,” Mindy said smoothly. “That news story was so much fun to shoot. I was surprised when they called me, but it was very flattering that they wanted to do a piece on me.” Her gaze drifted back to the display case. “It looks like we have very different offerings. These treats are so cute and rustic.” She put a little twist on the last word, and Sarah wasn’t so sure it was meant as a compliment. “My bakery caters to people looking for something a little more refined, so there’s no way we’ll be competing for business. There will be plenty of room for us both.”

Sarah gritted her teeth together, trying her best not to react to the not-so-subtle dig.

“I guess only time will tell.” She shrugged one shoulder as she spoke, determined to appear unaffected as she worked to tamp down her emotions.

Mindy pointed to one of the trays in the case that was empty except for a small, paper tag. “I see that you have a card out for peanut butter chocolate cupcakes. Do you use a ganache, or do you just have the peanut butter in the frosting?”

“Both,” Sarah said, lifting her chin proudly.

“Interesting.” The other woman hummed. “You know, when I was in culinary school, they taught us to make these amazing chocolate cupcakes that we infused with peanut butter and then topped with chocolate crumbles. They were extremely popular. The bakery attached to the school could never keep them on the shelves.”

At the mention of culinary school, Sarah’s heart fell. She had never formally trained in baking, although she’d spent years studying and practicing on her own. For some reason, she had assumed that Mindy would be in the same boat, but that clearly wasn’t the case.

“I studied in Upstate New York,” Mindy carried on. “Just a small school, but very prestigious. Where did you study?”

Sarah suppressed a groan at the question.

“Um... I didn’t,” she muttered. “I’ve spent my entire life baking, and my parents always said I have a natural talent for it. But I didn’t attend school to study baking.”

“Oh.” Mindy’s mouth pulled into a surprised little frown, but then she waved a hand in the air. “Well, that’s all right. I’m sure your desserts are still phenomenal.”

Once again, Mindy’s words said one thing, but her tone and body language said something entirely different.

Sarah wanted to sink into the floor, sure her face was bright red by now. At the beginning of her career, she had worried about not being formally trained. She had been terrified that not having gone to school for it would put her behind some of the other bakery owners she followed online and looked up to a great deal. But as the years had ticked by

and she had continued to practice, her talent had grown by leaps and bounds.

She had always hoped that her dedication and willingness to keep learning would be enough. And up until this very moment, she had felt that it was. But now, with Mindy staring her down with barely concealed pity in her eyes, Sarah couldn't help but suddenly feel inadequate.

“Uh, is there anything I can get started for you?” she asked, hoping that Mindy would just order something and go on her way quickly. This entire interaction was unraveling all the calm acceptance Sarah had built up inside herself regarding the presence of a new bakery in town.

“I'd love something with a little caffeine. Where do you get your coffee from?” Mindy asked, glancing at the board on the wall behind Sarah with the list of drink offerings.

“I buy from a market in New York City and have it shipped here,” Sarah explained, a note of pride in her voice.

“Oh, how quaint.” Mindy smiled, adjusting the collar of her brightly colored coat. “I order ours in directly from Colombia. But New York is so much closer, which must be easier. And I'm sure you get a much better price for the lower quality beans.”

Sarah felt defensiveness rise up inside her, and she straightened her shoulders. “They aren't lower quality.”

“Oh, right.” Mindy held up a hand, her fingers fluttering. “I didn't mean to assume. I'm sure they're wonderful. Anyway, I'll take a latte to go please.”

Sarah quickly rang up the woman's drink order and announced the price. She took Mindy's card and swiped it through the card reader before turning to the espresso machine, glancing over at William. He was deep in conversation with a couple at a table near the window, and he probably hadn't even noticed who their newest customer was, so there was little chance of him coming over to rescue her.

She steamed the milk and pulled the espresso shots as quickly as possible, eager to get the other bakery owner out of

her shop. Even though she was in a hurry, she made sure to steam the milk to perfection, and as she poured it over the espresso, she gave a little flick of her wrist to create a leaf pattern in the foam.

Satisfied that she'd created a top tier latte—even with her beans from New York—she slid the drink across the table to Mindy.

The curly-haired woman gave Sarah another wide but slightly fake smile. “Thanks so much. I’m sure I’ll see you around town.”

“Looking forward to it,” Sarah said, hoping the lie wasn’t obvious.

With that, Mindy picked up her coffee and strode out of the shop.

Sarah watched her leave, biting her lower lip as the door closed with a little gust of cold air. The woman’s blonde curls disappeared from view as she walked down the street, and Sarah couldn’t help thinking that, no matter what William had said, Mindy Harvey and Baking Fiend were not going to be good for business.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The music in Colette's headphones blared through her ears, and she threw her hands above her head, wiggling her butt as she danced around with the feather duster. She stopped for a moment to run the duster over the blinds before continuing on with her concert. She had spent the entire morning cleaning her cottage, and the gleaming floors and glistening windows smiled at her as she checked off the final thing on her to-do list.

When the final surface had been dusted, she set the feathery tool back in its place under the sink and plucked the earbuds out. The silence of her cottage greeted her, and she smiled, reveling in the feeling of a job well done.

A knock sounded at her front door, echoing off the walls and making her give a small jump and a squeak of surprise.

Her hand fluttered up to her chest as she made her way to the door, trying to steady her breathing. When she pulled it open, a man stood on the other side of it. He had sandy blond hair and round cheeks, and he wore a dark blue utility jumpsuit and boots. He must have read the look of confusion on her face, because he gave a light chuckle before introducing himself.

"Hello," he said with a wide, friendly smile. "My name's Ron. I'm with the extermination company you hired to spray for earwigs."

"Ohhh!" Colette exclaimed as recognition and relief washed through her. "Right, yes! I think we should probably

start with the main house.”

She leaned to look behind Ron at the house that lingered in the distance. None of the lights were on, and there was no smoke coming from the chimney. She knew that Zach had been spending most of his days away from the house. Doing what, she hadn't the slightest idea. But she had seen him return primarily in the evening on most days, and she wondered if he was even home.

“I can start with the outside, if that helps,” Ron offered helpfully.

“Yes! Let's do that.” She nodded at him before reaching behind her and grabbing a jacket off one of the hooks by the door.

They walked across the yard, their footsteps making tracks over the snow. Starting the night before, the air had begun to grow warmer. And as morning had faded into afternoon, the snow on the ground had begun to melt a bit, although it still blanketed the yard. She could hear the crunch of the snow beneath Ron's feet as he followed closely behind her.

When she got to the front of the main house, she walked up to the door. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Ron unhook a hose connected to a pack on his back that she hadn't previously noticed. He hummed a Christmas carol under his breath as he began spraying the edge of the house in small, sweeping movements.

Colette blew out a quick breath before raising her hand to knock on the door. She paused for a moment, listening for any sound of life from the other side, but none came. She chewed on the inside of her cheek as she lifted a fist and knocked again, but there was still no answer.

She threw a quick, hurried glance in Ron's direction and then felt in her jacket pocket for the keys. Colette didn't really want to enter the home without having cleared it with Zach first, or at the very least having given him a heads up. But the appointment time had come up so quickly, and she hadn't seen him since she'd made it. And now she had no choice.

“We’ll be in and out in no time,” Colette reassured herself as she put the key in the lock and turned it.

She stepped across the threshold of the door and paused again, listening. There was a faint sound coming from the living room, like what she’d imagine an old-time quill scratching against parchment would sound like. Her brow furrowed with confusion as she took a few tentative steps through the hall toward the source of the noise.

The moment she turned the corner that led to the living room, her mouth popped open in shock and horror. Everything in the place was draped with large sheets that she didn’t recognize. There were canvases all over, many of them containing half-finished images of the town, the mountain, and some of the people in it.

Tubes of what appeared to be some type of paint laid strewn across the floor, and one of them seemed to have lost its cap entirely. Orange liquid oozed slowly onto the sheet below it. Small wooden pallets covered with globs of mixed paint laid at random intervals, seemingly discarded at random. And in the center of all the colorful chaos sat Zach.

His back was to her where he was seated on a stool before an easel and canvas, noise cancelling headphones secured firmly over his ears. He held a small spatula in his hand, and as Colette watched, he dipped the piece of metal into a glob of paint in the palette he held and brought it up to the canvas before him. He scraped the tool across the canvas, producing the sound that had caught Colette’s attention.

“Zach,” she said loudly, trying to alert him to her presence without startling him, but he was entirely lost in his own world.

She tried to say his name a few more times, each one a little bit louder than the last as worry bubbled up inside her. Everything about the space looked so different, and she glanced to the oozing tube of orange paint still on the floor. She couldn’t help but wonder if it would seep through the fabric.

Finally, giving up on calling his name, Colette strode across the room. The floorboards creaked under her weight, but still, that didn't rouse him. When she got close enough, she reached out a hand and placed it on his shoulder.

Zach jumped, the spatula in his hand clattering to the floor and the clump of paint went flying across the white sheet below him.

“Wha—”

He whirled around to face her, tugging the headphones from atop his head. His eyes were wide, his cheeks flushed, and his mouth hung open. If she hadn't been so worried about the paint that she had all but convinced herself was seeping through the sheet and onto the original hardwood floor below it, she likely would have laughed.

“I'm so sorry to bother you,” Colette said, trying her best to keep her voice even and not betray her worries about the room. “I tried knocking and saying your name.”

“Sorry. Headphones.” Zach pointed to the large set of headphones now dangling around his neck as his brows drew together. “What's going on? Did something happen?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I just have an exterminator here to spray the house. He's doing the outside now, and he'll need access to the inside soon. And I thought you weren't home, since you usually aren't during the day, so I let myself in.”

She raised one shoulder in a shrug before letting it drop. She was fully aware that she was rambling, and she wasn't sure if it was due to her nerves from entering the main house without permission, or the anxiety caused by the tubes of paint scattered about.

“An exterminator?” A worried look darted across Zach's face. “Is there an infestation or something that I don't know about?”

“Oh, no. Sorry.” Colette shook her head again, admonishing herself for making a mess of things. She was definitely still getting the hang of this landlord business. “It's

preventative. He's just sealing everything to make sure no earwigs can get in. They can be a nuisance this time of year."

"Ah, all right. Well, just have him come on in when he's ready."

Zach leaned forward, picking up the paintbrush from where he had placed it on the palette. He started to turn back toward the easel, but Colette took a few, hurried steps forward, grabbing his attention.

"What are you painting?" she asked, the question coming out in a rush.

"A little of this, a little of that." He waved his hand at the variety of canvases strewn about the room.

"It seems..." Colette paused, searching for a word, any word, that wasn't the only one that came to mind. But she came up short, and with a sigh, she decided to finish her sentence honestly. "Messy."

Zach turned back to her slowly, the swivel of the stool that he sat on creaking slightly as he did so. By the time he was fully facing her, she could see by the expression on his face that she had offended him, and she immediately tried to backpedal.

"Sorry, I just..." Her sentence dropped off as she gestured wildly, indicating to the tubes of paint, discarded palettes, and half-finished canvases.

"Did I do something wrong here?" Zach asked.

His tone wasn't outright accusatory, but she could tell she needed to tread lightly if she didn't want to offend him.

"No." Colette shook her head quickly. "No, it's just... well, I'm worried is all."

"Trust me. I have painted in every single apartment I have ever rented, and never once have I gotten so much as a drop on the floor, the walls, the ceiling, or anywhere that it isn't supposed to be."

She blinked at him, swallowing past the lump in her throat.

“Okay, sure.” Colette nodded. “I just worry about this place, that’s all.”

“I understand.” Zach nodded, his voice softening a bit. “But as far as I recall, there wasn’t any kind of stipulation about painting in my lease. So I’m pretty sure I’m not out of bounds here. I promise, I’m keeping an eye on everything, and none of this paint will get on anything that it’s not supposed to.”

She held his gaze for a moment, reading the sincerity in his eyes. It was difficult for her to accept his more free-spirited style, but she knew she was being overprotective of the house just because of her sentimental attachment to it. But despite the many differences between her and Zach, she was starting to understand that there were similarities too. So she realized that she would just have to trust him, taking his word that he knew what he was doing and wouldn’t get paint on the floors or the walls.

Colette inhaled deeply, trying to find more ease within herself just like Zach had.

It will be fine, she reminded herself. Don’t go worrying about a problem that hasn’t even been created yet.

“Right, well...” She glanced toward the door and then back to Zach. “I’ll leave you to it, and I’ll tell the exterminator to come in whenever he’s ready.”

“Thanks.” Zach looked like he wanted to say something more, but instead, he just nodded once. Then he turned back to his canvas as she made her way toward the door.

As an afterthought, she called over her shoulder, “Oh, and his name is Ron, by the way.”

She didn’t wait for a reply as the door shut behind her, sealing itself with a final, resounding click.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Zach pushed himself off the stool, taking a few steps back to admire the painting before him. He had been working on one of the Town Square, where the small circle of shops wrapped around the road. In the center of the space stood the massive, beautifully decorated Christmas tree, and smiling shoppers walked about. Considering he had never truly dabbled in anything besides impressionism while painting, he was proud of his results so far. Even if he still had a lot of work to do.

Movement outside the large bay window grabbed his attention, and Zach glanced up, catching sight of a bright red coat and a flash of blonde hair. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. He crept closer to the window, watching as Colette strode down the driveway and onto the sidewalk, headed toward town.

He thought of the moment earlier in the day when she'd stopped by the main house. He'd been a little offended that she thought he wouldn't take care of this house that clearly meant so much to her, but looking at his sometimes chaotic process from an outsider's eye, he could see why she had been concerned. As he replayed their conversation in his head, he regretted that he hadn't taken more time to explain to her *how* he was so certain that no paint would get anywhere it wasn't supposed to.

Not long after she had left, he had privately resolved to stop by her cottage this evening to apologize if he'd been insensitive or curt. But now he chewed his lip, considering that

maybe catching her while she was out and about might be better than just showing up at her cottage at random.

Deciding in a rush, Zach turned and headed quickly toward the front door. He didn't pause to glance at the coat he grabbed from one of the hooks before shrugging it on, slipping his feet into his boots and then stepping out into the brisk winter day.

With long, confident strides, Zach made his way down the driveway, following in the same direction that Colette had gone. But when he stepped out onto the sidewalk, she was nowhere to be found. He stopped for a moment and pursed his lips, debating whether it would be too much to go all the way into town to search for her. But now that he had the idea in his head, he couldn't seem to let go of it.

"It's not like there are many places she could have gone," he said to himself as he started walking toward town, hoping that he'd find her along his way.

Zach hadn't been walking long when he turned the corner to head into downtown Snowy Pine Ridge and caught sight of her. It wasn't much, just a flash of her bright red coat disappearing to the side of a building, but it was enough to spur him on.

As he walked toward the large, industrial metal building, he caught sight of a small sign hanging in the window and stepped closer to peer at it. The sign read: DOG SLED RIDES. CALL FOR AN APPOINTMENT OR INQUIRE INSIDE.

There was a phone number at the bottom, but that was it. There was something about the minimalism of it all that struck something in Zach. He liked the fact that this place didn't have a bright, neon sign begging for just anyone to come in. Establishments like this kept their business going by word of mouth and by being the best, and that was something that he couldn't help but respect.

And as he recalled the fact that Colette had told him to try out the dog sledding in town, he figured now was just as good of a time as any. Plus, it would give him the perfect excuse to bump into her.

Zach spotted Colette immediately as he made his way around the corner of the building. There were row after row of large dog kennels behind the structure, and then a huge middle section that was also fenced in and attached to the building, where a massive doggy door led to the inside. Colette was in the middle of the fenced in space, five or six large huskies hopping and yipping excitedly around her feet.

She was laughing, a smile dancing across her lips that made her look radiant. Zach's heart beat a little faster at the sight of her looking so happy and carefree, but he shook thoughts of why it affected him so much from his mind as he strode forward.

He thought of clearing his throat or making some kind of noise so that she'd hear him approach, but he wasn't sure what noise he could make that she'd hear over the racket of the huskies.

Thankfully, it ended up being unnecessary when she must have caught sight of his movements in her periphery. Colette's gaze flicked to him quickly, and her eyebrows shot up toward her hairline.

"Hey!" she said, giving him a quizzical look even as her cheeks turned a bit more pink.

"Hey, yourself." Zach smiled as he tucked his hands into his pockets. "I needed a break from painting, and I figured maybe I'd check out the dog sledding you told me so much about. And," he admitted, flushing a little, "I saw you come this way, and I wanted to talk to you. Do you work here or something?"

"No. Lacy and Derek are just nice enough to let me come and get puppy therapy whenever I want."

She bent over, ruffling the ears of a gorgeous, fluffy husky and laughing when its wet tongue lapped at her face. Zach suppressed a grin, amused by both Colette and the husky. He had never seen her so at ease, and he found that he liked this side of her quite a bit.

Colette looked up at that moment, and Zach realized with a start that he had been staring at her in silence. The warmth in his cheeks dialed up several notches, and he cleared his throat, looking down at the snow-covered ground.

Fortunately, she didn't seem upset about their earlier encounter at the house, and when Zach lifted his gaze back to hers, she was smiling.

"You really want to go dog sledding?" she asked.

"Well, I'm not sure I'm up for a sled ride just yet," he said, a flicker of nerves lighting in his belly. "This was more just a visit to check the place out."

"Ah, I see." She raised her arms, gesturing with a wide grin to the dogs gamboling and barking all around her. "So what do you think?"

"I think they're loud." Zach had to all but yell to be heard over the din.

He'd seen videos of the stereotypical husky howl before, and they'd always made him chuckle. But in real life, without a volume button, and with six of them doing it at once, he could barely hear Colette over the noise.

She laughed and started making her way toward the gate, the dogs dancing around her feet and hindering her progress. When she finally made it out of the kennel, the dogs turned toward each other and began racing back and forth before darting through the doggy door and disappearing from sight.

"There," Colette said with another flash of a smile. "Much better. You want me to call Derek and Lacy? They aren't here right now, but I can let them know you're interested."

Zach shook his head. "No, that's okay. I don't think I'm ready yet."

"Suit yourself." Colette shrugged.

Silence fell between the two of them for a moment, and Zach shifted his weight nervously from foot to foot. He hadn't just come here to check out the dog sledding—in fact, that had been a distant second to the main reason he'd come. But now

that he was face-to-face with Colette, he wasn't quite sure how to say what he wanted to tell her.

Finally, when the silence began to stretch on for too long, he blew out a quick breath and raked his fingers through his hair.

“Look,” he said. “About earlier today. I didn't mean to come off as rude.”

Colette's eyebrows pinched together, and she tilted her head to the side in question. “What do you mean?”

“When you came to the house to tell me about the exterminator. I was just caught up with painting.”

“Oh, you weren't rude.” She paused briefly, her lips pulling to one side in an adorable way. “Don't get me wrong, you weren't overly chatty. And I could tell it bothered you a bit that I thought you would just get paint everywhere. But I didn't think you were rude.”

He gave her a cautious smile. “Okay. Good. Because I'm really enjoying living in that house, and I hope you know I wouldn't do anything that could damage it. I know how much it means to you.”

Her eyes warmed, something passing over her face that he couldn't quite read. “Thanks,” she murmured. Then she made a face. “Oh, and while we're apologizing, I'm sorry I came into the house without notice and that I insulted your creative process.”

Zach blinked. “Wait, what? Did you insult my process?”

“I called it messy.”

His jaw fell open a little at the reminder, and then he narrowed his eyes in mock affront. “Yeah, you did do that.” He dropped the offended act, his lips turning up in a grin. “Although, to be fair, you're not wrong. My process *is* messy. It's always been that way. But I make sure that none of that mess gets anywhere I don't want it to.”

Colette laughed, and the light, happy sound of it made something in him unwind a little. A tension he hadn't realized

he was carrying in his shoulders fell away.

“We’re both forgiven then?” he offered, unable to hide the little bit of hope that snuck into his voice.

“We’re forgiven.” Colette extended a hand and looked up at him expectantly.

With a chuckle, Zach placed his hand in hers and gave it a quick, firm shake. Despite the snow all around, it was nice enough out that neither of them had put on gloves today, and he tried not to focus on how warm and soft her palm felt pressed against his.

“Are you headed back to the house?” she asked when they finally released their handshake and dropped their arms.

“Probably soon. I’m painting more these days than I have in almost a year. So I’ll likely go grab a coffee and head back.”

At the mention of painting, another look of worry flashed across Colette’s face again, although it was clear she tried to hide it.

“I promise not to make a mess,” Zach said quickly.

“I know.” She shook her head, rolling her eyes at herself. “You already told me that, and I *do* believe you. It’s just... hard. Emma loved that house so much. I think I’m so set on keeping it in good shape because it feels like a part of her is still in the house. Like maintaining and caring for the main house is a way of caring for her memory and keeping her close. I know it probably makes me an uptight landlord, and I’m sorry about that.”

Zach hesitated for a second, considering her words. They were so tender and heartfelt that he had the sudden urge to pull her into his arms. He didn’t, but he did take a step closer, dipping his head to catch her gaze.

“I totally get it. I think I’d be the same if someone I loved as much as you loved Emma left me a house to take care of. If it would make you feel better, I can paint outside.”

“What?” Her eyes widened as she blurted the word, clearly shocked by the suggestion. “No way. Absolutely not. It’s cold

out, and that would just be cruel and unusual punishment.”

“Well, how about I just promise to be extra careful?”

“Pinky promise it.” She held up her hand, her pinky finger sticking straight up in the air as she arched a brow at him.

Zach couldn’t help but laugh. “You know we’re adults, right?”

She didn’t say anything, just shot a pointed glance at her pinky as she lifted it a little higher in the air. An amused sigh gusted in the cold air in front of his face, but it was immediately negated by the smile pulling at his lips as he laced his pinky with hers.

“Fine,” he said solemnly. “I pinky promise that I will be extra careful and not even the tiniest drop of paint will get anywhere that isn’t one of the sheets I put down.”

“Good.”

Colette grinned at him with satisfaction before their hands dropped back to their sides. They said a quick goodbye, with Zach telling her that he should go get his coffee and Colette saying she needed to get a few things done around her cottage. They walked to the edge of the parking lot in front of the dog sledding business, then both started walking in opposite directions.

As they separated, Zach replayed their conversation in his head, feeling much better about this one than their earlier one back at the house. They had found common ground, and he was starting to realize that with every interaction he had with Colette, he liked her more and more.

He grinned to himself and glanced over his shoulder, catching just a glimpse of Colette’s red coat as she disappeared into the distance.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The sound of the smoke alarm blared through the bakery, and Sarah yelped as she rushed toward the oven. She pulled open the door and smoke poured out of it, prompting her to wave her towel in the air to try to dispel a bit of it.

She wasted no time grabbing the oven mitt from the nearest counter and pulling out the tray of the now entirely burned apple streusel muffins that she had been working on. Sarah blew out a quick, frazzled breath and she tried to steady her nerves. The bakery had been busy most of the morning, but not as busy as it usually was at eight a.m. on a Monday.

Typically, at the start of the week she was greeted by a full line of her bleary and tired-eyed townsfolk starting the moment that they opened, begging for a fix of coffee after a full weekend. But this morning, it had been more of a trickle. Steady, but not busy. Not at first. And she couldn't help but wonder if the new bakery had anything to do with it.

She quickly waved that thought away, reminding herself of William's advice about minding their business and just continuing to serve the community that they loved. Sarah walked over to the trash can and dumped the tray of muffins into it with a sigh.

She glanced at the clock and cringed. She needed to get another batch of the apple streusel started soon, because it was about time for—

Sarah didn't get to finish her thought. The bell above the front door chimed merrily, and in walked none other than

Rudolph Hutchins. He was a grumpy man who ran the ice-skating rink, and every morning, without fail, he came in to order a classic Americano and an apple streusel muffin. Sarah was dreading having to tell him that another batch wouldn't be ready for a while.

"Hey, Rudolph," she said, offering him a smile as she wiped her hands on her apron and approached the counter.

She sent up a quick prayer to the universe for a Christmas miracle, one that would result in Rudolph wanting to try something different and not even mentioning his usual order. But as he opened his mouth, she realized that she wouldn't be that lucky.

"My usual, please," Rudolph said in his deep, gruff voice, as he reached in his pocket and began pulling out his wallet.

"I'm so sorry," Sarah began carefully. "The batch of apple streusel that I had going for today got burnt, so we're all out." The man's already crotchety expression turned even more sour, and Sarah continued in a rush. "But maybe I could interest you in something else? If you really just like streusel, we have a blueberry one that everyone raves about, and it's one of my favorites."

She looked at him hopefully, but when he started shaking his head, she had to stop herself from physically deflating in front of him.

"No, none of that." Rudolph put his wallet back in his pocket. "I've been meaning to get down to that new place anyway, so maybe it's just as well. What's it called? Baking Buddy?"

"Baking Fiend," Sarah corrected with a small grimace.

"Yeah, that one." He nodded. "I've been wanting to go try it out. Guess today's the day."

He started to turn around, then glanced back at Sarah as if it was an afterthought.

"Thanks, though," he mumbled before striding out the door and disappearing from view.

Sarah blew out a long, calming breath.

“It’s all okay. It’s just one day. It’s all okay. It’s just one day,” she whispered to herself on repeat as she tried to calm her nerves, but she was brought up short by the sound of the bell above the door chiming again.

“Hi,” Sarah said as her eyes snapped open, and she affixed another wide smile to her face. “Welcome to Sweet Thing. What can I get for you?”

The woman who had just walked in gave her an excited, happy look as she approached the pastry case.

“Can I have just a moment to consider everything?” the customer asked as she tapped her finger on her lips.

“Absolutely. Take all the time you need and let me know if you have any questions.”

Sarah tried not to sound too eager or glance at the new customer too often. After Rudolph, who despite his often-grumpy demeanor, was one of her best customers, she needed to be able to help someone.

“I do have one question,” the woman said contemplatively, bringing Sarah out of her own thoughts.

“Sure thing, what do you have for me?” Sarah turned to face her.

“You don’t happen to have any of those chocolate cupcakes with a peanut butter filling like Baking Fiend, do you?” the woman asked, and Sarah fought with everything in her not to let her smile fall. “I tried it the other day, and it was just heavenly. But when I stopped by there a little bit ago, she had just sold her last one.”

“I’m so sorry,” Sarah said with genuine remorse. “But I don’t have anything like that. We do have great chocolate cupcakes though.”

The woman considered for a moment, but then shook her head.

“No, that’s okay. Maybe some other time.”

“We’re here whenever you decide to give us a try.”

Sarah held her smile as the woman turned and exited the café, only letting it fall when she was no longer within line of sight of the windows. She glanced around the now empty space, her palms breaking out in a worried sweat as she pushed her way through the swinging doors that led to the kitchen.

As soon as she stepped into the warm space, William walked out of the office. He stopped, taking one glance at her, and immediately his face lit up with concern.

“Everything all right?”

Sarah shook her head, telling him everything that had happened with Rudolph and the customer right after him.

“I’m just worried,” she said when she finished, twirling the fabric of her apron in her hands just for something to do.

“I know,” William answered, his voice full of sympathy as he stepped toward her.

He reached out his large arms and wrapped them around her, pulling her toward him in a tight embrace.

“It’s okay to be worried. But I promise everything is going to be all right,” he murmured as he pressed soft kisses to the top of her head. “Sweet Thing is a staple in this community. People are excited that there’s someplace new. That’s perfectly okay and to be expected. But they’ll come back. I promise.”

“How do you know?” she asked, unable to keep the worry from lacing her tone.

“I’m the behind-the-scenes guy, it’s my job to know these things.”

Sarah chuckled despite herself, feeling marginally better at William’s sweet words.

“Plus,” he said, looking down at her with his soft kind eyes. “No matter what I’ll always be here. So that’s at least one customer you can’t get rid of. Ever. Ever. Ever.”

He punctuated each ‘ever’ with a kiss to one of her cheeks, and this time a real laugh pulled itself from her lips. She raised her hands and tried to push herself out of his grasp, fleeing his kisses but he held her tight as her giggles bubbled over. When finally, he stopped, he squeezed her tight once more before letting his arms drop back to his sides as he held her gaze.

“Better?” he asked.

“Better.” Sarah nodded, and she was happy to find that she meant it.

* * *

Zach sat back on his stool, smiling at the painting before him and how it was coming together. It would be finished soon, and he was proud of it. Prouder than he could recall being about a painting in quite some time.

His phone began ringing, the bright, merry chiming snapping him out of his moment of contemplation. He reached into his pocket, fishing out his phone and glancing at the screen. The name DENNIS bounced across the top of it, and he smiled as he pressed *accept* and raised the device to his ear.

“Hey, bud,” he said, genuine affection rolling through him.

“Hey, hey, hey.” Dennis’s jovial voice sounded on the other end of the line. “How are you? How’s Snowy Pine Ridge treating you?”

“It’s great, man.” Zach blew out a breath. “Really great, actually. I’m painting right now.”

“Anything good?”

He chuckled. “Surprisingly, yes. It’s different. Realist landscapes. But it’s good.”

“I knew it.” Dennis laughed, and Zach could hear the other man’s smile through the phone. “I knew it would be the perfect place to help you find your center.”

“You know how much I hate to say it, but you were right.”

“Where are you staying?”

“A gorgeous house. Old Victorian. The woman who used to live here passed away a few months ago and left everything to the younger woman that was taking care of her. She lives on the grounds, actually, but she didn’t want to move into this massive place. So now I’m here.”

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line, followed by Dennis blowing out a breath and then asking, “You wouldn’t be talking about Emma and Colette by any chance, would you?”

It hadn’t occurred to Zach that Dennis would have known the old woman, and he found himself wishing that he hadn’t phrased it in the way he had.

“I am,” Zach answered, his voice taking on a softer tone. “Colette is my landlord.”

“Oh. Wow. I didn’t know that Emma had passed. I’m so sorry to hear that. She was an amazing woman.”

“That’s what Colette said too. And everyone I’ve met so far as well. Everyone seems to have loved her.”

“I remember Colette too, although I didn’t interact with her much. She was quiet. It was always Emma who did the talking. But I always thought Colette seemed sweet.”

Zach paused, a smile tugging at his lips as he thought of his current landlord. “She is.”

“Pretty too.” Dennis’s voice had taken on a pointed tone, and Zach rolled his eyes at the ceiling and groaned.

“Don’t act like you haven’t noticed.” Dennis laughed, and Zach could practically picture the amused glint in his eyes.

“Of course I’ve noticed.” Zach pursed his lips to hold back the smile that threatened to break forth. “But that doesn’t mean I want to talk about it.”

“You know, for someone who’s so blunt about everything else, you sure play things close to the vest when it comes to the romance stuff.”

“No, I don’t. Besides, I don’t know if anything could ever happen between us. She’s a little too practical for that.”

“Oh, if only there was someone in Snowy Pine Ridge who wasn’t practical, and who could help her lean into her more creative side.” Dennis’s voice was dripping with sarcasm.

“How do you know she has a creative side?” Zach arched an eyebrow.

“You know as well as I do that everyone has the potential to expand their horizons and think outside the box they’re used to. They just need the right catalyst.”

“And I would be the catalyst? For my landlord?”

“Better you than some sleazeball who would break her heart.”

“Need I remind you that I don’t even live here, and that I’m just visiting?” Zach rubbed the bridge of his nose, a little surprised at the turn the conversation had taken—and even more surprised that Dennis’s arguments were starting to make a bit of sense.

“Yeah, yeah, all I hear is excuses.” His friend’s tone shifted as he changed the subject. “But speaking of, when will you be returning to Rochester?”

Zach paused, knowing that his answer would only make his friend even more nosy about his nonexistent budding romance with Colette.

“I don’t know.” He finally answered, the words emerging slowly. “I’m loving it here. And I’m feeling more inspired than I have been in a year. And it’s not like I have a ton of work or a day job waiting for me back home.”

“So you’re saying your hang-ups with not living there are all in your head because you could stay indefinitely. Got it.”

“Dennis,” Zach drawled in a warning voice.

“Fine, fine,” Dennis answered with an amused chuckle. “I’ll let it drop. All jokes aside though, I’m glad you’re doing well, man. I was worried about you for a second there.”

“Me too.”

There was a quick rush of noise on the other end of the line, before Dennis’s voice came through again. It was muffled now, as if he’d placed his hand over the speaker.

“I’ll be just a second,” he said. After another pause, his voice became clearer again. “All right, I’ve gotta let you go. Justine and I are about to go for dinner, and we’ll be late.”

At the mention of Dennis’s fiancée, Zach could hear love fill his friend’s voice. He was happy for the two of them. He’d always liked Justine, and the fact that she made his friend so happy was an added bonus.

“Well, you definitely don’t wanna be late,” Zach said with a smile. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Dennis said goodbye, and they both hung up, leaving Zach still smiling as he stared out the window of the living room. Another fine layer of snow had fallen on the ground since the night before, and his mouth fell open in shock when he saw a dog sled zoom by the window, pulled by a small team of excited huskies.

He laughed as he watched them, their tongues lolling out of their mouths before they finally faded into the distance. Zach recalled the day before, when he had seen Colette with the dogs, and the way her face had lit up as she was surrounded by them.

Puppy therapy, she had called it.

As he walked across the room and grabbed a sketchbook, his hand itching to draw one of the huskies’ adorable faces, he found that he might actually understand what she’d meant.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A gentle breeze stirred a tendril of Colette's hair, and she reached a mittened hand up to pull her beanie down a little more snugly over her head before wrapping her fingers around her mug of hot cider.

She was sitting on the front porch of her cottage with a blanket thrown over her and a small heater tucked beneath her chair to lock in the warmth as she watched the fat snowflakes fall toward the ground. The waning sunlight glinted off them, painting them in hues of calming orange and glistening blue.

She used to do this with Emma all the time. They had often sat and watched the snow while they talked about life and the various reality television shows they were watching. There had never been a single topic off limits with them, and it was only beginning to dawn on Colette now just how much those moments had meant to her.

Colette had always been someone who liked her own company and found comfort in her quiet moments of solitude. Loneliness wasn't a feeling she was accustomed to, but she had been feeling it all too often since Emma's passing. And she was beginning to wonder if all of the alone time was good for her.

She was so wrapped up in her own thoughts that it took her quite some time to notice that she wasn't actually alone. She hadn't noticed when Zach had slipped out of the main house and begun walking across the yard. She hadn't noticed when he'd waved to her as he approached, and it wasn't until one of

the boards of her porch creaked under his weight that she realized he was there at all.

A small yelp of surprise burst out of her when she saw his tall, broad figure suddenly standing before her. His vibrant green eyes glowed with amusement as he smiled at her, complemented by the dark hunter green coat that he wore.

“I waved at you and called your name,” he said, giving her a crooked grin. “But you were lost in your own thoughts.”

“I’m so sorry.” Colette held her hand to her chest, feeling her heart beating rapidly beneath her palm.

She felt something wet dripping down her cheek, and with another jolt of surprise she realized that she had been crying. Colette quickly tried to wipe the few tears away, but she wasn’t fast enough to escape Zach’s keen gaze. His brow creased with concern as he crossed the last few feet of her porch and lowered himself into the chair beside her.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his gaze roving over her face.

“I’m fine,” Colette said, but even she could hear the lie lacing her words.

Zach didn’t say anything. He just sat there, watching her while her mind began to spin with all of the things she was thinking about. She appreciated the fact that he wasn’t pressuring her to talk if she didn’t want to, that he was perfectly okay with just providing a steady presence while she figured out how much of her thoughts, if any, she wanted to divulge. It was that fact that had her blowing out a quick, steadying breath before she began to speak.

“It’s Emma,” she said.

The moment the words left her lips, she felt something inside of her open fully, and more words poured out of her than she had intended. It was as if speaking to someone who hadn’t known the old woman made it easier for Colette to talk about Emma. Or maybe it was just something about Zach. Either way, all Colette knew was that one second, she was warring with herself about what all she should tell this

handsome man beside her—who, despite living in a house that she owned, was practically a stranger—and the next second, she was talking so quickly her brain could hardly keep up with her mouth.

“She was like a mother to me. I moved here when I was very young, fresh out of high school, actually. Derek, my cousin, the one who owns the dog sledding business?” She sent a quick glance and saw Zach nodding, confirming that he knew who she was talking about. “Well, he and I have always been close. The rest of my family though... it’s complicated.”

“How so?”

Zach’s voice was filled with genuine interest, and when Colette’s eyes roved over his face there was no pity to be found there. She breathed a small sigh of relief at that, encouraged to continue by his open and empathetic demeanor.

“My father was an alcoholic. He and my mother divorced when I was young. And when she remarried... well, let’s just say her new husband didn’t necessarily like kids, and especially not teenagers. Things were pretty iffy for a while, so as soon as I graduated high school and had the opportunity, I came here. At first, I lived with Derek. But it wasn’t long before I met Emma. She took me in. She would have told you that she offered a job to me, some kid down on her luck, because she knew that the labor would come cheap, especially if she provided me with room and board, but that wasn’t even remotely true. She paid me more than enough. More than minimum wage, and more than what I would have made at literally any other job that I could have gotten fresh out of school.”

Colette glanced over her shoulder to the cottage. “She let me live here, and in return, I helped her with everything around the property. It was tough at first. What eighteen-year-old do you know who would excel at managing a household and taking care of an old woman?”

Zach laughed. “Not many.”

He shot Colette a look, letting her know that she could continue, and so she did.

“Emma was a wild one, you’ll hear that from just about anyone that knew her. She was an absolute force of nature. But she also became the person I loved most in this world. She was the mother I never truly got the chance to have.”

Colette raised one shoulder in a shrug before letting it drop. She had expected to feel the sting of tears behind her eyes now that all of her feelings and the less savory details of her past were laid bare, but she didn’t. Instead, when she looked back at Zach, who was watching her with something like admiration, she just felt kind of relieved to have it all out in the open.

“I can’t say that I completely understand what you went through,” Zach said after a pause. “But I can say that I’m very sorry you went through it.”

“No horrific stories about your own parents?” Colette asked with a chuckle as she pressed her mug of rapidly cooling cider to her lips.

“Quite the opposite.” Zach shook his head as a soft, affectionate smile played at his mouth. “Don’t get me wrong. My parents and I had our disagreements when I was growing up, just like with any family. But they were so supportive. They’ve been my biggest cheerleaders for my entire life. I wish you could have had that.”

Colette typically hated when people said things like that, because the words were usually only accompanied by pity. But there was none of that hidden behind Zach’s words or his gaze. Instead, his green eyes shone with a stark honesty that she found refreshing.

“How long have you been an artist?” she asked, not because she wanted to change the subject, but because she found herself genuinely curious.

Colette found that she wanted to learn everything she could about Zach, and that realization startled her. She hadn’t expected to be so intrigued by him when they’d first met. She hadn’t expected to *like* him so much.

“My entire life.” Zach shrugged, a far-off look dancing behind his eyes. He chuckled at some memory, giving his head a slight shake. “When I was little, I think five or six, maybe? Well, I used to draw on the walls of my bedroom. On every surface that I could reach. I’d hide my wall drawings behind my dressers, behind my bed frame, anywhere I could. But my mom would always notice them. The first couple of times, my parents painted over them, but once they realized that I wasn’t going to stop, they took me to an art store, let me pick out some paints and told me to go to town. They let me paint a mural on my wall.”

“A mural?” Colette echoed, her eyebrows shooting up in surprise and Zach nodded.

“Uh huh. It wasn’t any good. Most of it was just stick figures and childlike drawings of butterflies and dragons that looked more like blobs. But at the end of it, I was so proud.”

“Were you sad when they painted over it?”

“What makes you think that they did?” Zach asked, grinning. “When I got older, I told them that I wanted to paint my room. They wouldn’t let me. Instead, they had me switch rooms entirely. The room that I had been in and painted became the new guest room, and I took over the much less childish other room. The paintings on the walls are still there to this day.”

Colette smiled at him. “That’s incredibly sweet.”

“Isn’t it?” He nudged her shoulder with his own, an easy, affectionate gesture, and the last bit of Colette’s melancholy left her.

An idea struck her, and she immediately pushed herself to her feet. Zach watched her with open curiosity as she bent to set down her mug of cider, turned off the heater, and placed her blanket on the chair.

“Wanna see something?” she asked, still grinning.

“Sure. What is it?” Zach’s brow was furrowed in a question, but Colette just shook her head.

“You’ll see. Come on.” She waved her hand, motioning for him to follow her as she walked off the porch and down into the yard.

After only the briefest pause, Zach followed after her. She could hear the faint crunch of his footsteps across the snow. His stride was longer than hers, and she could hear it as he got closer to her with each step that they took toward the main house. By the time they reached the front porch of the large building, he was right on her heels, and she tried not to get distracted by his proximity.

“It’s unlocked,” he said as they reached the door, and she nodded as she reached forward to push the door open and head inside.

“Seriously, where exactly are you taking me?” Zach asked, kicking off his boots at the door and following after Colette.

The old wooden stairs creaked under their weight, and she threw a look over her shoulder and smiled at him.

“The attic.” She wagged her eyebrows at him, and he laughed. “Have you been up here yet?”

“No. I haven’t really had a reason to.”

Colette nodded as they reached the door that led to the attic stairs. She pulled it open, her heart suddenly pounding with nerves. The attic was where she had stored everything from Emma that she wanted to keep, and she hadn’t shared this space with anyone.

There was a half wall at the top of the stairs blocking the contents of the attic from their view. Colette blew out a final anticipatory breath before she stepped off the top stair and onto the landing. Zach’s sharp intake of breath at what he saw before him had her smiling softly to herself.

Pressed up against the walls—some up there for so much time that they had long since begun to gather dust, others only added after Emma’s passing—were paintings. Emma had been quite the collector. Local artists, artists who were well known, it was all the same to her. Just as long as the content of the painting made her *feel*.

Zach took a few steps farther into the room, getting close enough to crouch in front of a few paintings as he began studying them intently.

“May I?” he asked, reaching out a hand so that it hovered in front of the first painting in the row.

“Go ahead.” She nodded, and he began moving the paintings around, getting a better view of the ones in the back.

Colette stood in the background, watching as he made appreciative *oohs* and *ahhs* with each new painting he came across, rattling off names of artists that she hadn’t heard of but whom he seemed to be well familiar with. She could tell which ones he found particularly moving by the sounds he made and the way his eyes lit up as they roved over the canvases. She had never seen anyone look at something with such appreciation and such passion before.

She had found Zach handsome before. But now? The way excitement danced over his features and untold emotions flashed in the depths of his bright green eyes transformed him in a way that made her heart flutter.

Colette had no idea how long she stood like that, watching him with a smile on her face. She felt as if she could watch him for hours, just like that, overcome by the excitement of all of the art in the attic room.

Zach glanced over his shoulder at her after a while, and her cheeks flushed warmly from being caught observing him.

“Sorry,” he said with a sheepish grin, pushing himself up to standing and walking toward her. “I nerd out a little about this kind of stuff sometimes.”

He gestured at the paintings around them, but she shook her head, dismissing his apologies.

“Don’t be sorry. I like that about you. It’s nice, seeing someone this excited over something.”

He ran his hands through his hair, mussing it slightly, and Colette laughed when a stray lock fell over his forehead.

“What?” He tipped his head to one side, making another clump of auburn hair fall across his forehead.

“Here,” she said with a chuckle, not thinking anything of it as she reached forward and swiped the hair away from his temple.

Zach’s eyes roved over her face, and she was close enough as she pushed his hair back into place that she could feel his breath stirring against her skin.

“Colette,” he whispered, her name falling softly from his lips.

She met his gaze, her smile fading when she noticed the emotions in his eyes. The air between them became charged, and Colette’s breath hitched as Zach leaned toward her. He paused for a moment, his gaze dipping from her lips and then back up to her eyes, a silent request for permission.

Colette nodded, leaning up on the tips of her toes as he bent the last few inches to brush his lips to hers. The moment their mouths met, it was as if all the atoms in her body shifted. Zach’s large, strong arms wrapped around her waist, and it was as if the two of them fit together like perfect puzzle pieces. Colette was certain that he must be able to feel the fierce pounding of her heart.

When they broke apart, they were both a bit breathless, and Colette was grinning as her head spun. She couldn’t recall the last time she had been kissed quite like that. Actually, yes, she could. She had *never* been kissed like that.

He looked at her sheepishly, almost shyly, and Colette’s heart did another somersault. She suddenly wondered if she had done something wrong, if she had overstepped some boundary, but those worries were quickly dashed when Zach gave her a gentle smile before leaning forward and pressing a sweet, chaste kiss to her forehead.

“Should we go back downstairs?” he asked, reaching down to lace their fingers together.

Butterflies danced through Colette’s stomach. She felt like she was venturing into uncharted territory, which was both

thrilling and terrifying. But she pushed aside her fears as she nodded at him, allowing the handsome man to lead her back down the stairs of the house that she loved so much.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The door to the bakery chimed loudly as a customer walked out, and Sarah fought hard to not let her disappointment show on her face. Once again, someone had asked about the chocolate peanut butter cupcakes ‘just like Baking Fiend’s,’ and she’d had to tell the person that Sweet Thing didn’t sell them. At this point, she was contemplating trying to make something like it and putting her own spin on it, just to stop customers from heading to Mindy’s shop like the person who’d just left was doing.

Sarah glanced around the bakery. Will was in the corner, his laptop open in front of him as he helped someone with their budgeting spreadsheet. She smiled softly at the sight. William was always doing things like that, helping anyone in town who expressed even the mildest bit of confusion over their finances. His eagerness to help others was one of the things she loved the most about him.

The rest of the shop, however, was entirely empty, and something about that fact made her nervous. Sarah shifted her weight back and forth between each leg, trying to remind herself of all of William’s advice about minding her own business and how everything would work out in the end.

But as the minutes ticked by and not a single person who passed by on the sidewalk so much as glanced at the bakery, there was only one thought that kept occupying Sarah’s mind. Finally, when she could take no more of it, she huffed out a sigh and cast another look toward William. He was so

absorbed in his work that he didn't notice as she slipped the apron off her head and strode into the back room.

Sarah walked into the office, grabbing a scarf from the back of a chair and wrapping it around her neck and the bottom half of her face, obscuring some of her features. She pulled on her coat and her hood, and at the last second, she grabbed a pair of oversized sunglasses that were sitting on the desk and thrust them on. Satisfied that she was entirely disguised, she shoved her hands into her pockets and slipped out the front door, heading through town.

No one glanced in her direction as she weaved in and out of the shoppers milling about, and Sarah took that as confirmation that her disguise was working.

"I just need to know," she muttered to herself, sure that she'd sound like a loon if anyone could hear her, but not completely caring.

She made it to Baking Fiend in no time at all, and she stopped in her tracks in front of the building. It looked the same in person as it had that day on the news, and she took in the charming brick facade of the shop with the large bay windows where customers sat at wrought iron tables.

A woman exited the shop, one whom Sarah didn't recognize, so she knew it had to be someone from out of town. The woman stopped, smiling happily as she reached into the delicate white pastry bag that she clutched in her hand and extracted a large bear claw pastry.

The pastry looked delightful, cooked to a buttery soft brown and drizzled in icing that made her mouth water just looking at it.

"How is your pastry?" Sarah blurted, taking a few steps toward the woman before she could think too much of it.

The woman blinked at her mid-bite, taking a few seconds to chew and then swallow.

"Is it any good?" Sarah prompted again, giving the woman an expectant look.

“It’s the best bear claw I’ve ever had,” the woman answered honestly, looking at Sarah as if she had lost her marbles. Which maybe she had.

Sarah nodded. “Good, good.” But the words sounded a little hollow.

Understandably, the woman didn’t say anything else to her as she walked past, taking another bite of her pastry and mumbling to herself about crazy people. Sarah glanced at the bakery again, curiosity welling up inside her, and this time she couldn’t tamp it down.

She plowed forward with determined steps, unable to stop herself as she pushed open the door to Baking Fiend and stepped inside. She had hoped that being there would ease her fears, but as she looked around the space, it only served to make her belly roil into knots.

“Oh, no,” she murmured under her breath. “It’s adorable.”

And it was. There were black and white tile floors, and old-fashioned décor complemented by soft pastel colors on the walls. The display case for Mindy’s desserts and pastries was huge, almost double the one Sarah had at Sweet Thing, and it was backlit by a softly glowing light. Sarah crept forward, her eyes roving over the contents in the case, taking in the names.

There were the peanut butter and chocolate cupcakes everyone had been raving about. The bear claw she had spotted in the woman’s hand just outside. Glazed cranberry donuts, beautiful cinnamon rolls, and giant cookies. All of it was making her mouth water.

Sarah glanced at the large, chalkboard style menu filled with an elegant script behind the counter, contemplating the drink offerings. Once again, she let out a muffled sigh, because it all sounded absolutely delightful.

She pulled her scarf more closely around her face, worried that one of the customers in the bakery would notice her before she turned and walked back out. She had been half tempted to buy something just to try it, but the woman’s words about it being the best bear claw she’d ever had echoed

through her mind. Sarah didn't think she could take it if she found out for herself just how true that was. So she stepped back into the cold, snowy afternoon before she could hurt her own feelings any further.

She had taken all but three steps away from Baking Fiend when Sarah heard her name being called out. She flinched, patting at her disguise as she turned to find her friend Shelley Keegan walking toward her. Shelley's boyfriend's son, Brandon, was standing next to her, his gaze on his phone.

Realizing that her attempt to remain incognito had definitely failed, Sarah reached a mittened hand up as she unwound the scarf from her face, allowing them to see her as they approached.

"What are you doing out and about? Isn't it lunch time? I would've thought that would be a busy time for you," Shelley said, glancing from Sarah and then back to the bustling bakery behind her.

"Oh, um... we had a bit of a lull," Sarah explained. "And I figured I'd come down and finally check out the competition."

She tried to keep her voice light and airy, as if she didn't have a care in the world, but Sarah could tell by the look on Shelley's face that she hadn't been entirely successful.

"Have you tried the new place out yet?" Sarah asked, a little worried about what the answer would be.

"I have." Shelley nodded, and Sarah wasn't sure what to make of the reluctance in her friend's voice.

"And?" Sarah prompted, her brows knitting together in concern as her heart thudded heavily.

"It's good. But it doesn't hold a candle to your desserts and the drinks that William makes."

Shelley gave her an encouraging smile as she spoke, and Sarah nodded gratefully. She knew her friend's words were intended to make her feel better, and they did—at least, a little. But not as much as she would have hoped.

“How are you doing? What brings you two out today?” Sarah asked.

“Doing a bit of Christmas shopping. We’re both on the hunt for a gift for Matthew. We figured we’d join forces.”

“Ah. Good idea.”

The three of them chatted for a bit longer, and Brandon filled Sarah in on his recent skating escapades, but eventually Sarah began to feel bad about being away from the bakery for so long, and she was forced to say goodbye.

She hugged Shelley, her friend squeezing her a little tighter than usual before letting go, and Sarah allowed herself to revel in the support for only a moment. She thought of Baking Fiend during her walk back to Sweet Thing, wondering what kind of desserts she could add to her own offerings.

She didn’t glance through the windows before she walked into Sweet Thing, and her feet stuttered to a stop when she spotted the line at the counter and a frazzled looking William behind it. He was running like mad as he tried to take orders, make drinks, and pack up pastries all on his own. Her heart gave a quick twinge of sympathy for him, but she had to admit he looked pretty cute back there.

William’s eyes darted up, his gaze landing on her as she crossed the floor, pulling off her layers.

“Where have you been? I was about to send out a missing persons alert,” he teased, a smile tugging up the corner of his lips as she pulled on her apron.

“Sorry. I just ran out for a little errand,” Sarah said quickly, hoping that she sounded convincing.

William eyed her with one eyebrow slightly raised, but he didn’t question her further as he began packing another order and Sarah stepped up to help the next customer. She lost herself in the rush of people, encouraged by the line that seemed as if it just wouldn’t die down. She and William ran themselves ragged for so long that she lost track of time. When the final customer stepped out and she had time to pop

into the back to begin a few new batches of muffins that they were running low on, she let out a sigh of relief.

The door to the kitchen swung open, and she glanced over her shoulder to see William walking through, grinning at her.

“Whew. That was quite the rush,” he said, and she nodded.

“It was good though.” Sarah dried her hands on her apron and turned to face him.

His brow was slightly furrowed, and the questioning look in his eyes was at odds with the easy smile on his lips.

“So where did you disappear to earlier?”

“I told you...” Sarah began, but her sentence cut off when she saw the expression on William’s face. He clearly knew she hadn’t told him the truth earlier, he just hadn’t pressed her because they were busy. She wouldn’t get off that easy now, and she knew it.

She blew out a breath, steeling herself as she twisted her flour dusted hands together.

“I went to Baking Fiend.”

“And?”

“And... it was great.” She gave a sad chuckle. “I hate to admit it, but it really was. The place is beautifully decorated, and every single pastry looked amazing.”

William stepped toward her, placing a hand on each of her hips.

“It does seem like it’s been doing well since it opened. That’s okay though.” He pressed a quick kiss to her forehead, and Sarah’s eyes fluttered shut for a moment. “I told you, a little friendly competition can be a good thing.”

“Competition...” Sarah repeated the word, drawing it out as an idea began to take shape in her mind. Then her eyes flew open, and she looked up at William excitedly. “That’s it! Sweetheart, you’re a genius!”

“I mean, yes.” William grinned at her. “Of course I am. But what did I do right this time?”

Sarah laughed. “A competition! We can have a baking competition at the holiday party!”

A concerned look flitted across his face. “Oh. Hmm, I don’t know if that’s a great idea.”

“How can it not be great? It was your idea.” Sarah rested a hand on his arm, standing on her tiptoes to lightly press her lips to his.

She could tell that he wanted to argue further or try to talk her out of it, but this was the most excited she had felt in days. A new energy was filling her chest, and her mind was already buzzing with thoughts about how to pull it off.

“I’ll approach Mindy about the idea tomorrow,” she said, rattling off her new to-do list. “That’ll give me tonight to iron out the details.” She clapped her hands before rubbing them together. “Oh, this is gonna be great.”

She turned away from William as the timer to the oven began beeping. She hummed to herself as she took out the new batch of muffins, smiling as she found them perfectly browned and smelling delicious. As she set them on the counter to cool, she felt a lightness growing inside her.

William might not be sure this was a good idea, but she was growing more and more certain that this was the best way forward. Once she went head-to-head with Mindy in a friendly holiday baking competition, she would be able to let go of her worries about having a new bakery in town.

Everything would work out perfectly. How could it possibly go wrong?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Zach's breath left him in a puff that floated through the air as he propped a piece of wood behind the gigantic canvas to hold it in place. He'd had the idea for this painting earlier in the day, and try as he might, he hadn't been able to get it out of his head. Satisfied that it wasn't going to fall over, he walked around to the front of the canvas and began assembling the balloons that were filled with paint.

Dark clouds stirred over the mountain in the distance, and he wondered if there would be another bout of snow later that night. Concern about the weather was part of the reason why he wanted to get this project completed quickly, since there was no way he could do it inside. It would be much too messy and would definitely break Colette's rule about keeping the place clean, but he knew if he didn't do it, it was just going to stick in his brain. So here he was.

Once the balloons were all in the right place, he walked back to the small table he'd set up about ten feet away. He grabbed a dart from the table and squared up to the canvas. Closing one eye, he aimed for the center balloon and let the dart fly. It hit its mark, and red paint splattered out, cascading down over the canvas in a flurry of color.

Zach watched as a glob of paint dripped down, marking a track from the center of the canvas to the bottom, and he grinned. Picking up another dart, he repeated the process and let it fly. Just as the first time, the dart was right on target, and the balloon burst in a sea of blue. Purple swirls began to make

their way toward the plastic tarp on the ground as the blue mixed with the red, rolling down the canvas.

He readied himself again, grabbing a dart from the table and drawing his arm back, but just as he was about to let it fly, he heard a soft, amused chuckle from behind him. It startled him, and this time he missed. The dart imbedding itself in the center of the canvas without hitting a single balloon. Zach whirled toward the noise, blinking as his gaze landed on Colette.

Her blonde hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun. A few tendrils that had escaped cascaded down around her face, glinting in the soft winter sunlight, and Zach could have sworn his heart did a somersault.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you,” she said with a little smile.

Colette tucked her hands in the pockets of her coat as she walked forward to stand by him, eyeing the canvas with open interest.

“Wow. This is really something.” She brushed her hair back as she pondered the wet paint. “You know, I figured things would be interesting when I rented this house to an artist. But this isn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

Zach flushed, shooting her a sidelong glance. “I obviously couldn’t do this in the house, so I came out here to limit any stray paint spatters to just the snow. But if you want me to stop, I can.”

Colette shook her head. “I’m not worried about that at all. You can make as much of a mess out here as you want to. Go wild. The world is your oyster.”

She threw her arms wide, indicating the snow-covered lawn around them, but her eyes never moved from his. The moment drew out, both of them staring at each other as tension began to build. Zach’s mind kept darting back to their kiss in the attic, and he thought maybe she was thinking of it too, but neither of them brought it up.

“So,” he finally said, raising his eyebrows expectantly at her. “Did you come out here to see my creative process? Or...?”

“No.” She paused for a moment, chewing the inside of her lip as she seemed to consider her next words. Zach gave her the time she needed, despite the fact that all he could think of was kissing her again. “I wanted to talk about yesterday.” Color rose high in her cheeks, but she didn’t avert her gaze. “About... the kiss.”

Zach nodded. For his part, he knew what he wanted to say about it. He wanted to tell her that it had been amazing, that for the past twenty-four hours, he’d barely been able to stop thinking about it. But he didn’t want to scare her off. Or scare himself by admitting the growing depth of his feelings for her, if he was being entirely honest.

Colette took a big, deep breath, seeming to center herself before she continued talking. When she did, her words left her in a rush, like she was afraid that if she stopped, she’d never get them out.

“I’m sorry if I crossed a line. I just... you’re so intriguing, and I always have the best time with you, even if sometimes you’re a little blunt.”

Zach furrowed his brow in confusion, opening his mouth to ask her if that was a compliment, but she held up her hands and hurried on.

“I like that you’re blunt. I like that you’re creative. And this...” She waved her hands in front of her, gesturing to Zach’s canvas. “All of it is just so fascinating. I guess I got caught up in how excited you were over the paintings in the attic. Seeing you appreciate Emma’s collection made my heart ache in the best way. And I just didn’t think.”

She huffed a quiet breath as she finished, looking at him with her bottom lip trapped between her teeth. He took a step toward her, trying his best to fight at the smile that was threatening to stretch wide across his face.

“Oh, gosh. Now I’ve said too much. Sometimes my motor mouth runs away from me,” Colette murmured, watching Zach as he took another step.

He shook his head at her. “No, you didn’t.” He couldn’t fight it anymore, and he let the smile tug up the corners of his lips. “You said just the right amount, actually.”

The worry on her face dimmed, replaced by something that looked a lot like hope.

“Really?” she asked and Zach nodded.

“Uh huh. I think you’re fascinating too, Colette. You’re one of the most interesting people I’ve ever met. Seeing you is always the best part of my day. And I don’t regret the kiss. Not one bit.”

He took the final few steps that separated them and reached his arms out for her, pulling her into a hug. She stiffened in surprise for only a moment before she relaxed and nuzzled into his chest a little. The scent of apples and cinnamon wafted off of her, soothing and warm. He took a deep breath, drawing it into his lungs.

“Are you sure?” Colette murmured, her face pressed to his chest.

Zach squeezed her a little tighter before taking a step back, holding her at arm’s length so she could see the honesty in his face when he answered. “I’m sure.”

“Okay, good.” A slow, radiant smile overtook her face, transforming her features. “It’s just, everything around here can be so mundane. So monotonous, you know? And you... well, you definitely aren’t either of those things. I was worried that I got caught up in all of that and overstepped.”

“Not at all. I’ve loved getting to know you,” Zach assured her gently. “It’s something I’d like to do a lot more of, actually.”

Her face lit up even more. “I think I’d like that too.”

They smiled at each other for a moment, grinning like goofy teenagers, and an idea struck him. He dropped his hands

from where they still rested on Colette's shoulders and walked back over to the table. Zach grabbed one of the darts off of it and extended it to her in an offer.

"Here," he said with a wink.

"Wait, you want *me* to throw it?" Surprise laced Colette's voice.

"Yeah, I'd love to have some help with this one. Come on." He waved her over encouragingly.

She stepped closer, reaching out to pluck the dart from his hand. "Can you show me how?"

"Of course. First, you need to place your feet and shoulders like this," Zach said as he demonstrated how to stand to get the best aim, and she copied him. "Good. Then, you just flick your wrist and forearm forward and bam."

Colette smiled as she threw the dart. It barely nicked the balloon she had been aiming for, but it was still enough to break it open, and forest green paint spilled out. She crowed with delight as she turned to look at him.

"That was perfect," he said with a grin, grabbing the final dart from the table.

As he stood square to the canvas, Colette at his back, he told her, "In the spirit of oversharing, I am very, very mundane."

He let the dart go, and it sailed toward its target, piercing it right in the center with an explosion of bright yellow paint. Zach nodded in satisfaction when it hit, then walked toward the canvas to retrieve the darts still stuck in it so they could go again for the remainder of the balloons.

"I haven't created anything worthwhile in over a year," he continued as he pulled out the first dart. "My art has been stagnant, and that's putting it kindly. That's the entire reason I came here. To try to reconnect with everything that made me want to create in the first place."

"And have you?" Her voice was hesitant, and Zach didn't answer right away.

He focused on pulling the rest of the darts from the canvas quickly, jerking them straight back so to not rip the fabric before turning back to Colette and holding her gaze.

“Yeah. I’m starting to.”

She smiled at him, her face luminous in the bright wintry light. “I’m glad. Snowy Pine Ridge can have that effect on people.”

He approached her and handed her a dart, but when she reached up to take it out of his hand, he didn’t let go right away. Her brown eyes darted up to his, and he grinned at her.

“It isn’t just this place,” he said pointedly, and when a blush crept into Colette’s lovely cheeks, his heart stuttered in his chest.

He motioned for her to throw hers, then stood behind her and watched. Her throw was a little wide, but she managed to clip the balloon she was aiming for, and Zach nodded in approval.

“How about you let me take you to the arcade tomorrow?” he began, lining himself up to take his shot. “There’s one at the ice-skating rink, right?”

“There is,” she replied, and he could hear the smile in her voice as his dart went sailing through the air toward the canvas, sending out a spray of orange as it popped a balloon.

He glanced at her. “Perfect. So what do you say?”

“I say…” She brought her thumb and forefinger to her chin in an exaggerated expression of pretending to think. He rolled his eyes at her and laughed. “Yes.” Her smile pulled up higher. “That sounds lovely. But there’s one condition.”

“What’s the condition?” he asked.

Rather than answering right away, she stepped forward and picked up one of the darts. Colette took up the stance he had shown her, and it was better this time than on her previous two throws. Actually, it was *much* better than someone who had only thrown a dart three times. And as she flicked her wrist in a snap, sending the dart flying with absolute perfect precision,

hitting the balloon perfectly in the middle, Zach realized that he'd been played. She was a ringer!

Colette turned her gaze back to him, a teasing smile transforming her face so beautifully that it stole his breath away.

“Promise not to get mad when you lose.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A snowflake landed directly on Sarah's eyelash, making her blink as another one came down to land on her nose. She swiped a mittened hand toward her face, trying to clear the tiny white flurries that were falling all around her, but it was no use. She arrived at her destination, her heart hammering wildly as she tried to steel herself for what she knew was about to come, before pulling open the door and striding inside Baking Fiend.

The smell of cinnamon, apples, chocolate, and a pleasant mix of other scents rose up to greet her as she breathed in deep. It didn't matter where it occurred, Sarah would always find a way to enjoy the smell of sweets in the air.

Mindy stood behind the counter, her blonde corkscrew curls pinned back with little bows as she smiled at the customer she was helping. Sarah hated to admit that the bows were very cute and matched so well with the woman's bright blue pleated pants and polka dot button up shirt. Mindy had a style all her own, but she managed to pull off her brightly colored, quirky outfits every time.

When Mindy finished helping the customer, her gaze moved to Sarah, and a look of shock crossed her face before she quickly schooled her expression into one of confident disinterest.

Sarah, trying her best to not immediately get off on the wrong foot, gave the woman a small wave as she approached the counter.

“Sarah,” Mindy greeted as she approached. “So nice to see you. Did you finally come in to check out a bit of the competition?”

She waved her hands in a wide, open gesture to indicate the bakery and the beautiful display cases. Just like during her initial visit, Sarah eyed the treats that were up for sale and found a small pang of jealousy winding its way through her. Was it all in her head, or were the details of the treats being offered even more delicate and beautiful than the last time? Is this the kind of stuff that people learned in pastry school?

She tried her best not to let her anxiety show as she gave Mindy a quick shake of her head. “No. I’ve... I’ve actually been in before.”

Mindy’s face lit with interest, and her brown eyes sparkled. “Is that so? Why didn’t I see you?”

“I just popped in for a minute to—how did you say it? Scope out the competition?”

Sarah gave Mindy a smile that she hoped appeared friendly, but when the other woman’s eyes flashed for a second, she thought that maybe she hadn’t succeeded.

She cleared her throat awkwardly. “Anyway, sorry to bother you, but I wanted to pop in with a little proposition for you.”

“Proposition?” the other woman echoed, and Sarah nodded.

“I’m helping out with the town’s annual Christmas party at St. Nick’s Place this year, and I think it would be a wonderful idea for us to have a baking competition, as the two bakery owners in town.”

The last few words left her in a rush, and Sarah’s palms began to sweat a little. She had been so confident when she had first come up with the idea—with William’s help—but now she was beginning to second-guess herself.

Her heart was beating so hard against her rib cage she thought that it would pop out of her chest and land right in front of them on the counter, and a sudden rush of heat swept

through her. Mindy was looking at her with amusement lighting her dark eyes, and Sarah found it hard to tell exactly what the other woman was thinking as they regarded each other.

“Hm, interesting. And what exactly would this competition entail?” Mindy asked, lifting her chin a little.

“We can work out the details between the two of us, based on what we’re both comfortable with,” Sarah began, but before she could say more, Mindy nodded once.

“I’m comfortable with anything.”

Sarah blinked, nerves rising in her at the clear confidence in Mindy’s voice. *Uh oh.*

“Okay,” she said, swallowing. “If that’s the case, then let’s keep it simple. We’ll each bake one item, anything we’d like. You can choose your absolute favorite, and we’ll each make enough for everyone at the party to try some. Then we can ask everyone to vote for which treat they liked best.” She didn’t want to sound too worried about the outcome of the voting, so she added, “It will all be in good fun. And it’ll be a good way for us to both drum up some more business, I think.”

“I’m sure it will. I think it’s a great idea.” Mindy tilted her head to one side thoughtfully. “I’ll go back to some of my recipe books from pastry school and see if there’s anything challenging in there. I’d love to really pull off a show-stopper, especially if we’re going to be doing this as part of the Christmas celebration.”

Sarah’s heart bottomed out for only a second at the mention of Mindy’s more professional training, but she didn’t let the friendly look on her face falter as she nodded. “That sounds lovely. I can stop by or send someone with the details later this week. How does that sound?”

“Looking forward to it.”

Not wanting to stick around any longer than she had to, Sarah nodded at Mindy, thanked her for her time, and then turned and walked out the door. Once she was back on the sidewalk and had gone far enough away that she wouldn’t be

visible through the windows of the bakery, she stopped and let out a breath.

She had been equal parts nervous that Mindy would reject the idea of a competition and nervous that she would accept, but now that the bake-off was set, Sarah knew just what she had to do.

Her deep love of pastries had gotten her this far in life, making Sweet Thing Bakery a staple of the town. Now she just had to dig deep, find some creative inspiration, and remind everyone—including herself—just how good of a baker she could be.

* * *

Zach chuckled as Colette threw her hands over her head, waving them around in celebration as she beat him, yet again, at air hockey.

“Take that!” she exclaimed, grinning wildly and pointing a finger at him.

“Whew, you really got me.” He pursed his lips, unable to hide his amusement. “Good game.”

“Thanks. You too.”

The next couple waiting for the table stepped up to take their spots, and he and Colette walked away. Zach placed his hand on the small of her back as he led her through the crowded arcade portion of the ice rink. There was a slight chill in the air as people walked back and forth through the door that separated the two spaces, but he and Colette had been moving around from game to game so much that he had hardly noticed.

“Oh!” Colette exclaimed, her voice filled with surprise. “It’s almost nine. I didn’t realize how late it was getting. Do you want to go to Sweet Thing before they close?”

She craned her neck a little to glance up at Zach, giving him a hopeful look that he couldn’t say no to.

“Absolutely. Coffee and a dessert sounds perfect.”

“It really does. Although some of the seasonal coffee drinks that Sarah and William have come up with are like a dessert unto themselves,” Colette pointed out, sighing dreamily at the memory of some delicious concoction and making him laugh again.

They walked over to where their coats hung on hooks by the door along with everyone else’s and bundled themselves up before stepping out into the cold. A fine layer of snow had fallen, and it glinted under the streetlights as they walked.

Feeling emboldened, Zach reached down and took Colette’s hand, interlacing their fingers, and her only response was to beam at him. He couldn’t quite believe how much she’d come out of her shell. It was now almost impossible for him to reconcile the smiling, funny, charismatic woman he’d taken out on a date this evening with the weary, still grieving woman he had met when he’d first arrived in Snowy Pine Ridge.

Colette still experienced moments of that loss, of that grief. He knew that. But she wasn’t *only* grieving now. She was living too.

The two of them chatted amicably as they walked, and they made it to Sweet Thing in what felt like no time at all. When he pulled the door open for Colette, a bell chimed brightly, announcing their arrival, but the place was empty.

Or, at least, it seemed that way until they paused to listen. Colette’s gaze met his, a confused look crossing her face as they heard scuffling and muttering from the kitchen in the back. Whoever was back there seemed not to have heard them come in, and when a few more seconds went by without them being greeted, he arched a questioning brow at Colette.

“Sarah?” Colette called, trying to peer into the back without walking behind the counter.

The sounds and muttering from behind the door stopped, and a moment later, Sarah poked her head out of the kitchen to greet them. There was flour and cinnamon covering her face,

and a smudge of frosting right on the tip of her nose, and Zach had to suppress a laugh at the sight of her.

“Oh, hi.” Sarah beamed at them. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t hear you come in.”

Colette studied her friend, clearly noticing that the woman hadn’t fully stepped out of the kitchen yet and seemed to be doing that deliberately.

“What’s going on back there?” Colette asked, and Sarah blushed.

“Well, I had an idea for St. Nick’s Place party. In fact, it’s not really an idea so much as it is an event that will for sure be happening. And I’m practicing.”

Colette threw a confused glance at Zach, as if he might know about whatever was going on—but Sarah was Colette’s friend, not his. If anyone was going to know, it would be her, and she clearly didn’t. He just shook his head at her before turning his attention back to Sarah.

“What are you talking about?” he asked. “What event?”

“A bake-off,” Sarah answered simply. “Between Sweet Thing and Baking Fiend.”

Zach watched as Colette’s mouth popped open in surprise. “A bake-off?” she echoed. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

One of Sarah’s hands pushed through the door to wave airily, and Zach noticed that it too was completely covered in flour and spices.

“Of course it is. This means the party will have plenty of food and pastries to go around. And we’ll get to determine who the better baker in town is. It’s a win-win.”

Sarah’s tone wasn’t nearly as nonchalant as her words would make it seem. Zach could sense an undercurrent of stress in her voice, and Colette stepped forward, leaning her elbows on the counter and propping her chin in her hands.

“I’m glad that the party will have all the goodies,” Colette said. “You know I could never say no to any of your treats. But are you sure this is what you want?”

“Oh, of course! I’m absolutely, positively, one hundred percent sure.”

Sarah nodded vigorously, finally stepping out of the kitchen. As she did, Zach got a small glimpse of the kitchen behind her. Trays filled with baked goods and pastries lined every available surface, some cooked, some waiting to be put in the oven. From where he was standing, it looked like every single piece of equipment had been in use earlier that night.

“Sarah!” Colette exclaimed as she caught sight of the same thing, glancing from the kitchen to her friend and back again.

“What?” The woman whirled around, realized what Colette and Zach had caught sight of and then turned back to face them, blushing. “Oh, I’m just practicing. I want my recipes to be perfect so I can pick the best one for the contest.”

There was a worried, slightly manic glint in her eyes, and Colette sighed as she shot Sarah a sympathetic look.

“I know I’ve said this before,” Colette told her friend gently, “but you are the best baker in this town. You have more heart, more passion, and more talent than almost anyone I’ve ever met. And that will be true no matter what, contest or no contest.”

Sarah’s throat bobbed and she nodded before stepping up to the counter, asking them what she could get started for them.

They ordered their specialty decaf coffee drinks and a few of the pastries still on display in the case, then Sarah busied herself with putting it all together. When she passed their order to them, she told them to go ahead and take all the time they want to eat and enjoy the space since she would be in the kitchen late anyway, and then disappeared back behind the doors.

They walked their food and drinks over to one of the cozy tables in the corner and sat opposite each other. Once they were comfortable, Zach reached his hand across the table as Colette did the same. He held her hand again, gently running his thumb in slow, languid circles over her knuckles.

“I’ve had a really lovely time tonight,” Colette said with a slight flush to her cheeks.

“So have I,” Zach answered with a smile.

They were interrupted by a clattering coming from the kitchen, followed by a voice calling, “Sorry, dropped a pan!”

They both laughed, and then Zach turned his attention back to Colette. “So tell me about this Christmas party.”

He took a sip of his drink as she launched into the story. She told him all about Lacy’s family and their history with the party, and how when Lacy had come to Snowy Pine Ridge after her grandfather’s passing, she uncovered the truth about her family and how much they had loved her. It had been hard for her to reconcile, but one of the ways she felt close to them was by hosting the party. She told him about Lacy’s pregnancy and how she was taking a step back from the party this year, and that she and Sarah were putting it on instead, as a surprise for their friend.

Her face lit up when she spoke about it, her love for this town and its people pouring out of her. And Zach found that he would have been perfectly content to listen to her for hours.

“Of course everyone is invited,” Colette said, blinking her soft brown eyes at him pointedly. “Even out of towners.”

A slight blush danced across her cheeks, and Zach’s own blood heated at her suggestion.

“Colette, are you trying to ask me to be your date?” He arched a brow at her.

“No. Yes. Maybe. I mean, only if you wanted to,” Colette stammered. The flush that was once a gentle pink burned bright red as she tried to correct herself.

Zach couldn’t help but laugh and decided to save her from her obvious discomfort.

“To be clear.” Zach grinned. “That was me asking you to go with me.”

Colette’s stammering stopped, and she blinked at him, regarding him for a moment and he could see her trying to

work out if he was serious. He wasn't quite sure what he'd done to make her doubt him, especially after the amazing date they'd just had. But he decided to rectify that situation as quickly as possible.

"I would be honored if you would go to the holiday party with me." He kept his voice low, hoping that it rang with the sincerity he felt so keenly as he held her gaze.

He was rewarded with a soft, tentative smile tugging up the corners of her lips, and she gave him a slight nod.

"All right," Colette answered. "We'll go together."

"And now we just have to plan what we'll do between now and then?"

"Oh, do we?" Colette's eyebrows shot up, and she grinned at him.

"We do. The Christmas party is still a couple of weeks away, and I'd like to see much more of you between now and then."

"Is that so?"

"It is." He nodded, rubbing the back of her hand all over again.

Colette chewed the inside of her cheek, and he watched her as she thought about what he'd just said. A moment later, her eyes lit up as they flicked back to him.

"Dog sledding!" she exclaimed. "We can finally go dog sledding!"

Zach paused for a moment. She had told him about the dog sledding multiple times before, but it was something he'd never done. Honestly, he had never so much as considered doing something like that. He wasn't quite sure if it was for him, but one look at Colette and every bit of doubt was washed from his mind.

For her, he would be willing to try.

He gave her a smile and nodded. "That sounds great."

She beamed at him as a reward, and his heart warmed at the sight of it. They finished their coffees and pastries, and he listened with rapt fascination as Colette told him more about the town. The more she talked, the more Zach found that he loved the way she described Snowy Pine Ridge. He adored getting to know this place through her eyes, and even more, he adored the way that she seemed to light up from the inside out when she spoke about it.

It was about the time that they had finished their drinks and had yelled their goodbyes to Sarah, who was still in the back baking up a storm, that Zach realized he didn't want the night to end. They walked back toward their houses, hand in hand. Fat, fluffy snowflakes fell from the sky, filling the air around them and making the world go quiet.

One got caught on Colette's eyelash, and he reached with an unsteady hand to wipe it off. She leaned into his touch, her beautiful, dark lashes resting against her pale, freckled cheek, and as he gazed down at her, it all came crashing together with a realization that shook him to his core.

Zach was falling for the woman in front of him—or maybe he had actually fallen for her already. But there was something between them, and he knew it. Something that was begging to be looked at closer, to be cultivated and given room to grow. The only question was, could he do that?

By the time they walked past the gate that led to the property, the porch light from the main house shining brightly over the sparkling snow, he still hadn't arrived at an answer. He walked Colette to her door, brushing a blonde piece of hair out of her face as he leaned down to brush a quick, sweet kiss across her lips. He wanted to kiss her more, wanted to make the kiss last, but he didn't. There were too many thoughts swirling in his head for him to let himself get distracted.

“Goodnight,” he said when their lips parted, giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile when she looked a little confused. “I'll talk to you in the morning?”

She nodded. “Goodnight. I had a great time tonight.”

“Me too.” He smiled again before pressing another quick kiss to her forehead, and then he stepped back.

His body immediately noticed the lack of her body heat, and Zach shivered slightly as he walked across the grounds back toward his rental house. He opened the door and stepped inside, the door shutting behind him with a snap. He stood in the entryway for a moment, letting the peace and the silence drift over him, before taking off his coat and boots. And as he trudged up the stairs, ready to climb into the shower, he made a promise to himself to not shy away from what was building with Colette. Because maybe, just maybe, it was possible that Snowy Pine Ridge was trying to provide him with even more than just a creative spark. Maybe it was trying to provide him with love as well.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sarah blinked three times, hard and fast as she tried to clear the sandpaper feel from her eyes. She had no idea how long she had been in the bakery, but she knew it had been late. Zach and Colette had left hours ago, and she had locked up right after they had gone before disappearing back to the kitchen and losing herself to her baking once more.

She was almost glad that William wasn't there, certain that he would be calling her constant testing of new recipes downright obsessive by this point. But when she looked around at the trays of treats, many of them with only one bite taken out of them before they were tossed to the side, she had to admit that obsessive might be the only word for it.

"I'll finish the turnovers," she said to herself, the rasp of her own voice startling her for a moment.

The last words she had spoken had been when Colette and Zach were in the bakery. And now that she thought about it, that had been about the last time she had taken a drink as well. No wonder her throat was so raspy.

She checked the timer on the oven before walking over to where she kept her water bottle. Sarah took the lid off and took a deep, hearty drink. The back door opened unexpectedly, the hinges creaking loudly as someone stepped through it, making Sarah jump.

William stood in the doorway, his blue eyes sparkling with amusement as he looked at her.

“You’re having quite the night,” he said with a grin, eyeing her from head to toe.

Sarah looked down at herself and sighed. About five different kinds of pastry doughs and stuffing covered almost every inch of her. And if the bottom half of her looked that messy, she could only imagine what the parts of her that she couldn’t see looked like. She shuddered at the thought.

“I’m practicing,” she explained as he crept closer.

“Is that what this is?” He gestured around at all the trays and the discarded baked goods. “Because to me it looks like a Pillsbury massacre.”

Sarah rolled her eyes at him, but she couldn’t stop herself from smiling as she turned her back toward him with a swish of her blonde ponytail.

“I just need to finish these turnovers and then I’ll call it a night.”

“Turnovers?” William echoed, his interest piqued from the mention of his favorite dessert. “What kind of turnovers?”

“Apricot,” Sarah answered, and was immediately interrupted by the ding of the timer, letting her know that the said turnovers were complete. “And it looks like the time you had to wait is coming to an end.”

She winked at him over her shoulder as she grabbed one of the oven mitts from the counter. A blast of heat greeted her as she pulled open the oven door, and she made quick work of grabbing the tray and setting it on the only bit of clear space remaining on the workstation.

William immediately darted forward, his hands dancing over the tray as he contemplated which pastry he wanted to grab, but Sarah shooed him away.

“They need to cool for a minute, you impatient man.”

He beamed at her. “You love my impatience.”

“I love the fact that you’re only impatient when it comes to my desserts. There’s a difference,” Sarah chided him, but there was no bite to her words.

“Isn’t that the same thing?” William arched a brow at her, and before she could stop him, his hand darted forward and snatched one of the turnovers from the tray.

He brought it to his lips and took a massive bite out of it, and then immediately started to take big, gulping breaths as he tried to cool down the food that was now in his mouth. Sarah threw back her head and laughed, shaking her head at her fiancé.

“I told you they would be too hot!”

She walked over to one of the other trays while William huffed and puffed and waited for the turnover to be cool enough for him to eat. She selected one of the galettes that she had made right before the turnovers, a pastry that she hadn’t taste tested yet, and brought it to her lips. The cream cheese filling exploded across her tongue, and was a perfect balance to the ripe, juicy blueberry that sat atop it.

“I think these might be the winner,” she said, pointing to the baked good in her hand as she turned to face William.

The man seemed to have given up on waiting and on caring that he was going to scald his tastebuds right off and had fully bitten into the turnover, chewing it happily.

“I don’t know,” he disagreed around a mouthful of pastry. “This one is pretty dang great.”

She laughed at him again as a bit of apricot preserve clung to his chin. Setting down her galette, she walked across the kitchen and wiped it off for him. He smiled down at her as he swallowed his last bite and then planted a quick kiss on her forehead. When he pulled back, he glanced around the kitchen again and his brows knitted together.

“In all seriousness, though,” William began. “Are you doing all right? This all seems like a lot for a friendly bake-off.”

“I just want to win it,” Sarah answered simply. She knew it wasn’t the answer that he wanted, but she didn’t want to lie to him, didn’t even think she could when she was so incredibly tired.

“I know you do, but aren’t there things that are more important? Like, oh, say, sleep?” He shot her a pointed look.

“Yes, yes, that’s all super important.” She waved a hand between them dismissively before huffing a quick sigh.

She hadn’t opened up to him about her true feelings about the bake-off yet. The entire time he had been so supportive, but she knew he would also worry about Sarah’s competitive nature taking over. And maybe that was just what was happening.

“I know that this is all supposed to be friendly,” she started, meeting William’s blue eyes and holding his gaze. “And it is. I promise you that. For the most part, anyway. But there’s also a lot riding on this. My family worked so hard to get Sweet Thing up and running. It was already a community staple by the time I took over. And I can’t let a new bakery in town ruin that. I just can’t.”

“And it won’t,” William promised, like it was as easy as that.

But could it be? Could it be as easy as simply deciding that it wasn’t going to be a problem for her and her business, and then acting accordingly? Sarah didn’t know. Truthfully, her brain felt too addled by exhaustion at the moment to know much of anything.

“This competition can’t become the be all end all for you,” William said earnestly. “You are a phenomenal baker, and you have been for the entire time that I’ve known you. People come from out of state to visit Snowy Pine Ridge just to buy from here. You remember the woman that bought us out of the cinnamon apple muffins last year? Said she had driven two hours just to surprise the people at her work with them?”

Sarah blushed as she recalled what William was talking about, the feeling of pride that it had evoked in her then rushing up to wash over her all over again.

“See.” He gave her a soft smile. “That isn’t the only story like that either. So sure. Baking Fiend might be new and exciting. But there is one thing that it can never, ever have.”

Sarah cocked her head at him. “What?”

“You.”

He leaned forward and pressed a quick, sweet kiss on her nose, making her blush. She gave him a rewarding smile before stepping back and looking at the destruction around the kitchen.

“We can always come in early and clean before we open,” William said as he glanced at the clock. “That way, you can actually get a little sleep.”

Sarah sagged with relief, her exhaustion finally well and truly catching up with her.

“I think that sounds great,” she admitted with a nod.

She reached up and began untying the strings of her apron and hung it up on one of the hooks. William reached out a hand to her and she laced their fingers together as they turned and walked out the door, locking up as they went. In the stairway that led to their apartment, William tugged on her hand to stop her.

He pointed up toward the ceiling with a sly grin tugging up the corners of his lips. Sarah followed his finger to where it was pointing. Above them was a green, spiky plant with small red berries, and Sarah’s own smile lit up her face.

“Mistletoe,” she cooed as she turned back to William.

He nodded and then brought his lips to hers, and she gave herself over to his kiss. Maybe he was right, and maybe there was more to the bake-off than just winning. Because at the end of the day, there were more important things, like friendship, being a good neighbor, and love.

When their kiss ended, Sarah didn’t step out of his embrace. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his weight even more tightly, giving him a grateful squeeze, which William gladly returned.

“What was that for?” he asked with a smile as they walked the rest of the way to their apartment.

“Just being you,” Sarah said.

And as they stepped into the apartment, the door shutting behind them and the warmth of her home wrapping around her, she accepted that maybe she didn't need to pour so much into the competition. Because if William was able to turn her entire day around by just being himself for a few minutes, surely her just being herself and doing what she does best would be enough for the competition. And Sarah knew that she had to have faith in that, just like William and her friends had faith in her.

* * *

"I get it," Zach admitted, speaking into the cell phone that was pressed to his ear. "I mean, don't get me wrong—when I first came here, I knew the place was beautiful and could see the appeal. But all the stuff you said about this place being healing and being a fountain of inspiration, I get it now. I didn't then."

Dennis chuckled on the other end of the line. "I'm glad you finally saw the light, man. But what brought it about?"

Zach paused as he considered just how much to tell his friend, but apparently that wasn't necessary.

"It wouldn't have anything to do with a certain kind, nice, blonde that we both know. Would it?" Dennis's grin was almost palpable through the phone, and Zach couldn't help but huff out a laugh.

"A little bit," he was forced to admit. "But it's also this place in general."

"Have you seen Colette recently?"

"Well..." Again, Zach paused, wondering how much he should say. But Dennis would likely figure it all out anyway. His friend was one of the most perceptive people that Zach had ever met, and it usually was no use evading the truth with him. "I went on a date with her last night."

"Ohhhhh, you sly dog." Dennis made a noise of excitement. "How did that go?"

“Good.” Zach ran a hand through his hair. “Great, actually. One of the best dates I’ve ever been on.”

“What all did you talk about?”

“This place, mostly. It’s different, seeing it all through the eyes of someone like her. She sees things so differently, and it’s fascinating. And she believes in me, Dennis. *Really* believes in me.”

“She’d be a fool not to.”

Zach laughed. “Any time she’s seen any semblance of my art, she’s seemed really impressed by it, even when it’s all stuff that would never sell. I don’t know. It just feels good.”

“She’s right though.” Dennis’s voice had gone pensive. “To be impressed by your work and support your art. You’re a great artist. The last year has just been a blip.”

“That’s a pretty big blip.” Zach tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice when he said it, but he knew he didn’t succeed.

And the truth was, he *was* disappointed. Especially in the fact that he let himself fall so far into that rut that he’d had to resort to leaving everything behind just to try to seek inspiration. But then again, if he hadn’t done that, he never would have come to Snowy Pine Ridge, and by proxy, never would have met Colette. So in the grand scheme of things, he guessed he couldn’t be too sad about the events that had brought him here.

“I like that she supports you.” Dennis’s voice cut through his spiraling thoughts, bringing Zach staunchly back into the present. “You deserve that.”

Zach smiled at the phone, glad that his friend couldn’t see the dopey look that was spreading across his face.

“Thanks,” he murmured gratefully.

They made small talk for a little while longer, and Zach paced while they did so. Each time he passed the large windows at the back of the house, he glanced out of them toward the mountain that loomed in the distance. Something

was dancing at the back of his mind, something that was beginning to take shape each time he marched past that spot.

By the time he and Dennis had disconnected, he was jittery with the need to move, the need to get outside—the need to create. Without giving himself much time to think, he pulled out his artist’s bag and began stuffing it full of everything he would need. Travel easel, canvas, brushes, paint. Item after item he threw into the satchel before throwing it over his shoulder and stalking out the door.

He threw an errant glance across the grounds, noticing Colette’s cabin lit up with a warm and friendly glow, letting him know that despite the early hour, she was awake. Zach contemplated for a second whether he should invite her. On the one hand, he would love to have her by his side while he did what he was about to do. But on the other hand, there was a part of him that was craving the solitude.

He stifled the bit of him that was craving her, telling himself that he would give into it at another time, and climbed into his car. He followed the winding, picturesque road as it led out of town, and the beauty of the scenery wasn’t lost on him. Chubby fir trees glistened with frost, and he even caught sight of deer grazing within their depths as he passed by.

He smiled as the road began leading him up the mountain, twisting and turning while he searched.

“There!” He exclaimed to himself as he finally found what he was looking for.

There was a break in the trees just ahead, one where the road widened and allowed for cars to pull off. There was a small area before the guard rail where people could mill about and take in the view, which was exactly what he planned on doing.

Zach wrapped his coat around him a little more firmly as he made his way toward the railing. Below him, the small valley that Snowy Pine Ridge was nestled in glistened with snow and lights as the sun began to make its greeting to the world around it. The tops of the roofs gleamed, and a smile began to light up Zach’s face.

He took the easel out of his bag and began setting up, and before he knew it, he was mixing his paints on the small palette he had brought with him. As if in a trance by the beauty that was laid out before him, he brought the brush to canvas.

Blues blended seamlessly with yellows and greens and white until he had the perfect hue for the shadows that danced across the snow. Orange blended with pink and red until the sky on the canvas was as bright and vibrant as the sunrise he saw before him. He lost himself entirely in the canvas, and as he poured himself into it, a peace settled over him that he hadn't felt in quite some time.

He was creating, truly creating, for the first time in a very, very long time. And he couldn't help but feel gratitude for the place that had brought it out in him, and the woman that had as well. Every doubt that he had felt, every disappointment, all of it faded to nothing. And he knew with a certainty that he could feel all the way in his bones that he was exactly where he was meant to be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Colette ran her fingers through her softly curled blonde hair one final time as she blew out a breath. She checked herself over in the mirror and gave herself a nod of approval. She'd chosen a classic black cashmere sweater and dark jeans paired with cute but comfortable boots for the date she and Zach had planned.

Checking the time, she realized that she was at risk of being late if she didn't throw her coat on and make her way over to the main house, so she did just that. The snow that had started as they had walked home the night before had continued through the night, and it had left a beautiful, downy layer of fresh snow dancing across the ground. It crunched under her boots as she approached the large brick house before her.

She blew out one final steadying sigh before knocking on the large wooden door. Faster than she expected, the door was pulled open to reveal Zach in the threshold. His cheeks and nose were tipped with pink as if he had just come in from outside, and his eyes were lit up with excitement. Colette lifted her brows as she smiled at him questioningly.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm great!” he exclaimed, bounding forward in one large step and wrapping his strong arms around her.

Colette let out a high, excited laugh as he squeezed her in a tight hug and swung her around. She threw her arms around

his neck as her feet left the ground, giggling despite herself as the world twirled around her.

“What was that for?” she asked, still laughing when her feet were back on solid ground.

“This,” he said, reaching down to grab her hand.

Zach didn't look back as he turned and tugged her along behind him, curiosity welling inside of her as they walked quickly through the house. Once they reached the doorway to the kitchen, he shot a grin over his shoulder and then pulled her through. At the back of the room, parked just in front of the window, was an easel that had a canvas on it.

Colette could smell the still fresh paint as she crossed the room, her eyes roving over the explosion of color. Her mouth dropped open as she took it in, and awe swelled within her. It was a painting of Snowy Pine Ridge, as seen from a high vantage point. There were elements of his old, impressionist style of painting. She could pick out hints of that style in the way the rooftops seemed to shimmer and fade upward into the sky and almost blend into their surroundings. It was surreal, but somehow so beautifully and perfectly Snowy Pine Ridge.

She had never seen someone be able to depict the town that she loved so perfectly. And Colette's heart leapt with the sight of it.

“Zach,” she breathed as she crept closer, wanting to take in every single inch of the gorgeous painting. “This is amazing.”

“You think so?” His voice was hesitant now, all traces of his earlier excitement gone.

Colette cast a glance at him over her shoulder, and he had an almost sheepish look upon his face.

“Are you worried that it isn't?”

Zach seemed to ponder that for a moment before he shook his head. “No.”

Colette barked out a laugh as she turned fully toward him. “Glad to see your humility is intact.”

“It’s not that.” He chuckled. “I’m always worried that people won’t like my work. I think that’s part of being an artist. But at the same time, this painting?” He pointed at it, pride lighting his handsome features as he looked at his work once more. “It feels right. It feels like me.”

He stepped closer until they were standing side by side, both of them facing the beautiful rendition of the town.

“Something clicked today,” he said, his voice almost reverent. “I realized that for the longest time I was trying to paint exactly the same, no matter what. Despite the fact that I was growing and changing, I wasn’t allowing any room for my art to do the same. And that’s why it was suffering. I had put myself in such a box. That I could only paint in one specific way, even while my soul was yearning to express itself in a way that was entirely different.”

“And this painting fits your soul now?” she asked, even though she knew the answer before he said it.

It was clear as day that he had poured himself into it. She had admired his work before, found his talent to be beautiful in a way that she often found hard to describe. But as she looked at the canvas before her, this was the first time she actually felt *moved* by something of his.

Even though it was technically just a landscape, just a screenshot of her quaint, sleepy little town, the sight of it still had something fluttering within her chest.

“Yes,” Zach answered simply. “And quite a bit of that credit goes to you.”

Colette whirled on him as shock coursed through her. Her brow furrowed as he turned to glance at her.

“I don’t deserve any of this credit,” she argued. “This is all you.”

“I might be the one who painted it,” Zach explained, his voice filled with some emotion that she couldn’t entirely place. “But it was because of the way that you’ve believed in me. I don’t think I would have been able to make this if it hadn’t been for that.”

Colette flushed and dipped her gaze, his words making her heart flutter lightly in her chest.

“And being able to create like this,” he continued, “being able to spill it all out, it’s making a lot of things start to make sense.”

“Like what?” Colette asked, still glancing down at her boots.

“Like who I am and what I want.”

She risked a glance at him, heat rising to her face as her palms began to sweat. He was looking at her pointedly, the weight of his gaze falling heavily upon her. She studied him for a second, taking in the way his auburn hair glinted in the light of the kitchen and the way his large frame seemed to invite her in. She wanted to wrap her arms around him, to hug him and press him close to her.

But instead, she just asked, “And what is it that you want?”

He didn’t answer, not with words, anyway. Instead, he held her gaze, his unsaid ‘you’ dancing between them. She wasn’t sure if she wanted him to say it or not. She felt like having it spoken out loud would cross some kind of line that they’d never be able to take back. And while the thought of it thrilled her to her very core, she wasn’t entirely sure if she was ready for it. Not yet.

But maybe soon?

She cleared her throat, allowing the question to go unanswered as she cocked her head at him.

“So are we still on for dog sledding?”

He furrowed his brow at her. “Of course we are. Why wouldn’t we be?”

She pointed to the painting. “It looks like you’ve been outside all day. I didn’t know if you’d be sick of the cold by now.”

Zach winked at her. “I don’t care if it’s cold. I wouldn’t miss this date with you for the world.”

Colette couldn't help it. She blushed all over again.

* * *

Zach walked around the dog sleds, eyeing them with open trepidation as Colette and Derek stood off to the side chatting, and completely oblivious to Zach's inner turmoil. His hands began to break out in a sweat within his gloves as he took in the graceful wooden lines of the sleds. It was easy to see where he would stand, easy to see the places where the lead that held the dogs would hook too. But what wasn't easy to see was exactly how the monstrosity of wood and metal wasn't considered a death trap.

"Are you doing okay?" Colette's voice came from beside him, and Zach gave a little jump of surprise.

He turned to face her, her brown eyes lighting with amusement as they roved over him.

"You look sick to your stomach," she said, raising a brow at him.

"I *am* sick to my stomach," Zach mumbled, turning back to face the dog sled and continue his onslaught of weary glaring.

"Are you afraid?" Colette asked, walking around the sled so that she was in front of him.

He could tell that she was trying to keep the smile off her face, but her lips still tilted up despite her efforts.

"Of course I am!" Zach's eyebrows shot up as he looked at her. "Have you seen this thing? This is a death trap on... well, not wheels... legs, I guess."

She laughed at him, shaking her head slightly.

"It's perfectly safe." Derek's voice came from behind them, and Zach threw a glance over his shoulder.

Colette's cousin was walking toward them, a slew of dogs barking and yapping at his heels as they made their way across the snow-covered ground. Derek called out a command, and

the dogs trotted forward, each one taking a specific spot at their designated sleds. Even through Zach's worry, he could admit that it was incredibly impressive.

"I'm sure you believe that it is," he grumbled again, watching Derek as he bent to begin hooking the dogs up to their leads.

"I've done it loads of times," Colette interjected. "I promise, I wouldn't have invited you out if it was dangerous."

He turned his gaze back to her, meeting her soft brown eyes. The excitement dancing within them lit her from the inside out, and it threatened to steal Zach's breath away. *For her*, he reminded himself. He was doing this for her. And for her, he could be brave. For Colette, he could climb on this sled of death and face whatever was about to come.

Zach blew out a breath before giving her a quick, tentative smile.

"All right," he said. "I trust you."

Colette beamed at him, and that single beautiful smile made every bit of worry that he had felt worth it.

"All right." Derek's voice rang out, stealing both Colette and Zach's attention. "Everything is all set. I'll be here." He pointed to the sled he was closest to, which happened to be the smaller of the two. "And you both will be there." He pointed to the other sled. "Colette can handle the dogs when needed, but for the most part they're trained to follow me, so it likely won't be necessary."

Colette walked in front of Zach, putting her feet on the large, jutting pieces of wood at the back of the sled.

"I'll be here, and you'll be right behind me," she explained, grabbing onto the large handles at the top of the sled. "There's more than enough room for both of us. And I'll hold lower on the handles, and you'll hold higher."

Another quick bolt of fear rushed through him, but he quickly stamped it down and reminded himself who he was doing this for. He settled himself behind Colette, her blonde hair stirring with his breath, and he caught a whiff of her.

Apples, cinnamon, and vanilla. She always smelled like that, so cozy and so sweet, and he wanted to lean into her. Lucky for him, he had the perfect excuse.

Zach placed his arms on either side of her, exactly where she indicated, and Derek shot another glance at them over his shoulder. He grinned at his cousin, and Colette lifted a mitten covered hand to give him a thumbs up. Zach could only imagine the smile painting across her face, but he didn't have long to think about it. A moment later, Derek turned to face forward and cried out a commanding "mush"!

The dogs affixed to his sled started pulling forward, slowly at first. The ropes that affixed them to the sled straining as they fought to get momentum, and then suddenly they were off. The dogs attached to his and Colette's sled did the same.

Zach could feel the strain of the wood beneath him as it tugged over the snow, before suddenly breaking free and gliding across it. Colette let out an excited "whoop" as the air whipped at both of their faces, tendrils of her long hair flowing backward and dancing around him. She leaned back, pressing her head to his chest as his stomach rolled with fear that was slowly turning into excitement.

The sun glinted off the snow as they flew by it, casting the world in a cacophony of colors and dancing rainbows. The trees passed by them in a haze, and then they were racing out into the open space of the valley, the one that led to the mountain, and it was all Zach could do to keep his mouth from opening in awe.

The sun was gleaming off of it, casting it in an orange and pink glow, and as they got closer, the colors of it shifted from pink to orange to blue.

"Isn't it amazing?" Colette called, her voice rising over the sound of the wind in his ears.

"It is!" Zach called back with a grin. "You were right."

"Say that again. I didn't quite hear you!" she said teasingly, and he barked out a laugh.

They followed after Derek, making their way up a well-defined path through the trees that scattered across the mountain. They climbed for a bit, until the trail started wrapping around the mountain. Through the trees, he could glimpse the valley they had just cut across, and then the town below. He had to admit, he was starting to understand why Colette loved this so much.

He leaned his body forward, bringing his face close to her ear so that he could tell her as much. But at the same time, she turned her head toward him. Their noses collided, a quick dart of pain flashing through him before they both erupted in laughter. Her brown eyes were dancing as she looked at him sidelong, and he felt the sudden urge to kiss her.

He leaned forward again, bringing their faces close again. He hesitated just before their lips could touch, giving her the time to process what was happening and pull away if she wanted to. But instead, her breath hitched, and it was Colette who closed the distance.

Or rather, it was Colette who tried to close the distance. One moment, she was leaning toward him, so close that he felt her breath dance across his lips, and then the next thing he knew, their sled jolted hard. His hand let go of the handle on the impact, his arms windmilling around as he tried to find his balance again. But it was no use.

Colette had lost her grip as well, and her body reeled backward, knocking into him, and sending both of them flying off the side of the sled and into a large pile of snow. For a moment, Zach didn't know which way was up. All he knew was a tangle of bodies, limbs, and snow, until he finally came to a halt on his back.

The blue sky above him was blotted out by Colette, who had landed half on his body and was looking down at him. Snow was clumped in her hair and clinging to her dark eyelashes, and a wild, excited grin lit up her face. He locked eyes with her, and they both burst out into a fit of laughter. It was the kind of laughter that seemed to come all the way from the soul, and after only a few seconds, his stomach was in stitches.

“That was a first,” Colette said through another fit of giggles.

“It certainly was,” Zach answered breathlessly. “But what a ride!”

He leaned up on his elbows and pressed his mouth to hers, finally going for the kiss that he had wanted so desperately before they had fallen. She sighed when their lips met, and he deepened the kiss, feeling the warmth of this moment spreading through him despite the snow enveloping them.

The sound of dogs barking and the hiss of a sled gliding over snow grew closer, prompting them to pull apart, and Colette sat back on her heels as Derek pulled up beside them.

“You guys all right?” he asked, his eyebrows so high they threatened to disappear into his hairline.

Colette gave him a thumbs up as she pushed herself up to standing and then extended a hand to Zach.

“We’re just fine,” she said with a chuckle. “I think we just hit a rock.”

Zach took her hand and allowed her to help him up, brushing off the snow from his clothes as the sled they had been riding pulled up behind Derek, now manned by only the dogs.

“Must have been a big rock to throw the sled off kilter like that. Unless your weight wasn’t entirely balanced.” He gave them a knowing look, his lips tugging up into a small smirk, but he didn’t push the issue further.

Zach avoided Derek’s gaze as they climbed back onto the sled and situated themselves. Before they got moving again, he planted a quick, hurried kiss to Colette’s cheek, and then they were off. The snow sped past them once more, and Zach lost every other thought as he gave himself over to the moment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Derek walked through the kennels the next day, whistling as he doled out food into the bowls of the yapping dogs. Bart danced around his ankles, his whole body wagging with excitement along with his tail.

“How are you doing tonight, boy?” he asked, reaching down to scratch behind the pooch’s ear. “Doing all right?”

The dog looked up at him, something like a smile playing across his fuzzy face. Derek couldn’t help but smile and laugh too. He stopped petting Bart and continued with his ritual of feeding, but he knew he had to do it quickly. He had somewhere he needed to be, and if he wanted to do it all in time and not make Lacy suspicious, he had to hurry things up.

When he was finished with the dogs, he climbed into his car, letting it idle for a moment to try to warm the engine before pulling out of his parking space and pulling out onto the road. The snow of the day prior had finally let up, making the town look like it was wearing a large, fluffy blanket as he drove through it.

St. Nick’s Place sat on the edge of town on beautiful, sprawling grounds. He turned off the road and onto the long driveway, making his way down it and finding the end of it packed with cars, and a grateful smile tugged at Derek’s lips. Even though it was still relatively early in the afternoon, the sun was making its way toward the horizon and the light of the day was already dimming. The windows of the house cast out a warm glow, spilling faintly onto the snow-covered lawn.

He pushed open the door, the sound of everyone inside chattering merrily rushing up to meet him. Christmas carols played faintly in the background, and as he stepped into the entryway, his mouth popped open in surprise.

He knew that Colette and Sarah had gotten there early that morning, and that varying townsfolk had been popping in and out all day to help with the preparations, but Derek was still shocked about just how much progress they had made. Walking farther into the house, his head swiveled this way and that as he tried to take it all in.

Mistletoe hung in doorways, banisters were wrapped in garland that had stunning, antique ornaments hanging from it, lights twinkled where they draped gracefully from the ceiling. And in every room, there was at least one Christmas tree, sometimes even more, like in the case of the ballroom where there were three.

It was in said ballroom that Derek found Sarah and Colette. The latter woman was putting the final touches on the fireplace, fixing the fake snow that decorated the mantel and adjusting the small ceramic village that sat atop it. Sarah was off to the side, setting up two long tables side by side, and Derek assumed that would be the sight of the bake-off.

He had been excited when Sarah had told him about her plans for the Christmas party. Not only was St. Nick's Place perfect for something like that, with its professional grade kitchen that had three separate ovens, but he was also excited to get to sample what Sarah and Mindy came up with. He just hoped his friend wasn't getting too caught up in all of it and was still able to have a good time. He knew Sarah could be a little competitive during the best of times.

The woman in question looked up, her dark brown eyes lighting with recognition when they landed on him.

"Derek!" she said with a grin, her long blonde ponytail swishing as she moved around the table to come greet him. "You're here!"

"I am." He smiled at her, and his eyes flicked to his cousin.

Something must have grabbed her attention, because she was now walking over to join him and Sarah. Colette gave him a small wave as she approached, and he returned it happily.

“I thought for sure there’d still be plenty to do,” Derek mused, looking around the ballroom with barely concealed wonder. “But it looks like I got here too late.”

“We got an early start,” Sarah said with a shrug.

“Plus, a ton of people showed up,” Colette interjected, beaming. “This is just the people who are left over. It’s not even half of the total number of volunteers who have been in and out throughout the day.”

Derek’s heart swelled slightly at the thought. When Lacy had agreed to forgo the Christmas party that year, he knew that it had upset her. She loved this party, loved this house, loved everything that it all represented, and he’d hated having to ask her to skip it, even if it was just for a year. And when he thought about how not only his cousin and Sarah, but also so many of the residents of their little town, had shown up for Lacy... it threatened to overwhelm him.

“I can’t get over how amazing it looks.” Derek spoke past the lump in his throat as he grinned at the two women.

“Oh!” A familiar male voice came from behind him, and Derek turned to find Zach standing in the doorway, a look of shock on his face. “You’re already here!”

“Just got here, actually,” Derek answered, giving the man a handshake in greeting.

Tendrils of tinsel were stuck in Zach’s auburn hair, and it shimmered as he bent to give Colette a quick kiss on the cheek.

“The parlor room is done,” Zach announced, turning his attention back to Derek. “But there’s still quite a bit to do in the hallway and the living room. Want to help?”

“Absolutely.” Derek nodded before telling Colette and Sarah that he’d be back and following after Zach.

The two men chatted as they worked, wrapping some of the art on the walls and rehangng them so they looked like presents, stringing lights, and draping garland. Derek couldn't help but like the guy. He had a brusque but joking demeanor that had warmed Derek to him almost immediately. And the change in Colette since Zach had arrived at Snowy Pine Ridge hadn't escaped his notice either.

Derek knew that Zach didn't plan on staying in town forever, or at least he hadn't when he had first arrived. But over the course of the last few weeks, he'd noticed his cousin becoming a little more outspoken, a tad more outgoing, and even a little more adventurous, if how quickly she had climbed onto the dog sled yesterday after falling off was any indicator. And while a bit of that could be because of her finally starting to heal from her grief, he had a feeling that a bit of that might be because of Zach as well.

He liked getting to know the man, and they peppered each other with questions all the way through until the final decoration was hung. Derek could still hear the women in the ballroom, hear their laughter drifting to him over the still lilting music, and he and Zach wiped their hands on their pants and then went to find them.

Derek hugged them both, squeezing Colette extra hard in gratitude as everyone began to wind down and say their goodbyes. He took a final look around the house and the way that it had been turned into a winter wonderland, and he only hoped that Lacy would love it as well. But he had a sneaking suspicion that she would.

Everyone said their goodbyes and filtered out the door, with Derek locking up behind them. He waited until the final car was gone before beginning his journey home. The sun had fully set by the time he pulled into the drive, and his headlights lit up the front of their house as he waited for the garage door to open to allow him entry.

Once he was parked and the car turned off, he walked into the house, only to find Lacy standing in the kitchen with chocolate on her face and a tray of freshly baked cookies in her hands.

“What’s all this?” he asked, amusement tugging up the corner of his lips as he kicked off his shoes and crossed the floor to his wife.

“I got bored,” she explained with a shrug. “And I was craving chocolate chip cookies.”

She placed the tray on the counter and plucked one off of it. Lacy’s lovely face pulled into a scowl when she realized that the cookie was still quite hot, and she let it flop back onto the tray with the others. Not saying a word, she turned away from him and began rifling through the cabinet at her back. He watched, wholly entertained by her frantic searching, until she turned around holding a massive jar of peanut butter.

“And what’s that for?” He arched a brow at her, and she grinned from ear to ear.

“You’ll see.”

She turned back to the cookies, picking up the same one from earlier and seemed to deem that it had cooled down just enough. Derek watched as she grabbed a butter knife from the drawer, pried open the jar of peanut butter, and got out a generous dollop, all before spreading it over the cookie in her hand.

She took a bite and then sank back against the counter, a hum of approval leaving her as she chewed. Derek laughed at his wife before walking forward and grabbing a cookie of his own. He bit into it and was delighted at the delicious, gooey, melty middle.

“Wanna try?” Lacy asked around a mouthful of cookie, offering him the jar of peanut butter.

He couldn’t stop the stab of curiosity that rocked through him, and he shrugged as he took the knife from her and spread a bit of peanut butter on what was left of the cookie in his hand. When he took a bite, his eyebrows shot up in surprise and delight spread across Lacy’s face.

“Isn’t it great,” she whispered conspiratorially, wagging her brows at him.

“You might be a genius,” he admitted, leaning forward to plant a kiss on her forehead.

“Might be?”

He laughed as he finished the last bite of his treat before pulling down Tupperware and placing the rest of the cookies inside.

“Come on,” he said, grabbing her hand and the bowl of cookies and leading her through their house to the living room.

He helped Lacy lower herself onto the couch, her belly now so large it was making it hard for her to do even that. She sighed with relief as she sank into the cushions, closing her eyes and bringing her hands to her swollen stomach. She rubbed it back and forth, humming for a moment before her eyes opened again and landed on Derek.

He sat next to her and pulled her feet onto his lap. Her ankles were swollen, and he began rubbing them, eliciting murmurs of approval from his wife.

“How is little Joan of Arc today?” he asked as Lacy relaxed further into her seat.

“Kicking up a storm,” Lacy admitted, still rubbing her belly. “I can’t believe there’s still two weeks to go. I’m ready for her to be here now.”

“Ready to meet her?” Derek asked.

“And just ready not to be pregnant anymore. I don’t really like being the size of a house.”

“You’re beautiful,” he corrected, and she snorted a soft breath.

“I can be beautiful *and* large. Both things can be true at once.”

“Well, I’ll just speak to the beautiful part.” Derek laughed, shaking his head slightly at the woman he loved as he continued to rub her swollen feet and ankles. They sat in companionable silence for a few seconds, the kind of silence that can only be found in the company of people you are wholly comfortable with. And Derek would have been

perfectly content to sit like that with his wife for the rest of the night until it was time for them to go to bed.

But then Lacy let out a sigh as her eyes fluttered open. “We likely should get serious about her name.” She gave her belly another pat. “She’ll be here before we know it.”

Derek chewed the inside of his lip. He’d been thinking about that a lot lately, about what they would name their daughter, and he had more than a few ideas.

“I guess it is that time, huh?” He mused, never once stopping his massage of Lacy’s feet. “What about Daisy?”

She shook her head. “I had a hamster named Daisy growing up. It was mean and it bit me all the time. I don’t want our daughter named after that old thing.”

Derek chuckled and then looked at her expectantly.

“Ruth?” Lacy offered, and then it was Derek’s turn to shake his head.

“You want us to have a Baby Ruth?”

Lacy scrunched up her nose. “You’re right. Didn’t think of that.”

They went on like that for a while, each of them offering a name and the other shooting it down for one reason or the other. Andrea, Laura, Blake, Courtney, Alexandria, one after the other they were all proposed and subsequently vetoed.

Then, something tickled at the back of his mind. A name that he had read in a book once. He looked at Lacy, a smile blooming across his face as the name fell from his lips. His wife’s eyes lit up, and she repeated the name back to him. Then she said it again, chewing each syllable before she uttered it.

With a nod she grinned at him. “That’s it.”

He smiled back. “That’s it.”

They sat like that for a moment, grinning at each other like mad as they said their daughter’s name a few more times, trying it out to make sure they still liked it after they heard it a

few times. Derek knew it was now or never to bring up what he needed for the following night.

“Want to go to St. Nick’s Place tomorrow?” he asked abruptly, unsure of how else to broach the subject.

“Why?” She furrowed her brows.

“I know the party is cancelled this year,” Derek explained. “But it still might be nice to spend a little bit of time there tomorrow evening just me and you. Just because we aren’t celebrating with the town doesn’t mean we can’t celebrate at all. I’ll pick up some sparkling grape juice, we can dance in the ballroom and then eat pizza on the floor?”

He hated that he had to lie to her, even if it was for a surprise like this, and he tried not to fidget with how uncomfortable it made him.

Lacy flushed with gratitude as her eyes roved over his face. “You’d do that for me?”

“I’d do anything for you,” he answered, holding her gaze.

That, at least, was not a lie.

“I think I’d really like that.” Lacy gave him a short, sweet nod. “St. Nick’s Place it is.”

“Brilliant.” Derek grinned.

Now all he had to do was get through tomorrow without ruining the surprise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Lacy took a step back from the mirror, taking a moment to admire her reflection. She had originally just planned on wearing leggings to her night with Derek at St. Nick's Place, but when she'd said as much to him, he'd immediately protested.

"If we're going to act like it's the real thing," he'd insisted, "then we need to dress like it. How am I supposed to whisk you around a dance floor in a flowy dress if you aren't wearing a flowy dress."

She had laughed at him but ultimately conceded. And now there she was, clad in an emerald, green wrap dress that delicately cradled her bump. Her honey brown hair was pushed back away from her face with a small, black headband that matched the black flats she had placed on her feet. She knew the dress would have looked much better with heels, but there was no way her poor swollen feet were going to be stuffed in anything like that any time soon.

"You look beautiful," said a voice from behind her, and Lacy's green eyes flicked up to meet Derek's where he was lounging in the doorway.

"Right back at you," she said, whirling at her husband and giving him a wink.

"I look beautiful?" He fluttered his eyelashes at her, prompting her to laugh and swipe a hand at him.

"Beautiful. Handsome. It's all the same thing."

She eyed him up and down, meaning every word that she said. He was in black trousers and a white button-down shirt that contrasted beautifully against his tanned skin and auburn hair.

He grinned at her. “You ready?”

“Absolutely.”

He extended his arm to her, and Lacy gladly looped hers through it. They walked through the house like that, with Derek demanding she wait long enough for him to pull the car door open for her. Lacy slid inside and buckled herself in while Derek crossed over to the driver’s side door and got them ready to drive off.

“Are we ordering pizza from Frosty’s?” she asked as they drove, taking Derek’s hand and looking out the window.

“Sure,” he said, keeping his eyes focused on the road. “If that’s what you want.”

The drive didn’t take long at all, as their house was already on the border of Snowy Pine Ridge so that they could have enough space for the dogs and the kennels. So it was only a few minutes and they were already making their way down the long, winding drive.

Lacy’s brow furrowed in confusion as the massive home came into view. Warm, bright lights glowed in the windows, and she could have sworn she saw a shadow dart across one, like someone was already inside.

“I came earlier to get it set up for you,” Derek explained. “I made sure everything was warm enough, and that the ballroom was clean.”

Lacy guessed that made sense, and she nodded at her husband. They made their way across the snow, Lacy being careful where she stepped so it wouldn’t fall into her flats, and then they pushed open the door.

Her breath left her in a quick, excited huff as she took in the entryway. She could have sworn that she told Derek to take the decorations down after they had cancelled the party. And

now, not only were they still hanging, but it looked like they had been added to.

“Madame,” Derek said with a flourish as he stepped up behind her and helped her out of her coat.

He paused just long enough to shrug out of his own jacket and then hang them both on one of the hooks in the entryway before grinning at her, taking her hand, and leading her through the suspiciously decorated home. When they turned the corner to the ballroom, another gasp pulled itself out of her.

They hadn’t even touched the ballroom, except to put up the trees before she had called off the party all together. But now, they were all decorated, lights glimmering and twinkling along their evergreen boughs alongside shining, beautiful baubles. The mantel above the large, ornate fireplace was decorated with fake snow, the traditional, ceramic Christmas village nestled atop it, the antique train going round and round, as it did every year. Garland adorned every surface, wrapped around banisters and bar carts.

And there, in the middle of it all, stood Colette, Zach, Louise, and a few other of her fellow townspeople, all of them smiling warmly at her. Lacy’s mouth popped open in surprise as she gaped, turning around and around so that she could take it all in.

“Did you do all this?” she asked, a mix of emotions rushing through her as she glanced between her husband and her friends.

“With a little help,” Derek answered sheepishly. “Everyone else will start arriving in about an hour. But we wanted you to have a little bit of time to take it all in.”

“It’s amazing,” she breathed before turning her gaze back to her friends, her green eyes bright with affection. “Truly. It couldn’t be more perfect.”

Colette walked forward, extending her arms to her friend in the offer of a hug, and Lacy stepped into them gratefully. She squeezed Colette tightly, as tightly as her large, protruding

belly would let her, that was, and hoped that she could find some way to convey to her friends how much this all meant to her.

“We know how much this party means to you,” Colette murmured, low enough that only Lacy could hear. “We didn’t want you to have to miss out on something that you love just because you’re pregnant.”

A lump rose in Lacy’s throat, and she quickly swallowed past it, blinking rapidly to clear the tears from her eyes that were threatening to spill over.

“You really didn’t have to do this,” she said, her voice gruff and thick with the emotions swirling inside of her.

“We know,” Colette answered with a light chuckle. “But we did it anyway, because we love you.”

Lacy blushed, feeling the eyes of the people in the room on her and she felt so overcome that she was finding it hard to speak. Derek, sensing his wife’s needs, stepped forward.

“Want to see the rest of the house?” he asked, and Lacy nodded gratefully.

She stepped out of Colette’s embrace, turning to thank her friends once more before taking Derek’s hand and letting him lead her out of the ballroom and into the rest of the house beyond.

“I can’t believe they all got together and did this for us,” she mused.

“For you,” Derek corrected her quickly. “They did this for you.”

She looked at him sidelong, smiling at him as knowing danced in the depths of her green eyes.

“They weren’t the only ones who chipped in, I’m sure.”

Her husband blushed at that, and Lacy was almost overcome entirely by the love that was coursing through her. They walked through the long, sprawling hallways, the sounds of the early party goes fading into the distance, until they came to one of the parlor rooms. It was quiet, with only the

soft sounds of Christmas carols coming from the record player in the corner, which was turned down low.

One solitary Christmas tree, decorated to perfection, glimmered in the corner, and a cozy fire crackled in the hearth. It was one of Lacy's favorite rooms in the house. Even though she had never been here when he was alive, the room made her think of her grandfather. And she could picture him in it, enjoying a glass of brandy as he and Emma had talked about their day.

She blew out a breath the moment they walked through the door, waddling over to the high, puffy reading chair by the fire and collapsing down into it, rubbing her belly fondly.

"You know," Derek mused as he walked through the room, his dark blue eyes shining. "It's hard to believe that there was a time when we didn't even think we were going to stay in Snowy Pine Ridge." He fingered through the vinyl albums that were on display, studying them intently. "And now look at us. The entire town showing up to support you, to shower you with love and make sure that you don't have to stop doing the things that you love."

Lacy swallowed hard, as another lump rose in her throat. The corners of her eyes pricked with tears, and she shook her head at her husband.

"You know you can't say things like that to me right now." She sniffled through her tears. "Not with all these pregnancy hormones."

Derek chuckled as he walked across the room and pulled an ottoman over so that he could sit in front of her. He reached out to her, a silent request for her hand which Lacy was all too happy to oblige. He squeezed her hand, rubbing his thumb in small, languid circles along the back of her palm, soothing her just as surely as the fire was.

"I love you," Derek said softly. "The town loves you. And I'm really glad you decided to stay."

Lacy nodded, whipping her other hand across her cheeks to clear away the tears that had begun to fall. He gave her a

moment, allowing her the time that she needed to process the overwhelming feelings that had plagued her since the moment they walked through the door. When finally, she felt like she had a handle on things and wasn't going to burst from all the gratitude rushing through her, she patted Derek's hand.

"What do you say we go back in there and spend time with our friends?"

"I would love nothing more," he answered, giving her hand a swift, comforting squeeze before pushing himself to standing and then helping Lacy to her feet.

Hand in hand they followed their previous path through the house and by the time they made it back to the ballroom, even more people had showed up. Glasses of champagne, and sparkling grape juice for Lacy, were passed around and a cheers went up, and in that moment, Lacy could not recall the last time her heart had been so full.

* * *

Sarah huffed out a breath of frustrated nerves as she and William opened up the hatch back of their car. All of the tools and ingredients that she would need for her assortment of items for the bake-off were inside, and she was finding the sight of it all a bit overwhelming.

William, sensing his fiancée's bout of anxiety, threw an arm around her shoulders and tucked her into his side, squeezing tightly.

"It's all going to be all right," he murmured as he pressed a kiss to her temple. "You're going to crush it at the bake-off."

She gave him a skeptical look and William's bright blue eyes sparkled.

"Seriously," he insisted. "You're the best baker I know."

"I'm the only baker you know," she said with a slight roll of her eyes, but she had to admit his words had made her feel marginally better.

“No, you aren’t,” he protested, removing his arm from Sarah’s shoulders so they could begin to grab the trays and the bags that they would need for the remainder of the evening. “I know your mom too.”

Sarah snorted, her blonde ponytail swishing back and forth as she reached into the back of the vehicle and began to pull things into her arms.

“I am not a better baker than my mother,” she argued.

William paused, glancing at her conspiratorially.

“You are,” he said in a hushed tone, glancing back and forth as if he was afraid to be overheard. “But don’t you ever tell her I said that. I value my life.”

Sarah laughed and her spirits began to lift as they grabbed the final bag from the car and William hoisted the straps onto his already full shoulders. They waddled toward the front door of St. Nick’s Place, both of them completely weighed down with the items they held. Sarah looked at the cars already lining the driveway, realizing that more than a few people had arrived early, and it warmed her heart.

She easily spotted Derek and Lacy’s Honda Pilot near the front, and she smiled as they walked past it, hoping that Lacy had been excited at the surprise.

The moment that William opened the door to the massive house, noise floated out of it to greet them. A group of people somewhere in the house were singing a loud, enthusiastic rendition of “Joy to the World” to an equally as exuberant chorus of cheers and applause.

William chuckled, shaking his head as they made their way through the winding hallway toward the kitchen.

“Sounds like they’ve already broken into the champagne.” Sarah laughed, eliciting a snort of agreement from her fiancé.

They made it to the kitchen, and Sarah immediately cast a glance toward the dining room. There was no wall that separated the large, formal dining room and the kitchen, so it gave her an unobstructed view to the people that had begun milling about the space. She tore her attention away and began

setting down her belongings at one of the workstations. Earlier in the week, she and Mindy had had an opportunity to chat and decided that since they were having trouble narrowing down their favorite recipes, each woman would bake a total of three pastries for everyone to sample, and the party goers would vote on their favorite collection.

Immediately after that, she and William had come to St. Nick's Place to make sure that the kitchen was set up perfectly to handle two bakers creating that amount of food. She started pulling her supplies out of the bags but was immediately interrupted by someone rushing over to her.

“There you are!”

Sarah's head snapped up, her eyes immediately falling on Lacy who was making her way over as quickly as she could. Her friend's face was pulled up into a wide, excited grin, green eyes flashing with joy, and Sarah was immediately wrapped into a hug.

“I'm so glad you're here,” Lacy gushed, squeezing Sarah as tightly as her baby bump would allow.

The women finished embracing, stepping back so that they could grin at each other.

“Do you like it? The surprise?” Sarah asked nervously, making Lacy's eyebrows shoot up.

“Like it?” Lacy clapped a hand to her heart. “I love it. I love you all for the work that you put into this.”

Sarah blushed slightly, grinning at her friend in appreciation. “Good.”

“Colette and Zach told me all about the bake-off.” She pointed over her shoulder, and Sarah glanced in the direction she indicated.

The two people in question were standing in the center of the dining room, talking animatedly to Louise, whose hands were waving wildly through the air. Colette's brown eyes darted up for a second as her gaze landed on Sarah. The woman's face broke into a welcoming smile, and she gave

Sarah a small wave before turning her attention back to Louise.

“I’m so excited for all the treats,” Lacy continued excitedly, patting her rounded belly as she talked about the pastries. “What are you going to be making for us today?”

“It’s a surprise,” Sarah said mysteriously, giving her friend a wink.

Lacy made an excited face, going along with the intrigue of the answer. “Well then, I guess I’ll let you get to it, because it looks like your competition is here.”

She gestured with her chin in the direction behind Sarah, and Sarah turned to see what she was talking about. Mindy was making her way through the crowd, carrying boxes and bags of supplies, her blonde corkscrew curls bouncing merrily with every step. Sarah’s heart began to pound nervously at the sight of the other woman, but she tried her best to tamp it down as she turned her attention back to her friend.

Lacy placed a warm hand on Sarah’s arm, giving it an encouraging squeeze.

“You’re going to be great,” Lacy said earnestly.

“Of course she is,” came William’s voice from beside her, and Sarah threw a grateful smile his way.

He had finished unpacking her things for her, having it all laid out on the tables and he gave her a quick, swift wink.

“But Lacy is right. We should let you get to it.”

William leaned down and gave her a quick kiss on the forehead before he and Lacy turned and disappeared into the crowd. Taking a deep breath, Sarah steeled herself as she walked toward Mindy.

The other woman had made her way to her station, pulling the items she had brought with her out of their bags and getting everything set up as she would need it. Mindy seemed to sense Sarah’s arrival, and the woman’s brown eyes darted up and landed on Sarah.

A slow, feline smile tugged up the corner of Mindy’s lips.

“Well, hello there,” she said sweetly before turning her attention back to her tasks. “Come to sniff out the competition?”

“No.” Sarah shook her head, hoping that her nerves weren’t obvious to the woman in front of her. “I just figured I’d come over and see if you needed help getting everything set up.”

Mindy’s brow furrowed, and the woman blinked at her for a second. “You’re offering to help?”

“Well, just to help you unpack,” Sarah answered with a shrug. “I can’t exactly offer you help in the bake-off.”

Mindy narrowed her eyes almost suspiciously, but then the look was gone in a flash.

“That’s sweet,” Mindy said in a short but not entirely unpolite tone. “But no thank you. I’ve got it all taken care of.”

Sarah almost asked if she was sure, but then stopped herself.

“All right.” She gave the other woman a quick nod. “Let me know if anything changes. I think we’ll be getting started soon.”

As if on cue, Lacy’s voice began ringing out over the crowd. Somewhere in the last few minutes of Sarah coming in, the party had begun in full swing. And Lacy had placed herself in the middle of the two workstations as she began to call for everyone to settle down.

“All right, everybody!” Lacy yelled, clapping her hands in excitement as every pair of eyes in the large dining room turned toward her. “As you see behind me, we have not one but two amazing bakers setting up to give us a real treat!”

A few groans at the pun peppered through the crowd, and Sarah couldn’t help but laugh.

“Sarah from Sweet Thing,” Lacy continued jovially, “and Mindy from Baking Fiend have joined us tonight for a good old-fashioned holiday bake-off!”

There was a round of applause as Lacy flung out her arms wide, gesturing to the two women who stood behind her. Sarah gave everyone a quick, shy wave as she made her way back to her station and began pulling on her apron. It didn't matter that she knew almost every single person in the house with them, she still wasn't entirely sure she liked all of their attention on her at once.

Thankfully, Lacy was still announcing the details of the contest, and she drew their attention back to her.

“These two lovely ladies will each have ninety minutes. And in that time, they will be creating three delicious pastries and morsels for us to try, and we'll vote on our favorite to determine who will win the bake-off. So give these two fabulous gals a round of applause before we start the timer and let them get bakin'!”

Another round of applause and cheers sounded, and Sarah blushed as more than a few people wolf whistled while raising their glasses into the air. Lacy made a big show of clicking start on the timer on her phone, and then they were off.

Sarah pulled over her brand-new bag of flour, ripping it open as she got out her measuring cups. After her baking frenzy earlier in the week, she had been able to narrow it down to three recipes. Two of them were favorites that sold out at Sweet Thing almost every single day: chocolate croissants and her ooey, gooey cinnamon rolls. But the third was something she had come up with not that long ago. It was a pistachio, mint and honey muffin, with a crumble coating.

She had developed the recipe not that long ago and hadn't put it on the menu yet at Sweet Thing. But when she'd had William taste test it for her, he had lost his mind over it. Sarah could only hope that everyone else did the same.

She gave herself over entirely to the baking, humming Christmas carols as she went and tuning out the noise of her fellow townsfolk around her. She was measuring, rolling out dough, hand mixing, machine mixing, everything at random. She felt like a blur.

In no time at all, she was setting out her first tray of chocolate croissants, followed shortly after by the cinnamon rolls. She threw a quick glance over to the table where Mindy was working frantically. She was taking something out of the oven and bringing it over to the table. Sarah couldn't see through the throng of the crowd what it was, but almost immediately she heard their hums of approval as people began to sample it.

A fierce, competitive excitement tore through her, and she turned back around to check on her muffins. Glancing at her watch, she realized there was only twenty minutes left before Lacy called time on the competition. But that was fine with her, the muffins would be done in five.

She tapped her foot impatiently, standing by the oven as she waited to take them out. When the timer on the oven she was using dinged, she jumped and pulled the door open. Throwing on her oven mitt, she grabbed the tray of muffins and set them on the counter to cool.

Sarah bent her face over the steaming, delicious pastries, grinning as she marked that they were baked to perfection. And just as she bent her face over them, inhaling their nutty, sweet scent, a frustrated cry echoed through the kitchen from somewhere behind her.

She snapped up, her head swiveling around to find the source of the noise, but it didn't take her long at all. Mindy was standing on the other side of her at her station, her hands flapping wildly in the air over a tray of small, deflated lumps of pastry dough.

"No, no, no, no," Mindy began to say, color rising high in her round cheeks.

Sarah watched, worry flooding her as the other woman's eyes began to dart around the crowd. Mindy noticed that she had garnered attention from the crowd, and tears began to dance along her lower lashes. A pang of sympathy hit Sarah, and she took a step toward the other woman.

The movement made Mindy's gaze dart back to her, and an emotion that Sarah couldn't entirely place flashed across the

woman's face. Before Sarah could go to her, Mindy bowed her head and ran from the room, disappearing down the hallway and toward the back of the house.

Sarah looked around the kitchen, her eyes landing on William at the edge of the crowd. She felt at a loss for what to do. Should she go after Mindy and make sure she was all right? Or should she stay here and serve the muffins? Muffins that she knew were going to win her this competition.

Her fiancé held her gaze, his blue eyes sparkling with understanding and love, and in that moment, Sarah knew what the right thing to do was. She threw a pointed look at the muffins, a silent order for William to keep watch over them, before she turned and headed off in the direction that Mindy had fled.

At first, she wondered if she'd even be able to find the other woman. Between the throngs of people milling about and the multitude of rooms, the woman could have gone anywhere. But just as Sarah was about to turn around in defeat, a sound grabbed her attention from a small, open door to her right.

The door was only slightly ajar, and Sarah knew that it hadn't been earlier. Once upon a time, the room had served as a home office, and they had never decorated it or had need for it during the Christmas party. So the door typically remained shut tight. And through the small crack in the door, Sarah could hear Mindy's high-pitched voice as she talked to herself.

"... such a silly, stupid mistake..." Mindy muttered as Sarah reached forward and pushed open the door.

She had hoped to enter the room quietly, not wanting to startle the other woman. But the door gave a loud *creeaaakkkk*, and Mindy's head snapped up. When her gaze landed on Sarah, her eyes narrowed.

"Come to gloat?" she asked, raising her chin in defiance as she stared Sarah down.

But Sarah just shook her head, not at all put off by the woman's suddenly brusque demeanor.

“I came to make sure you were all right,” Sarah explained, stepping farther into the office and shutting the door behind her.

“Of course I’m not all right,” Mindy said, but there was no venom to her words. Instead, there was only a sad sense of defeat, as if Sarah extending an olive branch of kindness had leeches all the fight out of her.

“Want to tell me what happened?” Sarah asked hesitantly, wondering if she was pushing Mindy too far.

But when Mindy’s brown eyes turned back to her, there was no malice in them. The other woman studied her for a second, and Sarah just gave her what she hoped was a soft, coaxing smile. She walked across the room, pulling out one of the chairs that sat in front of the desk and gestured for Mindy to take the other. And the woman hesitated for only a moment before sitting down in the chair that Sarah had indicated.

“Eclairs,” Mindy muttered, her voice low enough that Sarah had to lean forward slightly to hear her. “I was making eclairs. The choux pastry, it collapsed. I don’t know if it was undercooked, or if I did something stupid in my rush to get them in the oven like forget to add all the eggs. But whatever happened, they’re completely unusable.”

“But you had other pastries, right?” Sarah prompted. “I saw the way people were flocking around the first thing you made. I couldn’t see what it was, but from the sounds of the crowd, it seemed like they liked it.”

Mindy began shaking her head. “You don’t get it.”

Sarah chewed the inside of her cheek, considering her next words carefully. “I know it’s frustrating,” she offered. “But people have been saying amazing things about your bakery since the day you opened. And based on that, and on the way people were reacting to whatever you put out earlier, I’d venture to guess you’re an incredible baker. So your eclairs collapsed? We all make mistakes from time to time. And sometimes dough is just finicky. It doesn’t say anything about your talent.”

Mindy's eyes searched Sarah's face, and Sarah tried to stay still and not shrink away from the weight of the other woman's gaze.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" Mindy asked suspiciously, and Sarah shrugged one shoulder.

"Do I need a reason? Maybe I'm just a nice person."

A laugh pulled itself out of the pretty blonde woman, and Sarah could have sworn that some of the heaviness left her shoulders.

"I guess you are," Mindy admitted. She paused for a moment, and Sarah didn't do anything to fill the silence, opting instead to let Mindy sort out her thoughts.

"You know," Mindy began again. "My parents were always really tough on me. And when I went to culinary school and then began to study the art of pastry making, they *always* emphasized how I had to be the best." She let out a humorless chuckle. "So when I decided to open up a bakery here, the first thing I did was scope you out. I came to the bakery about six months ago."

Sarah tried and failed to hide her shock, and Mindy smiled at her sheepishly.

"You weren't there when I came," she explained. "The man you're always with—I think he's your fiancé?" Sarah nodded in confirmation, and Mindy gave a wry chuckle. "He was working the counter. I ordered a couple different things. And when I tell you they were some of the best pastries I had ever tasted, believe it. I knew I had my work cut out for me if I wanted to compete with you for business." She shrugged. "I guess it made a version of myself that I don't entirely like come out. One who can't accept being anything less than perfect."

Sarah remembered the day that she had gone to Mindy's own bakery, hearing the customer that raved about the bear claw, seeing the sold-out shelves, and the way those things had all made her feel so inadequate as a baker. She shook her head, laughing slightly despite herself.

“You know, Mindy,” Sarah said with a wide smile. “You and I might have more in common than you think.”

Then she told Mindy about all of it. She admitted that when Baking Fiend had opened, she had been terrified that she was going to lose business, and Mindy’s formal education when it came to baking had made Sarah feel inadequate.

The more Sarah spoke, the more Mindy’s eyes softened, and by the end of it, the other woman was looking at Sarah with compassion and understanding.

“The truth is,” Sarah finished, biting her lip, “I don’t think we *have* to compete with each other.”

“You don’t?” Mindy asked, sitting a little straighter.

Sarah shook her head. “I think we can collaborate. What if we worked together on recipes? Create drinks that complement each other and run sales in tandem? Have punch cards that customers can fill up at both shops, and even have bakery social nights? Things like that?”

Mindy’s eyes lit up. “You’d really do all of that?”

“Of course,” Sarah answered with a smile. William’s words from earlier in the week rushed back to her as she added, “There are more important things than winning. Like being a good neighbor, and a good friend.”

Mindy blinked, something lighting in her eyes. “Are we friends?”

“I think we can be,” Sarah answered honestly. “If you want to be, that is.”

There was a brief pause where Mindy seemed to consider those words. It lasted just long enough that Sarah began to get worried she was about to be turned down on her offer of friendship when Mindy began to smile.

“I think I would like that,” the other woman said hesitantly. “Now, what do we do about the competition?”

“What about a tie?” she offered, lifting one shoulder. “We can just walk out there and tell them we’ve decided the

competition ended in a tie and they don't need to vote, but they can continue to enjoy the snacks.”

“You think they'll go for that?”

Sarah chuckled. “Trust me, as long as that crowd gets to eat, they'll be happy with anything we tell them.”

Mindy laughed before giving her a quick nod. “A tie it is, then.”

The two women pushed themselves up to standing and walked out of the office side by side. And with each step they took, Sarah felt a weight being lifted off her shoulders.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Colette chewed her bite of muffin, watching with amusement as Zach eyed his massive cinnamon roll and contemplated the best way to take a bite. Sarah's ooey gooey cinnamon rolls were all but famous in this town, filled with a cinnamon like jam, with hints of nutmeg and a buttercream frosting that melted so deliciously across it. And what really set it apart was the sprinkle of cocoa nibs Sarah placed across the top.

She wasn't surprised when Zach had picked it to sample from the trays of treats that had been laid out. And she hadn't warned him that while they were life-changingly good, they also were notoriously difficult to eat, considering that they were about the size of Colette's head.

Zach turned his head to the side, holding the pastry aloft as he took a massive bite. His cheeks puffed out as they filled with pastry, and his lips would barely close over the sheer amount of dough he now held in his mouth.

Laughter bubbled up in Colette, pushing its way past her lips as she gazed at him and shook her head. "You look like a chipmunk."

"Hmph a hewt humpink," Zach grunted around the bite of cinnamon roll, his words so muffled that they didn't make any sense at all.

The confused look on Colette's face must have told him that she hadn't been able to understand a thing he said, because he just held up a finger as he worked to try to chew the bite that was still held in his mouth. After much effort, he

finally swallowed it down before turning a charming grin on her.

“But a cute chipmunk,” Zach clarified, waggling his eyebrows at her, and prompting Colette to laugh again.

Warmth filled her chest as she looked at him, not able to stop herself from thinking about how much she was starting to care for him. The thought was immediately followed by how much it was going to hurt her when he left, but thankfully, that train of thought was quickly interrupted by Lacy and Derek walking up to the two of them.

Lacy had her hand on her belly, rubbing it gently as she waddled across. Colette couldn't help but notice that her friend looked tired—but also incredibly happy.

“So?” Colette asked, her eyebrows flying up as the two newcomers filed up beside her and Zach. “Did we pull it off?”

She gestured around them, to the decorations that still glittered merrily and the townspeople that they loved so much chatted with one another.

“Pull it off?” Lacy scoffed. “I'd say you did more than that! This was the best Christmas party yet! And not only because I didn't do any of the work.”

Lacy winked, making everyone around her laugh. Colette felt a warm pressure along the small of her back as Zach slid his arm behind her, nestling her to his side as they all stood talking. It felt good being next to him like that, especially as she leaned more of her weight on him, luxuriating in the feel of it.

She knew that she had changed in the short time that he'd been in town. Could feel herself growing more confident, more sure of herself as she spent more time with Zach, allowing him to rub off on her. But as she looked up at him, watching as he laughed and joked with Lacy and Derek, noting how at ease he was with them, and how happy he seemed, she couldn't help but think that maybe she'd rubbed off on him a little bit too.

The music grew louder as it floated in from the ballroom, and cheers went up. Colette knew exactly what was happening as the Carpenters began to croon “Merry Christmas Darling” over the speaker.

She felt Zach shift next to her a moment before his breath stirred a tendril of her blonde hair, sending it floating toward her face. She shivered at his closeness.

“Dance with me,” he murmured, sending a blush rushing into Colette’s cheeks as she nodded.

His hand dropped from around her waist, and Lacy gave them both a knowing smile as she was whisked away through the formal dining room and into the ballroom beyond. Already the crowd had moved itself around, clearing the dance floor for the couples that now occupied it.

Zach spun her, a grin lighting up his tanned face, and his auburn hair glinted under the sparkling glow of the Christmas lights. She caught sight of Sarah dancing as she gazed up lovingly at William. And then Mindy, who seemed to be doing the jitterbug with Louise, even though it did not fit with the music at all. The two women were laughing at each other, and Colette’s heart swelled at the sight of so much joy.

She leaned her head against Zach’s chest, listening to the soft, steady beat of his heart, and feeling the warmth of him. It was hard to believe how perfectly they fit together, the contours of her body and his melding perfectly as they swayed and turned in time to the music. And she let it all seep into her, taking any fear or apprehension within her and washing it away.

“I’m really glad you came to Snowy Pine Ridge,” she murmured, her face still pressed to the planes of his chest. When he spoke, she was able to feel the rumble of his voice against her cheek.

“I am too.”

She breathed deep as she steeled herself for what came next, but she didn’t want to lose her momentum. Colette was terrified that if she stopped talking, if she let the nerves that

were currently bubbling and roiling within her chest make her pause for even a moment, she'd find herself unable to speak entirely.

Her arms were wrapped around Zach's broad, strong torso, and she squeezed him a little tighter as the words fell from her in a rush.

"I care about you," Colette admitted. "A lot. I know it hasn't been that long, and we've barely even begun to graze the surface of what this could be. But I don't want to stop trying. This doesn't feel finished."

Zach's heart sped up as she spoke. She could hear its hard, fast beat grow more and more frantic with every word she spoke. And when he didn't respond immediately, she wondered if she had misstepped. If her confession had been too much and Zach was about to let go of her and bolt out the door.

She dared a glance, moving her chin from his chest so that she could look up at him, and her heart leapt at what she found there. He was looking down at her, the corners of his mouth tilted up in a smile that was so sweet and so soft that it threatened to turn her into a puddle in the middle of the dance floor.

"It doesn't feel done, because we aren't done yet," Zach said simply, shrugging one shoulder.

Her heart thudded faster, and when Zach bent down to press his lips to hers, Colette felt as if she could fly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The sunlight streamed in through the window, painting the back of Lacy's eyelids in pink hues before she finally blinked them open. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, but when they did, a smile lit her face. She was lying on her side, the only way that she could sleep these days. And across from her, also curled up on his side, his dark blue eyes soft as he looked at her with a love filled grin.

"Were you watching me?" Lacy asked, rubbing her hand over her eyes as she tried to clear the final remnants of sleep.

"Yeah," Derek answered, his still raspy voice letting her know that he hadn't been awake for long.

"Weirdo." She rolled her eyes, but the word held no bite and was completely undermined by the smile that she gave her husband.

Moe and Curly wandered into the room, their tails wagging. Pod and Sugar were right behind them, all four of the dogs padding across the floor.

"Did you have fun last night?" Derek asked.

Lacy nodded, reaching out idly to pet the dogs as they sidled up to the bed to say good morning. "It was amazing. Perfect, actually. I can't believe you guys went through all of that to pull it off."

"Seeing you happy made every bit of it worth it." Derek propped himself up on his elbow before leaning forward and pressing a quick kiss on her forehead.

Lacy glanced at the clock, noted the time, and let out a groan. “We need to start getting ready or we’re going to be late.”

“I know.” He grinned again. “I was just giving you a few more minutes.”

He nuzzled her hair affectionately before helping her move herself around to get out of bed. The night before, as the party was beginning to wind down for the evening, they had agreed to meet Colette and Zach for an early brunch. Now, however, with Lacy’s feet swollen from standing for so long the night before, and the exhaustion from lugging around a belly that felt ready to pop at any moment, she was starting to wonder if brunch was a good idea.

But she wanted to see Colette and wanted to spend more time with Zach to get to know him better. So Lacy put on a brave face and began getting dressed. It felt like no time at all and then she and Derek were loaded into their car, making their way to Frosty’s Shack to meet their companions.

By the time they walked in, Colette and Zach were already seated at a table. They waved enthusiastically the moment they saw Lacy and Derek walk in. As she plopped down in her seat, Lacy glanced around the restaurant, noting that there was no sign of Louise.

“I think maybe the owner had a little too much eggnog last night,” Lacy joked, prompting the rest of them to laugh.

“She and Mindy both,” Colette responded, grinning conspiratorially. “They both hit the nog pretty hard last night.”

“The nog?” Derek laughed at his cousin, and Colette stuck her tongue out at him.

“Yes, the nog,” she retorted.

Lacy, sensing that Colette and Derek were about to get into one of their playful—but often quite extensive—familial bickering matches, quickly cut them both off.

“Speaking of Mindy,” she mused. “I was glad to see that she and Sarah worked things out. Ending on a tie was probably the best outcome for the bake-off.”

“And she and Sarah are actually friends now,” Zach chimed in as Colette nodded in agreement.

“I think that will be good for Sarah,” Colette said. “She and Mindy will be able to run ideas by each other, host collaborations, all that jazz.”

Everyone at the table nodded as the young woman who had been helping out the other customers flitted over to their table. They all placed their orders, Colette’s stomach growling loudly enough when the server walked away that everyone at the table was able to hear it.

“I wonder if they can....” Lacy’s words cut off as warmth spread throughout her lap.

Her hands flew to her stomach as she pushed her chair back, staring down at the small pool of water now forming on her chair and underneath the seat.

“What is it?” Zach asked while Colette just stared at her.

Lacy threw a glance sidelong at Derek, and her husband was just staring down at her lap, realizing what was happening with a shell-shocked look on his face.

“It’s time,” Lacy said, breaking the silence of the table.

Their little girl was about to arrive.

* * *

Zach’s heart began to pound as Lacy’s words sank in and he pushed himself back from the table, the movement snapping Colette into action as well. Derek seemed to be in a haze as he helped his wife to standing.

“The bill!” Lacy yelled, pointing to the table as Derek tried to usher her out the front door.

“Don’t worry about it,” Zach called out, watching them disappear through the glass door as he took out his wallet.

He took out a few twenties, more than enough to cover everything that they’d ordered and then some and tossed it on

the table.

“Shall we?” he said as he turned to Colette, who was glancing between him to the front door and back again.

“The baby is coming!” she exclaimed, blinking rapidly as if trying to clear her mind of hazy thoughts. “It’s early.”

“Only by a couple of weeks,” Zach reassured her, and Colette turned her wide-eyed gaze to him.

“You knew her due date?” she asked, incredulous.

“Derek told me last night. Now let’s go.”

He reached down to grab her hand, lacing their fingers together as they headed out the door after Lacy and Derek. The moment they stepped out into the cold December air, he immediately knew something was wrong.

Derek and Lacy had made it to their car, and the engine was revving as they tried to back out of their parking space, but nothing was happening. As they walked closer, Zach realized that their tire was caught on a bit of ice.

“What’s happening?” Derek called out the window he had rolled down.

“You’re stuck on ice,” Zach clarified. “Here.”

He gave Colette’s hand a small tug, directing her toward the front of the vehicle.

“We’ll rock it out,” Zach said as he placed his hands on the hood and Colette followed suit.

Together, they began pushing on the car and then stopping rapidly, rocking it back and forth, back and forth as they tried to help the tire find purchase. After a few attempts, just when Zach was beginning to worry that it wasn’t going to work, the tire caught asphalt and the car began to pull backward.

Derek cheered inside the car, the sound of it carrying across the parking lot through the still open window. But the moment that they had backed out successfully the car stopped and the passenger side window, where Lacy was sitting and focusing on her breathing, rolled down.

“Get in,” she commanded, her eyes swiveling from Zach and Colette. “I want you with me.”

Lacy stared directly at Colette, who blushed like mad as she and Zach rushed forward and pulled open the back door. They climbed into the back seat, their shoulders pressing against one another as Derek began the drive toward the hospital.

There technically wasn't one in Snowy Pine Ridge, but there was one in the next town over. It was bigger, but not by much. But at least their hospital was state-of-the-art, and once they hit the highway, it only took them about twenty minutes to arrive. The entire time, Lacy was practicing her breathing and talking to her stomach, commanding the baby to stay exactly where it was until they got to their destination.

The baby, thankfully, obliged. The moment they arrived at the hospital, all four adults exited the car and made their way through the front door, Lacy refusing to allow anyone to fuss over her. But when the nurse at the welcome desk saw her walk in, taking note of her protruding belly and the wet spot on her jeans, she immediately knew what was happening.

Zach felt like he'd only had enough time to blink before Lacy was being loaded into a wheelchair, which she initially tried to shrug off but the nurse insisted, and then she and Derek disappeared behind the door that led to the labor unit.

Colette turned to face him, her eyes still wide with the exciting turn the day had taken.

“I guess now we wait,” she said, nodding her head toward the area filled with chairs, magazines, and TVs.

They curled up in two seats that were side by side, with Colette resting her head on his shoulder as she watched the *Frosty the Snowman* movie playing on the television in front of them.

“You know,” Zach said, unable to stop the smirk from spreading across his lips. “This town isn't nearly as boring as I thought it'd be.”

Colette snorted but didn't say anything else as she snuggled deeper against his shoulder. A sense of certainty and clarity rushed through him, as he glanced from Colette to the TV, and thought of what was happening with Derek and Lacy somewhere in the hospital. Or maybe it was the feeling of comfort, the kind that roots itself into your soul. The kind that only come from being home.

They didn't say anything else after that, opting instead to stay nestled together in the waiting room of the hospital, finding comfort in the others presence as they waited for a new life to be brought into the world.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The bell above the door to Sweet Thing Bakery chimed merrily, pulling Sarah out of her thoughts as she whirled to face the entrance and see who had walked in. Colette was smiling at her from the doorway. She looked tired, but also so happy that it was coming off of her in waves.

“The baby is here,” Colette said in lieu of greeting, and her body was practically vibrating with the force of her joy.

Sarah’s eyebrows pulled together in confusion. “What?”

“The baby,” the other woman announced, finally arriving at the counter. “Derek and Lacy’s baby. Little Miss Piper Lee.”

It all clicked for Sarah then, and she decided to blame the lapse on the amount of baking she had done the last few days. Her heart leapt with excitement and love as the news settled in, and she stared at her friend with a smile.

“That’s a beautiful name,” Sarah mused. “How is everyone?”

“Tired. Understandably so. But they’re so, so good. Momma and baby are both happy and healthy. And Derek is over the moon.”

“Exactly how I expected them to be.” Sarah smiled softly at the picture forming in her head, showing Lacy, Derek, and their brand-new baby all smiling at one another. “Was it just you at the hospital?”

The other woman shook her head. “We were all at brunch together. Me, Lacy, Derek, and Zach when it happened. Me

and Zach both went to the hospital with them.”

Sarah arched an eyebrow. “And he stayed the entire time?”

Her friend blushed. “He did. He was so great about it too.”

“So things are going well?”

“They are,” Colette started to answer, but she hesitated, seeming to weigh her words before she said them. “I like him a lot. More than I should this early on, if I’m being honest. But the truth is he doesn’t live here. As far as I know, he still plans on going back home, and now that he’s painting again it’ll probably happen sooner rather than later. And I don’t know what that means for us.”

Sarah gave her friend a knowing smile. “I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised when it all works out.”

“And how are *you* doing?” Colette asked after giving her friend a slight roll of her eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“How are things with Mindy? How are you feeling now that the bake-off is over?” Colette prompted.

“Amazing, actually.” Sarah shook her head slightly. “We got the chance to talk quite a bit at the party. I never thought that we’d have so much in common.”

Colette nodded, giving her friend an exhausted but satisfied smile. “Sounds like the start to a beautiful friendship.”

“I think it might be.” Sarah eyed the other woman up and down. “Now let’s get you some caffeine. I love you, but it looks like you need it.”

Colette laughed, but she did not object.

* * *

Colette was glancing down at her phone as she walked up toward the college and not paying a lick of attention as she approached her cottage later that day. She was tired, so very,

very tired after waiting for Piper Lee's arrival at the hospital almost the entire night before. But she also didn't think she had ever felt quite so full of love in her life.

Derek had texted her new pictures of the baby, and she was smiling down at them as she unlocked her door. And because of that, she didn't see the small vase with half a dozen red roses sitting on her welcome mat until she was practically stepping on it.

"Oh!" Colette squeaked in shock as she looked down at the flowers on her doorstep.

She stooped down to pick them up, bringing them to her nose so that she could sniff at them delicately. When she looked up at her door, ready to stick her key in the lock, she also noticed a folded-up piece of paper that had been taped to the wood almost exactly at her eye level.

A smile tugged up the corners of her mouth as she began to guess who it might be from, and her suspicions were confirmed when she unfolded the piece of paper and read the note that had been scrawled within it.

Meet me at the main house for dinner.

-Z

She glanced toward the house in question, and more shock zipped through her. A trail of red rose petals lined the path from her front porch to the porch of the large house across the yard. The beautiful, glowing crimson was a stark contrast against the white of the snow, and she could not believe that she hadn't noticed it sooner.

She walked across the snow delicately, careful to stay just to the side of the flower petals, as she didn't want to step on or ruin a single one. Colette stopped in front of the door to the main house, wondering if she should actually knock or not. But she knew she couldn't bring herself to not at least announce her presence, and opted to give the door one quick, hard rap with her knuckles before grabbing the knob and pushing it open.

The path of petals continued past the door, and after Colette kicked off her snow boots and took off her coat, she gladly followed the rose petals farther into the house. It wound its way through the hallway off the entryway, carving a direct path to the kitchen at the back of the house.

The moment the doorway was in view, she could see the light of at least a dozen candles flickering warmly off the walls. And when she finally stepped into the open space, she realized that she had underestimated the number of candles by a lot. They covered every surface, or at least the ones that didn't present a fire risk. Even more flower petals peppered the floor, enough of them that the smell floated up to greet her. Or maybe that was the scent of the candles? Either way, the combination of it all made Colette dizzy with joy.

And in the center of the room, standing on one side of the small, circular dining room table, was Zach.

He looked handsome in a deep green sweater and dark jeans. The colors of it complemented his tanned, freckled skin and his auburn hair. He smiled at Colette as she approached, holding out a hand to her which she gladly took.

Without a word he helped guide her into the seat that had been pulled out for her, and her head kept swiveling around to try to take in every detail of the room. She knew she would want to recall all of this later.

“Thank you for coming,” Zach murmured, his voice low and appreciative as it broke their small bubble of silence.

“This is amazing,” Colette breathed, still staring around the room in awe.

“Colette,” Zach said, bringing her focus over to him.

His green eyes were darting around her face, shining with some emotion that she was having trouble placing.

“Dinner will be ready soon,” he explained. “And don't get me wrong, I love having the opportunity to feed you. But I also brought you here for a reason.”

He paused for a moment, but Colette got the sense that he wasn't done speaking yet, so she gave him the time that he

needed to collect his thoughts. She reached across the table to where one of his hands rested on the polished wood, placing her hand on top of his.

He smiled at her the moment her skin touched his, seeming to find the strength in it to keep saying what he'd brought her here to say.

"I don't know what I expected when I first rented out this place," Zach continued, and now that he'd found his words, they were leaving him in a rush. "Meet some new people, get back in touch with my creativity. Sure, those all sounded great. But I think there was a part of me that didn't really expect anything more than that."

He smiled at her. "But then here you come along, and everything changed. For the first time, it's all so startlingly clear. The reason my art wasn't fitting me anymore, the reason it was all so drab and lifeless, was because I was trying to create as a person that I just wasn't anymore. I had changed, but my art hadn't. And you helped me see all that. You, and this place."

He took a deep, steadying breath before closing his eyes to speak again.

"I love you, Colette."

The words clanged around her, sending a whirling rush of joy through her. She could not see her face, but she was sure that if she had a mirror, she would actually find herself glowing from the strength of it.

"I love you, and I don't want to leave," Zach said, watching her face for any reaction.

"You love me?" she asked, with a simple cock of her head.

Zach nodded. "I do. And trust me, I get that it happened fast. But it doesn't make it any less true."

She smiled at him again, before letting her own words, the one that she felt like she had been holding back for quite some time now, fall from her lips.

“I love you too.” The smile that he gave her when she spoke outshone all the candles in the room. “And I don’t want you to leave.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing I’m not going to.”

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. “What?”

“I’ll stay in Snowy Pine Ridge,” he answered simply. “There’s a place in town, a little shop space, that’s available for rent. I walked by it the other day. It’s close to the art supply store, and it’s perfect for a gallery.”

Colette continued to stare at him slack-jawed. “You’ve really thought this out.”

“I have.” He nodded again before giving her an expectant look. “So what do you say?”

“What do I say?” she stammered. “I say absolutely!”

She wasn’t able to contain her joy any longer. She pushed herself out of her chair, launching herself into his arms as she brought her mouth to his. The kiss that they shared was long and sweet, filled with all the words and promises that they had just made, sealing them in stone by the time their lips parted.

Colette looked up at his face, smiling at his handsome, chiseled features, and she felt the love practically pouring out of her. A timer sounded from somewhere in the kitchen, breaking them both out of the little bubble of happiness they’d fallen into.

Zach planted another quick kiss on her lips before excusing himself as he left the table and pulled the last bit of dinner out of the oven. Colette popped up, helping him grab the side dishes as they set them on the table.

Stuffed chicken breasts with rice pilaf and an assortment of veggies. The smell of it all mingled together before dancing up to Colette’s nose, making her mouth water. She and Zach loaded their plates with food and began eating, Colette sighing slightly as the flavor exploded across her tongue.

“So Christmas is in a few days,” Zach said pointedly, speaking around a bite of his chicken breasts.

“Now that you’re sticking around,” Colette answered, picking up on what he was indicating. “I guess we have to figure out what *our* Christmas plans are.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

He grinned at her, and they began launching into a detailed conversation as they figured out exactly how they were going to spend Christmas that year. The more they talked, the more Colette felt like somehow, despite everything that had happened in her life, she had ended up exactly where she needed to be and with the person that she was supposed to be with.

And when she threw a quick glance around the familiar kitchen, the one where she and Emma had shared so many meals together, she couldn’t help but feel like the woman was standing right beside her. And she just knew that wherever Emma was watching her from, the woman was currently smiling right along with her and Zach, and she was nodding with approval.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Zach held his gift in his lap, his palms sweating as he thought about what he was about to do. Colette was by his side, throwing nervous glances at him as she read his nerves, and across the room Lacy and Derek sat in two chairs before a balloon arch, an ever-dwindling mound of presents sitting around them.

“I loved this book as a kid,” Lacy called out, holding up a copy of *The Pokey Little Puppy* for all to see.

He had been shocked when Colette had told him a week ago, on Christmas morning, that she was going to have to plan a baby shower for Lacy. When he’d given her a confused look, she had shaken her head and laughed before launching into an explanation.

Apparently, she and Sarah had tried to throw Lacy a baby shower a few months ago. But their friend, who Zach was figuring out always did things according to her own timeline, no matter how unconventional, had refused.

She had insisted that she wanted everyone to meet the baby first before having the shower, she wanted them to get to know the baby, to suss out her personality before they began picking out gifts for her. Colette and Sarah had had no choice but to oblige.

And now they were all crowded into Sweet Thing Bakery. Sarah had closed it down for the afternoon, volunteering the dining area and all the treats and baked goods for the occasion. It was a beautiful event, he had to admit.

The guest of honor, Piper, was nestled in a car seat just to the side of her parents, her lashes resting against her chubby cheeks as she napped peacefully while her parents opened presents. Zach watched as the pile of presents began to dwindle, getting more and more nervous as the minutes ticked by.

Not even Colette knew what present he was gifting them. She had offered to shop for the baby gift and put both their names on the card, but he had declined. He had had something else in mind entirely, and he had been afraid that it would get damaged if he had set it in the teetering mound of presents, it would accidentally get damaged.

Lacy opened the last one, showing off a fancy new baby monitor, when Zach pushed himself up off his chair. He approached Lacy and Derek, his two new friends smiling at him warmly as they caught sight of the present in his hands.

“I wanted to hand it to you personally,” Zach explained. “I didn’t want... well... you’ll see.”

He ran a nervous hand through his hair as Derek reached out his hand and gently took the present from Zach. Everyone in attendance watched, and Zach, not wanting to be the center of attention walked back over to his seat by Colette.

“Are you gonna tell me what it is yet?” she asked as she leaned in close.

He shook his head. “You will know here in just a second.”

He shot her a loving smile, which she quickly returned before they turned their attention back toward the people at the other side of the room. Just then, Lacy ripped off the final bit of wrapping paper, and a gasp wrenched itself out of both her and Derek.

“Zach,” she breathed, her hand fluttering to her heart as she stared at the canvas that she still held. “This is...”

Her words failed her, and even at a distance Zach could see the tears dancing along her lashes.

“It’s perfect,” Derek finished for his wife, looking at Zach and giving him a warm, grateful smile.

“Show us already,” called a voice from farther back in the room, one that Zach suspected belonged to Louise.

Everyone chuckled, but it quickly died out as Lacy held the painting aloft and turned it to face them. He heard Colette’s own quick intake of breath as she took it in, and pride unfurled in Zach’s belly at everyone’s reaction.

It was a portrait of Piper, swaddled in a fluffy, red blanket, and superimposed on an impressionist rendition of the town. From the way it had been painted, it looked like the town was folding in around her, cradling her and keeping her safe as she slept.

It was the first painting he’d done that blended the impressionism of his old style, and the realism that he’d been playing around with. A beautiful mix of the person that he was, and the one that he was becoming.

He glanced at Colette, and her gaze was no longer on the painting, but on him instead. She didn’t need to say anything, since it was all written clearly on her face: the love, the pride, the promise of the future.

With a smile, Zach bent his face to hers and kissed her sweetly, glad to meet that future of theirs head on. As long as it meant that she would be by his side, he couldn’t think of anything better.

* * *

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Fiona writes sweet, feel-good contemporary women's fiction and family sagas with a bit of romance.

She hopes her characters will start to feel like old friends as you follow them on their journeys of love, family, friendship, and new beginnings. Her heartwarming storylines and charming small-town beach settings are a particular favorite of readers.

When she's not writing, she loves eating good meals with friends, trying out new recipes, and finding the perfect glass of wine to pair them with. She lives on the East Coast with her husband and their two trouble-making dogs.

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