

CREEKVILLE CHRISTMAS



Cocoa Kisses

FROM USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MELANIE JACOBSON

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For Gage and Rome,
Aunt Lemony loves you!

Chapter One

Taylor



I MARRIED LEVI TAFT for the third and last time when we were ten. We divorced later that afternoon when he ditched me to go swimming at Kyle Siever's house. I should have known then that a boy always looking for adventure was destined to break my heart. And he did a few more times in fifth grade before I'd had enough and quit speaking to him.

I ignored him all the way through middle school. But we lived next door to each other, and by our freshman year of high school, we were friends again. By our senior year, we were best friends. We even chose to go to the same city for college. Different schools, but we lived on the same block and shared a car.

After graduation, he threw himself into his career as a globetrotting journalist, and I wanted to throw myself off a building after working for the IRS for a year. So our paths diverged. I took the well-trodden one back home to Creekville

to open a café. He took the less-traveled one that led to war-torn countries on faraway continents. I haven't seen him in years.

Not that we don't talk. We do. Texts. DMs through Instagram. But he hasn't posted in a while, so until twenty seconds ago, as far as I knew, Levi Taft was in Europe on assignment. He'd been in a country so small, I thought it was the capital of another country until I looked it up. It's one of the -stans. Kind of a map speck, like Andorra.

See? You didn't know Andorra was a whole country either.

Anyway, all of this explains why I'm totally unprepared for Levi to walk into my café ten days before Christmas. He's not looking at the register where I'm standing at first, so I duck. By which I mean squat with my head below the counter, my jaw dropped far enough to gather flies if we had them in December. Lots of flies. So many flies.

“Gal?” Mr. Greer's trembly voice calls. I'd been ringing up a treat for him and his wife.

My name is Taylor, but any female under sixty is “gal” to Mr. Greer.

“Uh, yes, Mr. Greer. Dropped something. Hang on.”

I wish I had a tube of lipstick in my pocket. And a brush. Also breath mints. Or my whole bathroom vanity, really. And the Queer Eye guys on Facetime.

“Taylor?” Levi's voice.

The mellow timbre of it rolls over me almost like a scent memory, immediately triggering a supercut montage of about two hundred Levi flashbacks in one second flat.

I look up, and there he is, his face peering down at me from beside both of the Greers.

“Are you hiding from me?” Levi asks, smiling a little.

“Yes.” I blink up at him, trying to take him in.

“Why?” Mrs. Greer asks.

“I don’t know.” This is not true. I know exactly why seeing Levi walk in made me want to run for cover.

“You should probably get up so I can hug you,” he says.

“He’s handsome,” Mrs. Greer says. “You should do that.”

“Are you a good young man?” Mr. Greer asks.

“I try to be,” Levi says.

“Then I agree with my wife,” Mr. Greer tells me. “You should hug him.”

It’s been four years, and if Levi is cool, then I’m cool. This is fine.

A smile tugs at my mouth. Levi is here!

I surge to my feet and run around the register, grinning now. Levi steps away from the Greers like he knows what’s coming, and I launch straight into his arms.

“Hey, weirdo,” he says, wrapping his arms around me and lifting me from the floor.

“Long time, no see, wonderboy.” I squeeze him tight until he splutters and gives my waist a playful pinch.

I step back and look him over. “I can’t believe no one told me you were coming to Creekville.” He’s wearing jeans and a soft gray sweater beneath a black peacoat. Maybe all of those things should look like he stepped out of a glossy department store ad, but that’s not Levi. These clothes look broken in, like they’ve become so used to the shape of his lean frame that they could never fit anyone else. It would be like trying to walk in someone else’s Birkenstocks.

“Last minute decision,” he says. “There’s a cease-fire until January, so there was no reason to stay for the magazine. But I sublet my apartment until the beginning of February, so ...”

“You’re kicking it with your parents. I bet they’re thrilled.” They get to see him more than anyone else, but never as much as they like because they have to catch him in DC between assignments.

“They will be when I tell them,” he says. “I haven’t even stopped by the house yet. Once my mom gets hold of me, I’m doomed.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes. Smothered by love. How sucky for you. Do you have a minute? Grab a table, and I’ll take care of the Greers so we can catch up.”

“Sure.” He takes the table I point to.

“Sorry, Greers.” I dart back around the counter and count out their correct change. “Here you go.”

“Thanks, Taylor,” Mrs. Greer says, picking up the bakery bag with two mint chocolate brownies inside. She’s a tiny woman, and she tucks her arm into her husband’s and smiles up at him. “We’re spoiling ourselves because we solved the final puzzle on *Wheel* last night.”

“Good job.” I give them a distracted smile. I’m dying to visit with Levi, but I love the Greers, so I rally. Or try to. “What was the final answer?”

“Chief executive officer,” Mr. Greer says. “We solved it right away.”

I lean across the register and bat my eyes at him. “When are you going to leave Mrs. Greer and marry me, Mr. Greer?”

This is their favorite joke and probably half the reason they come into the café every week. The tops of Mr. Greer’s ears turn red.

Mrs. Greer cackles. “You make excellent brownies, Taylor Bixby, but until you can make my blue-ribbon meatloaf, you don’t stand a chance.”

I snap my fingers in an “aw, shucks” show of regret. “One of these days I’ll snag him. Merry Christmas, Greers.”

“Merry Christmas, gal.” Then they’re off, leaving the café with the jingle of bells hung over the door for the holidays.

“One more minute,” I tell Levi. I walk to the storage room and poke my head in. “Hey, Celia,” I say to my part-timer who’s busy filling in an order sheet. “A friend of mine stopped in, so I may need you to come out if we get more customers.”

“No problem. I’m almost done in here anyway.”

I round the counter to sit with Levi, smiling that I had panicked about my hair and makeup. That’s never mattered between us. He pushes out the chair across from him with his foot, and just like that, no time has passed; we are Levi and Taylor again, childhood best friends catching up over the holidays.

I plop down in the seat and prop my elbow on the table, chin in hand. “Knife fight. Chicken versus wombat, chicken has the knife.”

His grin flashes at me, but he shakes his head. “Chicken every time. But it probably doesn’t even need the knife.” We’ve been having this debate over which animal would win in a fight against every other animal if given the right weapon since we had biology together our freshman year.

“Conceded.”

“Sword fight. Gorilla versus lion. Gorilla has the sword,” he says. “You have flour in your hair.”

I swipe at it, not actually caring where it is. I study him as I consider my answer. Heavy scruff covers his cheeks and the angles of his jaw, but it’s still easy to see that his face has thinned. If he lost another ten pounds, he’d be gaunt. He’s always been lean but solid. He still looks solid but with some wear and tear. Job hazard of eight years as a globetrotting reporter. “Gorilla. You forgot to shave.”

He reaches up and scratches his chin. “Definitely gorilla.” He holds out his hand for the palm-slap-slide-to-fist-bump we always did. Do.

Our rhythm is back, and I slip right into it, completing the handshake.

He looks around. “This place is pretty great.”

“Thanks.” I try to see it through his eyes. When I’d made the decision to move back to Creekville four years ago, I’d known my success would hinge on creating a café that would draw in all kinds of people. It couldn’t be too country cute or it would alienate young customers. It couldn’t be too modern and curated or it would put off older folks.

He meets my eyes, a smile on his face. “It’s very you.”

“That was the goal.” Bixby’s is designed to feel contemporary rustic, but with more flair than the monochrome aesthetic all over the home improvement channels. I’ve gone with an overall color of soft white walls and gray furnishings, but with surprising pops of turquoise in the accessories.

It’s perfect for weaving in orange accents in the fall, then trading those out for holiday reds after Thanksgiving. Never *before* Thanksgiving, though. I’m an autumn and Christmas purist. Let each season shine, in the décor *and* the bakery case.

The tables have mini poinsettia or rosemary bush centerpieces, garlands of wooden cranberries swoop around the tops of the walls, and small white lights twinkle slowly in

the front window, a sleepy blink here and there so it doesn't overstimulate my guests.

"Hungry?" I ask. "Can I get you some coffee?"

"Will I sound uncool if I ask for a cup of cocoa?"

"You remember." I don't know why this pleases me. I've made him so much cocoa over the years it would be a shock if he didn't.

"Is that something people forget?" he asks.

"Not around here," one of the high school boys at the nearest table says. "Good choice. Get a cranberry blondie too."

"Cocoa and a cranberry blondie, please," he says.

I pop up to fill a mug and plate the blondie, setting them both in front of him less than a minute later. I pinch a piece of his blondie before he can even touch it and pop it in my mouth. "So how long are you in town?"

"Not sure. Through Christmas, at least. Kind of depends on when the magazine has a new assignment for me." He takes a bite of his blondie and his eyes widen. He chews with the look of someone savoring his food before he narrows his eyes. "Should I be super happy to be eating this right now or upset that you've never made it for me before?"

"Happy since it's a new recipe I tried this year. And maybe grovelly so I'll give you another one."

He presses his hands together, prayer-like, and dips his head toward me. "All the groveling." Then he takes another bite.

He doesn't have to grovel. It makes me happy to see him enjoying my baking. It always has.

I steal his mug and take a sip. "Dang. I am so good at cocoa."

He laughs. "No lies detected."

The two high school boys get up and clear their table. "Bye, Taylor," one of them calls.

"See you, gentlemen. Cookie if you get an A." It's a standing deal I have with my high school regulars—cookies for smart cookies.

"Bet on it," the other one says, and they wave goodbye.

"So you're going to entertain me while I'm here, right?" Levi asks.

I smirk at him. "No. I'm in charge of Christmas Town again, remember?"

His eyes go shifty, darting from side to side.

"Too late," I tell him. "You're getting drafted."

He heaves a deep sigh. "It can't be as bad as that time insurgents held me captive for three days." He slides his mug back and takes a drink, setting it down with a considering look. "Fine. I'll do it, but you're going to have to pay me in cocoa."

"Deal. Now get out of here and go see your parents before I get in trouble with your mom."

He wipes the crumbs from his lips with a napkin then stands. “I’ll be back when my mom lets me out of the house again. But she might not let me out at all. You know that, right?”

“Yes, dummy.” I step into his waiting arms, and the strongest wave of nostalgia I’ve ever experienced washes over me, strong enough to make my breath hitch.

His arms tighten for a second and then we let go of each other, smiling.

“It doesn’t suck to see you again, Taylor.”

“You’re surprisingly tolerable, Levi.”

He picks up the remainder of his blondie and heads toward the door. “I’ll see you when my mom is done spoiling me.”

“So never?”

The bells over the door jingle. “Basically.”

“Give her my love.”

“Merry Christmas, Taylor.” The door closes as he heads down the sidewalk.

I watch after him, and he turns and waves. I return it, smiling, and keep watching until he disappears. I’ve always loved Christmas in Creekville, but Levi’s sudden appearance takes it all up a notch. The holidays haven’t felt this merry since ... well, since Levi’s last Creekville Christmas. Minus the eggnog-and-mistletoe incident. If we didn’t count that, it had been pretty nearly a perfect Christmas.

And Levi and I had decided that it definitely didn't count. It had been a weird night.

I was glad we'd finally get a shot at another truly perfect Christmas.

Chapter Two

Levi



I'D MEANT TO BUM around Europe for Christmas. The cease-fire looked like it would hold through the new year, but if that changed, it'd still be easier to head back on assignment from the "neighborhood" than DC, assuming Eastern Europe was that hood.

I've been restless lately. Usually, a new assignment solves that. Or a new country. New faces. New food. New views. I'd found a cheap room to rent in Moldova while I waited until the magazine gave me a new assignment. I'd had every intention of settling in to eat an obscene number of the local cheese dumplings and stream shows I'd missed between explorations of Kishinev and the surrounding countryside.

I knew the restlessness well. I'd felt it growing up here. An impatience to see and do the next thing. A sixth sense that life was happening outside of my sleepy town. I'd been right; there is so much life outside of Creekville.

But four years is a long time to have been away from family over the holidays. This year, with all the peace in the air—and after too many cheese dumplings eaten alone—I'd decided it was four years too many.

I wanted the familiar charm of Creekville's Main Street, the over-the-top town traditions, smothering hugs from my mom, and an illicit Christmas cigar my mom pretended not to see my dad and me smoking out in the cold. I hated cigars, but I loved huddling in the far corner of the yard, us and my brother.

I wanted Taylor. To see her, to make sure we were still good after...well. After the last time I was in town for Christmas.

So I took a red-eye flight into Dulles, slept in my editor's guest room, and got up this morning to take the two-hour train ride to Roanoke. From there, I transferred to a bus headed to Creekville, and twenty minutes ago, I walked from the depot at the end of Main straight to ... Bixby's Café.

Taylor's place. She's as much a part of Creekville as my family.

I look back and smile at her through the café window. She returns the smile and waves.

I pick up my rucksack from where I'd leaned it against the corner of the building and hitch it over my shoulder as I walk the mile to my parents' place. Downtown Creekville during the holidays is the Hallmark ideal of every smalltown Christmas movie. I'd passed so many familiar sights on the way to Bixby's. The town square, where the towering tree bristles with ornaments and ribbon but isn't yet lit. The

pharmacy with a poster advertising the town production of *A Christmas Carol*. The hardware store with a display of elves committing mischief. The yarn store with handknit wool sweaters in the window.

But it hadn't felt like home until Taylor jumped into my arms and immediately drafted me into her whirlwind of plans and overcommitment.

I pick up my pace toward my parents' house, ready for another warm welcome. They come into DC sometimes when I'm there between assignments, but my mom is going to lose her mind when I walk through her front door.

Their place is in full Christmas mode. It's tasteful, but a giant live wreath hangs on the front door, lights drip from the eaves, and full plaid bows accent evergreen swags across the front porch railing.

I'm about to knock before I catch myself, and I feel a twinge at having been gone so long that I almost forgot I'm always welcome here. Instead, I push open the front door and yell, "Mom?"

I hear a gasp and something loud clatters to the kitchen tile at the back of the house. Then my mom comes barreling out, heading at me with the same speed as Taylor did, and I hold out my arms to scoop up my favorite lady.

"Levi? What in the world?" she says, pushing against me. I loosen my hold, and she grabs my face and peppers loud smacking kisses all over my cheeks. "I can't believe you're here!" Smooch. "Why didn't you tell us you were coming?"

Smooch. “I already sent your gift to the magazine office.” Smooch. “But I’ll get you something else.” Smooch. “Just won’t be handmade.” Smooch on the forehead.

“Mom,” I say, laughing and pulling her hands down from where she’s holding my face hostage. “It’s good to see you too. I had time off from the magazine, and I decided yesterday that I want to spend it here. Can I have my old room?”

“Can you—” She breaks off with a splutter. “As if I’d let you stay anywhere else. Go put your stuff down and meet me in the kitchen. You’re too—”

“Skinny,” I say at the same time she does. “Not my fault. I’ve eaten cheese dumplings for three days straight.”

“They didn’t help,” she says. “I’ll fix that. Now let me go call your father.”

I head upstairs to drop my bag in my old room at the end of the hall. I pass my sister’s room. Rachel is the youngest and just got married last year. She’s spending the holidays with her in-laws in California. My brother Zeke is two years younger than me, but he’s been married since college, and he’ll be here with his wife and two kids in time for Christmas Town. It’s a must-do if you’ve got children.

My room has stayed the same since high school. I’m kind of a minimalist, so I only have two shelves with stuff on them. One holds my yearbooks and a couple of trophies from regional cross-country meets. The one below it holds a half dozen of my favorite novels, all scavenged from used bookstores because I thought it made them more legitimate.

I shake my head and toss my bag on the navy comforter covering the double bed. I sit at the headboard and lean forward to peer through the window. It gives me a clear view of the gate my dad installed in the fence between our yard and the Bixbys'. He'd put it in after he got tired of removing splinters from Taylor's and my hands because we were too impatient to walk to each other's front doors and knock.

Taylor's old room faces mine. The curtains are drawn; I know she moved into the apartment over her café when she opened it. But for a moment, I sit and remember the number of times we sent messages back and forth. I slide open the drawer of the nightstand beneath the window and smile when I find the small whiteboard and markers still inside it. We could have just texted, but we'd started sending messages like this when we were kids before we had cell phones and the window messages kept going through high school.

One of the things I'd always hated about Creeksville was how nothing ever changed. But right now, that's exactly why I'm here—at least for a couple of weeks. I'm going to soak it all in, and when the itchiness strikes to be on the move again, that's about when my editor will send me on a new assignment.

“Levi! Come eat!” my mom calls from downstairs.

I shouldn't have stayed away so long. I smile again, but it fades as I catch a glimpse of my closet, the door hanging open, a coat and some old snow boots sitting inside where I left them when I was here last. We'd gone next door for Mrs. Bixby's

potluck. She held it every year, three days after Christmas, and all the neighbors brought leftovers from their holiday feasts, played cards, and drank the last of the eggnog. The very strong eggnog.

The eggnog of Christmas regret. The eggnog of very bad choices. The eggnog that makes it easier to skip the holidays at home the next year. Or four.

But it's fine. I saw Taylor, and it's fine.

Only, seeing her has me thinking something else. Something like...I'm not sure anymore that four years ago was a bad choice.

I slide the closet door closed and head downstairs to get spoiled. I'm ready to do a Creekville Christmas reset—mistake-free and regret-free.

Chapter Three

Taylor



“LEVI IS BACK!”

I glance up at my sister, who is making this announcement in time to the jingle bells as she walks through the café door. Typical of Sara, who is always in the middle of a half-finished thought. It’s been worse the last couple of months while her husband, Dean, is deployed in Kuwait. She’s solo parenting their twin boys, who are darling maniacs. She could probably keep a viral social media channel going with the wild things those two get into before breakfast.

“I know,” I tell her. “I saw him yesterday.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t say anything,” she says. “It’s been forever since I saw him. At least, what, three years?”

“Four. The twins had just started walking last time he was home for Christmas.”

“Oh, yeah.” A haunted look flickers through her eyes as she recalls the early days of chaos when the twins graduated from crawling. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. The ornament carnage from my parents’ Christmas tree. The lengths everyone kept going to as they tried to keep the tree decorated but out of the twins’ reach.

Actually, it was the funniest of times.

“He looks good,” Sara continues, talking over her shoulder as she heads toward my tiny office.

He’s too skinny, I argue in my head.

Sara returns a minute later, her coat and purse left behind as she ties on an apron that says “Bixby’s” on the bib. “Anyway, the Tafts suggested a game night tonight—7:00 but at Mom and Dad’s so I can keep an ear out for the twins.”

The boys aren’t quite old enough for kindergarten yet, so Sara decided to stay with our parents at their invitation until Dean is back from Kuwait. My parents love it, since—as Mom points out with a meaningful look at me every time—the twins are their only grandchildren.

Sara loves being back here because the boys wear themselves out at preschool during the day, and then she has help with them during what my mom calls “the witching hour,” the time between dinner and bedtime when they lose their minds. Or their ability to regulate their emotions, anyway. And “witching hour” is a lie. The few times I was dumb enough to be there around dinnertime, the meltdowns lasted closer to two.

I love having Sara here because she helps in the café several times a week while I work on Christmas Town stuff, aka the Beast Trying to Eat Me Alive.

“Are you coming?” Sara asks.

I blink. “What?”

“Game night with the Tafts. You coming?”

“Depends on how much organizing I get done.”

“But Levi will be there. You have to come. It’ll be like old times.”

“That’s not a selling point,” I say, and she snorts. There will be cheating and trash-talking. There will be arguments about the rules. Unholy alliances will form. Friendships will be pushed to the breaking point until someone wins, everyone else says they cheated, and the teams change for the next game. Then it’ll happen again with new unholy alliances.

There will also be our moms driving me and Levi crazy. We may have outgrown our childhood weddings, but Mrs. Taft and my mom started trying to marry us off when they were pregnant with us, and the more the wine flows at game night, the harder they try. I cringe every time they bring it up.

“Let me see what fresh mess is in my inbox,” I tell Sara. “I’m a soft maybe right now.”

“Fair enough,” she sighs. “Get cracking. The boys are expecting the best Christmas Town ever.”

Something about the way she says it makes my Hermei senses tingle. Hermei is the dentist-turned-head-elf in the old Claymation Christmas special Dad still makes us watch every year, maybe because Dad is a dentist who would secretly love to be a Christmas elf. But at six-foot-two, his Christmas elf dreams are doomed to disappointment.

“What’s wrong, Sara?” I ask.

“With what?”

“You sound stressed about the boys and Christmas Town.”

Oh, Christmas Town. Imagine a snow globe of an idyllic smalltown Christmas. A quaint Main Street, the shop windows glowing and stuffed with holiday goodies. Wreaths and ribbons hung on all the streetlamps. A large Christmas tree, decorated to perfection, rising in the town square, shiny ornaments catching the light of the setting sun, families gathered together to admire it, carolers in the background.

Now imagine that whole thing comes to life with a town parade that starts at one end of Main Street, then proceeds to Creekville’s actual town square with its actual thirty-foot-tall Christmas tree, Santa bringing up the rear of the parade. In a sleigh. Pulled by reindeer.

Yeah. Real ones.

Because that happens. And when Santa gets to the town square exactly at dusk, he meets Mayor Derby on a dais while all of Creekville watches as he declares Christmas Town open,

and then he turns a key that lights the square from the streetlights to the enormous tree.

That town square will have—since that morning—been the site of mad construction, a great deal of confusion and cursing, shouted hellos, and merry Christmas greetings flying between friends and neighbors. Everyone will have been rushing to build and erect their Christmas Town booths because this is *the* event that puts Creekville on the map with the largest Christmas market in the region. Local businesses and clubs put together an entire temporary town of wooden facades painted to look like an alpine village, each fronting a booth selling handmade goods and food for thousands of visitors who flood in Friday night and all day Saturday before Christmas.

It's been a town tradition since before I was born, and two years ago, I was the brave and stupid soul who volunteered to take it over when Glynnis Hunsaker decided she was ready to step down from running it after thirty years.

Not only is it a key part of the holiday season for hundreds—maybe even thousands—of families, it's also a major economic boost for the local small businesses, and a key fundraiser for some of the local teams and clubs.

It's a whole thing. A thing that will be the death of me, but a thing I love with all my heart. A thing I plan to make bigger and better than ever now that I've had two years of doing it Glynnis's way to get my bearings.

That's why Sara comes in most days to give me time to work on the many details involved in Christmas Town. There's only

a week to go, and each day brings a new crop of crisis emails, but none of them matters more than the troubled look Sara is trying to hide.

“Sara?” I prompt, determined to get the truth out of her.

She sighs. “Last year was the first year the boys fully understood Santa and Christmas. They’ve been looking forward to Christmas Town since Thanksgiving.”

“Don’t worry, it’s going to be awesome.” Right after I solve a dozen new problems the day has brought me, including a fight between the gardening club and the Wiccans, who the gardening club is accusing of copying their booth design.

“I know,” Sara says. “That’s not the problem. It’s Rome. He’s so bought into the idea of Santa and Christmas magic that he won’t tell anyone what he wants for Christmas. Says he’s saving it for Santa.”

“Just go into Roanoke,” I tell her. “Have him tell a Santa there. Boom, done.”

“I wish. But Rome is a skeptic who wants to believe. I suggested that already, but he’s adamant that only the Christmas Town Santa is real. Mr. Groggins is too good, and the reindeer and sleigh only make the point more.”

Mr. Groggins plays Santa every year, and he takes it seriously. He keeps his snowy beard year-round, and he owns his own Santa suit that is so glorious, I’d bet it’s trimmed with real ermine. And if it isn’t—and I hope it’s not because I’d be sad for the ermine even if they’re homely weasels in real life

—I bet it *costs* as much as if it were trimmed in real ermine. It's gorgeous crimson velvet with a real leather belt and boots. He always smells like pipe smoke and peppermints, and every year I see him as Santa, I half believe in him myself.

“I get that,” I say. “But Mr. Groggins is excellent at passing on kids’ requests to the head elf who gets it to you. You’ll have time to get Rome’s gift.”

“It’s a gamble,” she says. “Even if I get the twins to see him on Friday night—”

“I can make that happen,” I tell her, my eyebrow arched. “I’m somewhat connected.”

“Fine, they’ll get front-of-the-line passes for Friday night,” she says with a tight smile. “But Christmas is that Monday. That gives me two days. What if Rome wants a toy that’s sold out? What if I can’t even get it in time with overnight shipping because it’s the weekend?”

She rubs her temples. “Sorry. I sound like a lunatic. But Dean’s deployment has been so hard on them, and Rome is fixated on telling ‘real’ Santa what he wants and having it appear on Christmas morning. I have a feeling if I can’t make it happen, it’ll be one disappointment too many for him.”

I wrap her in a hug, and she rests her head on my shoulder. “You’ve got this. *We* ’ve got this. I need a Tata and Twin night, and I’ll worm it out of him.”

Tata is what the twins called me before they could say my name. It’s not ideal, but it was too cute to keep correcting

them. Eventually, even when they could say my name, Tata stuck. I look forward to the day they find out what ta-tas are and are horrified.

Sara squeezes me back. “Keep reminding me it’ll be okay. Sometimes it’s these little things that make me lose perspective even when I’m keeping all the big stuff together.”

“Hey,” I say, leaning back and holding her by the shoulders. “Your kid’s belief in the magic of Santa *is* a big thing. The twins deserve some magic after the last six months. We’ll figure it out.”

The bells jingle, and I let go of Sara as Levi walks through the door.

“Levi!” Sara calls when she sees him. “Come give me a hug.” She darts from behind the counter and steps into his waiting arms, a big smile on both their faces.

“You okay?” Levi asks, and I realize he’s talking to me.

This also makes me realize I’m frowning, because for a split second I’m bugged that his hug with her is the same as his hug with me. Levi has always been *my* friend, but he’s known Sara his whole life too, so why wouldn’t they hug? I squash my annoyance flatter than a crepe and joke, “Long time, no see.”

“You’re just an excuse to come say hi to that cranberry thing you gave me yesterday.”

A real smile takes over. My nighttime baker handles most of the daily baking now, but I still make one special every day, and right now, the cranberry blondies are killing it with

customers, so I've made a batch daily since I premiered them last week.

"You're in luck," I tell him. "I have three left, and they're going to disappear soon."

"Yeah. In my belly." He pats his flat stomach. "Also, I'm coming here every day to pretend I want to help with Christmas Town as long as you keep serving those blondies. How about I buy one now and bring the other two to game night?"

"Your money is no good here," I say as Sara plucks one from the display case for him. "You can have the blondies, but I don't know if I'll be at game night yet. Too much to do."

"Whoa," he says, his eyes widening. "No way. You can't make me deal with them on my own. What do you need me to help with so you can come tonight?"

"Let's do a drama check." I pull out my phone and check the many, many emails I have to tackle. "Sixteen emails."

"That's not too bad," he says.

"In the last half hour," I clarify.

"Oh."

I skim them while Sara gets to work moving around the pastries to fill in the front of the case.

"Are they always drama?" he asks.

"Levi. My dude," Sara says. "Do you even remember living here?"

“Right. Dumb question,” he says.

“There’s always something and it’s never interesting,” I grumble.

“Not to you, but I love it.” Sara gestures around us. “We’re in a café, so spill the tea.”

“Is it your job to make bad dad jokes while Dean is gone?” I ask.

“Hundred percent yes.”

I roll my eyes at Levi. “It looks like I have to call Joyce Hardy. She’s upset because she saw the birdcalls the Rotary Club wants to sell, and she says they’re unacceptably suggestive.”

Levi’s brow furrows. “Birdcalls?”

I hand over my phone with Joyce’s “evidence” on the screen.

Sara peers at it over his shoulder and bursts out laughing. “So what you’re saying is that Joyce Hardy outed herself in an email for having a dirty mind?”

“Exactly.” I grin at Sara, happy she’s laughing. “You’d have to *want* to see something naughty when those poor men only want to call birds. My guess is she’s afraid it’ll set her britches dancing when someone uses them.”

Levi loses it, and then we’re all laughing at the idea of Joyce Hardy, the prim children’s Sunday School director, overcome by the sound of birdcalls.

“What are you going to tell her?” Levi asks when we settle down.

I clear my throat and adopt a serious expression. “I’ll say I understand her concerns and have a talk with them. The harder call will be to Mr. Winters when I tell him they have to sell them with a warning label that using them might seduce Joyce Hardy.”

That sets us off again, the kind of laughing that’s much more than the situation deserves, but the kind that sometimes you just need. The kind that blows off stress. Like from Joyce Hardy’s weekly complaints.

This time when our laughter winds down, Levi sighs. “I’d rather negotiate with a warlord than deal with Joyce Hardy.”

“Well, sure,” I say. “There’s a chance you can get somewhere with a warlord.”

Levi grins. “You get me. But I’ll go over to the hardware store and talk to Mr. Winters for you, let him know that the local chapter of Indignant Church Ladies may be having words with him soon.”

“If you get me out of having to use the phrase ‘suggestive birdcalls’ with him, I’ll come to game night no matter how many emails I have to ignore.”

“On it,” he says, snagging the blondie Sara extends to him and heading for the door.

Sara fixes me with a speculative stare as the bells jingle behind him. “Tayvi is a cute couple name.”

“Nope,” I tell her. She’s always been in favor of an epic Bixby-Taft wedding. There are times when that’s sounded a little too close to wishes I don’t even speak in my own mind. “I’m going to go answer more emails.”

“Ugh, fine,” she says. “Go do your thing.” But she sighs as she bends down to retrieve paper goods to replenish our carryout supplies.

“You okay?”

She scrubs a hand over her face. “Yeah. Tired.”

“Not sleeping well?” She worries about Dean all the time.

“I sleep okay. It’s the worry every minute I’m awake that wears me out. Wait, that’s not exactly right. I worry about Dean every minute I’m awake unless I’m with the boys, and then I’m exhausted trying to wrangle those two.”

People talk about “herding cats” like it’s difficult, but managing the twins would be more like herding feral jackrabbits who also have an obsession with booger jokes. And boogers.

“I’ll go over with you after work and help with bedtime,” I tell her.

She reaches over and clutches my arm. “It’s not just bedtime.”

I pull her fingers away, laughing. “I know. Witching hour. I understand what I’m signing up for. It’ll be fine.”

She gives a small groan. “I want to accept, but I can’t do that to you.”

That settles it. “You’re not doing anything to me. Go upstairs right now. Turn your phone off. Turn my TV on. And I don’t want to see you again until closing.” I live in the apartment above the café—a major reason I chose this location—and I can tell how tempted she is to take the stairs behind the shop and disappear into my place for two hours of peace and quiet.

I sweeten the deal because what else would a baker do? “I want to. I’d like to take a crack at Rome and see if I can get him to tell me what his Christmas wish is. Go nap or binge Netflix or something.”

It’s the right move. She nods. “That would be good, honestly.”

“Cool. I’m on it. Give me your apron and get out of here. I’ll finish up and then we can head over to the house.”

She leans over to hug me. “Best sister ever.”

I’m a pretty rotten sister for begrudging her a hug from Levi when she’s trying to do so much, including help me. “Only sister ever. Now go.”

She almost sprints for the back exit. I love having my own place, and I love that I can offer it to her for some well-deserved rest. But anticipation for game night spreads through my chest like hot cocoa on a cold day, because I love being with my people, especially now that Levi is home.

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. So much so that even my reply to Joyce Hardy gets a liberal sprinkling of holiday cheer, and *that* is practically a Christmas miracle.

Chapter Four

Levi



“WELCOME, TAFTS!” MRS. BIXBY cries as she opens the front door. “Get in here before you freeze to death.”

It’s cold in Creekville. Not Moldova cold, but it’s in the thirties, which is enough to make me wish I’d put on a coat for the twenty-yard walk from my parents’ house.

“What’s up, doc?” Dr. Bixby asks as he clasps my dad’s hand.

“Not much, doc. How’s business?” my dad asks, returning the handshake.

“Nobody ever flosses, so it’s been a good year.”

They laugh, and I roll my eyes but smile. This is what passes for humor between a dentist and a family doctor.

We file into their family room, which is already set up with games stacked on the coffee table, the Wizards game muted on

the TV, and bowls of popcorn and other snacks on end tables. Sara is fiddling with a charcuterie board on the kitchen bar.

“Hey, Tafts,” she says.

“Hey. Where’s Taylor?” I ask. Our moms exchange a look, the kind of look elementary schoolers trade any time any boy talks to any girl. I ignore them like I have since they started doing this when I was *in* elementary school.

“Upstairs finishing bedtime with the boys,” Sara says.

“We won’t wake them up, will we?” my mom asks. Fair question since game nights get loud.

Sara shakes her head. “No. A big upside to how hard those boys go all day is that they’re out like lights when they fall asleep.”

“Can I interest anyone in a cranberry whiskey sour?” Dr. Bixby asks as my parents descend on the charcuterie board. He gets yeses from everyone except Mrs. Bixby, who opts for a glass of wine.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell them and head upstairs to find Taylor. I hear her before I even reach the landing, singing softly. Her voice is thin but sweet, and I follow it to Taylor’s old bedroom, where Sara’s twins sleep.

I lean against the wall out of sight. I don’t know a ton about kids, but they always seem curious, and I don’t want to be a distraction when Taylor’s trying to get them down. She finishes the lyrics to “Up on the Housetop,” and there’s a beat of silence.

Then a sleepy voice asks, “Tata, we’re going to see Santa’s weindeer, wight?”

Taylor’s long sigh tells me she’s probably been trying to get them to sleep for a while.

“Yes, Rome. Creekville has a special deal with Santa. As long as we have Christmas Town, he’ll always be here to light the tree.”

“The weal Santa?”

“The real Santa,” she says, her tone reassuring. “What are you going to ask him for?”

“Something special,” he says.

“Oh, yeah? Like what?”

Taylor’s working so hard to sound casual that it’s obvious this is an important question.

“I’ll tell *him*,” the little voice says.

“I know his address,” Taylor says. “I have to send him his Christmas Town invitation every year. If you want to draw a picture, I could mail it to him *before* Christmas Town.” Her voice is hopeful—even cajoling—but the little guy shoots that right down.

“No. I’ll tell weal Santa myself.”

“Sure,” she says, this time with a note of resignation. “Good plan. You ready for sleep, Rome?”

“One more song.”

There's a soft rustling, and I imagine they're settling into the covers more. Then Taylor begins "Silent Night," singing it slow and soft enough that I rest my head against the wall and relax. If this doesn't knock the kid out, he's not human.

It takes three verses, but when Taylor steps into the hall a few minutes later, she has a relieved smile on her face until she sees me and jumps.

"Sorry," I mouth.

She presses her hand to her heart and shakes her head, then jerks it toward the stairs. I follow her down.

"He was pretty much asleep when I slipped out," she tells Sara as we walk into the family room. "But I couldn't get his Christmas wish out of him."

Sara sighs and her shoulders droop slightly. "Thanks for trying."

"Don't worry, Sara," my mom tells her. "Put something new and shiny enough in front of him on Christmas morning and he'll be fine. Especially if it makes obnoxious noises." She points to me. "Ask me how I know."

Sara gives her a smile that looks so tired I want to tell her to go tuck in with her twins. "That would work with Gage, but Rome is a different situation. He hasn't been himself since Dean deployed, and the only thing that seems to make him feel better is talking about how Santa is going to bring him his wish. But he barely believes. One of the other kids at preschool whose family doesn't do Santa told him Santa

wasn't real, and now Rome is fixated on it. It's like he's hanging all his happiness on proving Santa is real, and his test is whether Santa can bring him a wish only he knows about."

My dad shakes his head. "It's probably not much comfort, but that's a pretty sophisticated test for a four-year-old to come up with. Smart boy."

"Don't I know it," Sara says. "They're both like that. That's why they're hard."

"Can't argue with that," Mrs. Bixby says. "They save all their creativity for getting into trouble."

"They were on top of Liz's car in the driveway when I got home today," Dr. Bixby adds. "Said it was a better stage because it was higher. I asked them better than what, and they said—"

"The kitchen table," Mrs. Bixby interjects, "because that's what I had just chased them off of, and they snuck out while I was busy wiping off their muddy footprints."

"They're so hard," Sara says, with a deep sigh.

"Honey, you're doing great if you get them to adolescence," Dr. Bixby says. "After that, you should probably send them to work with Dean every day. Let the army whip them into shape."

"I'm not sure they're ready for that level of combat," she says.

"The boys could handle it," Dr. Bixby says.

“I meant the army’s not ready,” Sara says.

“We’ll figure it out,” Taylor tells her after she’s done laughing. “Rome will spill to Santa next Friday, and between the four of us, we’ll be able to beg, borrow, or steal whatever it is Mr. Groggins tells us Rome wants.”

“I’ll help,” I say. “Even if it means going into any of the DC suburban supermalls, I can do it.”

“A man who will brave the malls two days before Christmas?” Mrs. Bixby says. “Not all heroes wear capes.”

“Count us in too,” my mom says. “I’ve got the gifts for Zeke’s kids already, so I’m itchy for another present procurement project.”

Sara looks from one face to the next, drops her eyes to the ground, snuffles, and takes a full ten seconds before she can look up again. “Thanks, y’all. Sincerely.”

“Enough of that,” Dr. Bixby says, rubbing his hands together. “I’m ready to kick butt and take names.”

We warm up with Ransom Notes, which has Sara in tears of laughter within twenty minutes, and Taylor watches her sister with a mixture of amusement and relief. I catch Taylor’s eye, and she smiles at me. I wonder if that smile is saying the same thing I’m thinking: that it’s been too long, that it was dumb for me to half-consciously avoid coming back home, that this feels right. That all is well.

My parents win the game and Dr. Bixby finally interrupts their gloating to inform them that they get to pick the next

game and the teams.

They bend their heads toward each other. Watching them scheme together reminds me I never should have gone this long without a visit.

They straighten, and the gleam in my mom's eye tells me what their choice is before she even announces, "Charades."

This is met with a hoot from Taylor, a groan from Sara, and the Bixbys shaking their heads. Charades is not the right word for the way our families play this game. Maybe full-contact sport? That should probably be played in an octagon? That fits better.

Anyway, my parents pick the teams, and it's parents against children.

I have been inside a tank rumbling into enemy-held territory that was less noisy than the next twenty minutes.

My parents—as usual—are the instigators, with my dad—the honorable and dignified town doctor—crawling around the floor at varying rates of speed, standing and swimming and maybe ...

"Is he eating air hamburgers?" Taylor asks as her parents holler things like "Michael Phelps having a stroke" and "broken windmill."

Sara is laughing too hard to answer, and when the timer on her phone goes off, my dad looks absolutely disgusted that his team didn't guess *Seabiscuit*.

“Really, Dad?” I say. “They were supposed to get Seabiscuit from a swimming sandwich?”

“I was *galloping*,” he says at a near yell, which sets Mrs. Bixby off laughing as hard as Sara.

“Fine, Mr. Expert Charades Guy. Let’s see what you got,” he says, sitting down in a way that makes the whole sofa sound like it’s huffing in indignation.

Sara and Taylor cheer. “Go, Levi,” Taylor says.

I draw a slip from the bowl and stare at the words. *I’m the king of the world.*

The parents show no mercy. “Time starts now,” my mom says.

I hold up six fingers. At first I try to show a boat sinking, but they guess “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” and Pearl Harbor. Finally, someone guesses *Titanic*, but they’re not getting the quote, even when I try walking around all cocky like Leonardo DiCaprio’s character. Exasperated, I grab Taylor, pull her up in front of me, stick her arms out like Kate Winslet on the bow of the *Titanic*, and stand behind her, hands on her waist.

Now, at least, they’re guessing close to the quote. “Oh, king! You’re the king of the ocean? What is the quote?” Sara smacks the side of her head.

Taylor sometimes seems taller than she is, probably because she’s always bursting with energy, always claiming her space in a room without trying. You can’t ever forget that she’s there, and you’re always half-primed for her to say something funny

or smart or insulting or all three. But as she's locked inside my arms, almost breathless with laughter, I'm aware of how small she is. I'm barely six feet tall—sometimes just under on a tired day—and the top of her head still barely reaches my chin.

I probably have seven inches and fifty pounds on her, but as her back shakes against my chest, she's so ... there. I can't even pretend this makes sense, for this slight woman to be filling my arms so completely, but she is. The warmth of her body beneath her soft sweater, the scent of baked cookies that trails her everywhere, the sound of her giggles as I pretend to put a crown on my head, then Taylor's head, in a wasted effort to get Sara to guess the quote. I forget to move for a few seconds, focusing on the feel of her against me. I make a big globe shape with my hands, but it's too late.

When my mom calls time, Taylor slides to the ground and rolls to her back, too weak from laughing to stand, grinning up at me and trying to speak.

“You were”—gasp of air—“that was so”—“I can't!” And then she's laughing too hard again.

Sara is giving me a look of disgust. “What even was that?”

I fold my arms over my chest and scowl from her down to Taylor. “Useless. Both of you.”

This only makes Taylor clutch her side and laugh harder.

I roll my eyes. “I'm the king of the world.”

My dad shakes his head. “Son, my swimming sandwich was closer to that than whatever you did up there. That scene

wasn't even with Kate Winslet. It was with his friend."

I reach down to pull Taylor up, but she bats my hand away and crawls to the couch, still grinning.

Sara stands. "This is going to take wine. Anyone else?"

All the parents' hands go up.

"Taylor, go help her with the glasses," Mrs. Bixby says.

"I got it," I tell Taylor. "You sit there and think about your behavior tonight." She giggles again and winces like it hurts to laugh at this point. "I don't feel sorry for you."

She pretends to scratch her eyebrow while making a rude gesture.

Sara and I head into the kitchen, but when my dad says, "Look at me, I'm the king of the world," there are more hoots and laughter, and I turn in the kitchen doorway to glare at them, trying to keep a straight face. Sara leans against the other side of the wide doorway, watching them.

"They might be drunk already," she says, smiling. "One cocktail and they're all ridiculous. Maybe we should cut them off."

"Mommy?"

We all turn toward the stairs, where one of her twins is standing, hair sticking up, big eyes looking worried.

"Hey, Gage. Did we wake you up, honey?" Sara asks.

His bottom lip quivers. "Oh no, Mommy." He points above us. We both glance up to see mistletoe. "You have to kiss, but

that's not Daddy."

Sara's smile softens and she hurries over to scoop him up. "We don't have to kiss, Gagey. That's just if people want to."

"No, you do," Gage says, and the light catches a tear trembling on his lashes. "It's the rule or you don't get your Christmas wish."

I throw a confused glance at Taylor. I haven't heard this tradition.

"That's what my dad tells my mom so she has to kiss him," Taylor explains.

Mrs. Bixby gets up from the sofa and walks over to Sara and Gage. She gives his leg a squeeze. "That's not the real rule, Gage. It's just Grandpa being silly."

But Gage is shaking his head. "No, there has to be kissing." His face crumples as he says with even more distress, "But that's not Daddy."

Not being Dean suddenly feels like the biggest failure of my life as Gage's tears fall. They're big, and he's not making any noise, but he looks absolutely brokenhearted.

Taylor jumps to her feet. "Your mom was just saving my place for me."

We made some questionable decisions the last time she and I were near mistletoe. I should find a way to get us out of this. But I watch her hurry toward me, already mouthing *Sorry* as Gage lifts his head, and I don't want to get us out of this. A

reckless part of me takes over and wants to see if I imagined how it went the last time.

“You’re going to kiss?” Gage asks.

If every single one of our parents wasn’t already paying attention, their heads would have swiveled toward us in perfect sync, I’m sure.

“They sure are,” my mom says, her eyes gleaming. It’s a distinctly plotty kind of gleaming.

Sara leaps at the lifeline Taylor has thrown her. “It’s okay that I was saving Tata’s place, right, little man?”

I dart my eyes to Taylor, who is now standing next to me, squinting up at the mistletoe. Does she realize she’s frowning? Makes a dude feel awesome. “Tata?” I ask quietly.

“Don’t even start,” she mutters.

“It’s okay,” Gage says. “Do a kiss now and fix Christmas.”

I drop my voice even lower and smirk at Taylor. “Stop making this awkward. You heard him. Christmas is on the line.” Then I lean down and drop a kiss at the corner of her mouth, getting a strong whiff of cookies for my trouble. She’s wary, and I don’t want to push this only to satisfy my curiosity.

It’s over so quickly that Taylor doesn’t even have a chance to react, her eyes barely starting to widen as I straighten. I give her a big close-lipped smile, like *See? Painless*. But I’m also keeping them pressed tight because if I don’t, they’ll soften and seek hers out again. This is not ideal.

I smile at Gage, trying to smooth over the nervous energy buzzing between Taylor and me. “Thanks for helping us remember the rule, buddy.”

But he’s frowning. “That’s not how Grandpa and Grandma do it.”

My dad snorts, and Sara shakes her head at her parents. “Y’all been married thirty-five years. Your conduct is unbecoming.”

“Ask me if I’m sorry,” Dr. Bixby says, grinning.

Taylor mutters again, and I scold her, barely above a whisper. “That’s a no-no word, Tata.”

She pokes me in the ribs, and I grunt.

“Gage, buddy, maybe you best explain how I should do this so we don’t go around messing up Christmas wishes,” I say.

Taylor glares at her dad.

“You have to push her almost all the way over and then do a long kiss that sounds like—” and he makes a noise that for as many sounds as I’ve had to describe from foreign lands, I wouldn’t even know how to replicate. Maybe a combination of humming and lip smacking?

“It’s a dip-and-smooch thing,” Sara says, her voice fading as Taylor directs her wrath-filled gaze her sister’s way.

I keep my expression grave even though I can tell my dad is about to lose it. “I understand,” I tell Gage. “It sounds like this

is very serious. So I dip back Tata, give her a loud, long smooch, and then we've got it?"

He nods his head. "Then when you're done, you pat her bum."

My dad is laughing now. "Well done, Warren."

"Take notes, dear," my mom says. But none of them take their eyes off us. "Go ahead and save Christmas, please, Levi."

This situation is now more funny to me than awkward. And honestly, I just had Taylor's soft, warm body doing all kinds of twisting and bumping against me for charades; it's the *audience* that makes her uncomfortable. Not me.

I slide an arm around her waist and pull her against me; having Taylor pressed against me from chest to knee is a very different experience from having her back pressed to me. Her eyes flash at me. Irritation, maybe?

"Say no if you want to, Tay," I tell her, my voice low.

"It's fine," she says with the slightest trace of martyrdom.

Something about it pricks my pride enough to make me decide to prove that I've had women *want* a second kiss.

"Merry Christmas, Taylor." I slide my free hand into her hair, around the base of her neck, and lean her back. She goes with it, grabbing my arms for balance. "I'm offended you think I can't hold you."

"Shut up and kiss me," she growls.

I know she means it as a warning, but it sends a lick of heat shooting up my spine and cements my half-baked decision. Instead of laying a comical, smacking kiss on her, I lower my head slowly, and her eyes get big.

“What are you—”

But I cut off the surprised whisper with a soft kiss, my lips brushing hers. She stiffens. “Trust me,” I whisper against her mouth.

Another beat and she relaxes slightly. I brush my lips over hers again, and this time, her soft breath feathers against mine, her hand tightening on my bicep.

“Is that enough?” I hear Sara ask, but she sounds far away, like I’m listening to her through a tunnel.

“Almost,” Gage says, and I’m going to make sure that kid gets extra pumpkin pie at Christmas dinner.

I settle my lips more firmly over Taylor’s, not off to the side like the first time. And she kisses me back.

There is no mistaking the pressure of her mouth, and the distant tunnel sound of the other people in the room disappears, buried beneath the loud drumbeat of my blood pulsing in my ears. I slide my fingers holding the back of her head with barely any pressure, only enough to create a gentle scraping along her nape. She gives the tiniest tremor, and an indrawn breath that invites me to explore between her slightly parted lips. I do, stealing a taste of her, which wins a small sound from her. It is not a protest, and I’m about to go back for

more when Gage's voice—remarkably piercing for a human not yet in kindergarten—says, “Good job, Tata. You did it.”

She presses lightly against my chest, and I draw back, my eyes searching hers as they flutter open. She clears her throat. “We did it.”

“We did it,” I repeat softly.

“Right. So ...” She gives another light push, and I straighten and set her on her feet.

Sara's gaze dances back and forth between Taylor and me, but she only says, “All good, Gage?”

“Bum pat,” he says.

Taylor's eyes are speaking murder if I do it, but I shrug, like *Sorry, not the boss here*. I draw my hand back and she takes a step forward right when I would have connected with her jeans.

“And there's the pat,” she says. It must have been convincing enough for Gage because he rests his head on Sara's shoulder, his eyes at half-mast.

“How about now?” she asks. “Christmas wishes are still coming true?”

“Yes.” Then his eyes widen and his head pops straight up. “Oh no. I forgot to tell everyone to wish for Rome's wish to come true. We need to do it again.”

Well, the rules are the rules. I'm game.

Dr. Bixby, apparently less entertained than Sara was by me kissing his younger daughter, claps his hands. “Good thing that’s what I wished for anyway.”

“Me too,” Mrs. Bixby says.

All the other adults rush to assure Gage that it’s what they all wished for too, trying to get us out of another mistletoe kiss. I really, *really* don’t want their help with that.

“I’m going to get him back to bed,” Sara says, setting Gage on the stairs and starting up behind him. “Choose something *quiet* to play without me.”

They disappear, leaving Taylor and me standing beneath the mistletoe with the gazes of all four of our parents on us.

Taylor clears her throat. “Codenames?”

Mrs. Bixby blinks at us a couple of times, then slides the game from the stack. “Codenames.”

The rest of the night goes fine, wrapping up after two rounds of Codenames just as Sara rejoins us.

“He’s down again. Sorry about that, guys. Am I a party pooper if I say I’m too tired to play another game?”

“Nope,” Taylor says, practically shooting to her feet. “I need to head home and answer Christmas Town emails anyway.”

“I’ll walk you out,” I say before anyone else can.

She opens her mouth like she’s going to protest but shuts it and turns and walks out.

“You don’t have to walk me out in my own parents’ house,” she says when we get to the front door.

She reaches for the handle, but I beat her to it, clasp it and keep the door shut.

“Are we going to talk about it this time?” I ask.

She doesn’t pretend to not know what I mean. “Not necessary,” she tells my collarbone.

“Taylor.” I wait until she meets my eyes. “Last time we didn’t talk about this, I didn’t come home for four years.”

She draws her head back. “That’s why you stayed away?”

“It’s part of it, I’m realizing. Not doing that again.”

“You don’t have to. You didn’t have to last time. It’s fine, Levi. We stepped in and helped a stressed kid. Doesn’t need a conversation.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “And last time?”

She studies my collarbone again. After several long seconds, she shrugs. “Rum.”

“That’s it?” I don’t want to leave this alone. Not with the realization that avoiding a simple conversation did more to keep me bouncing around Europe than I’d acknowledged to myself until now. “This is the second time we’ve found ourselves in this position. And neither of us drank enough to pretend that was really about helping out a kid.”

She pushes past me and opens the door. “It was for me. Don’t make it weird, Levi.” Then she slips out of the door and

tries to pull it shut, but I catch it and watch her hustle down the walkway.

“Too late,” I call to her as she skims around the front of her car. “It wasn’t just me. And I know where you work.”

She stares at me over the roof of her car before she licks her lips and says, “Let it go or I’m cutting you off from cocoa.”

I clutch at my heart to let her know her threat has hit home. “You’re a cold woman, Taylor.”

She gives me a sweet smile—sweet enough to be rotten—and gets into her car and drives away.

“This isn’t over,” I tell her disappearing taillights. Not even close.

Chapter Five

Taylor



I HEAD DOWN TO open the café at 6:00 like I do every morning, even though I was up until midnight answering emails and didn't sleep great after that. Tossing. Turning. Replaying that kiss. Burning with mortification every time I remembered moaning.

Moaning. I *moaned*. Levi Taft kissed me, and I moaned. In front of him. And our parents. All of them.

So do I want to talk about that? No.

Or about how I wished we'd had to do it one more time for Rome's wish too?

All the no. NOPE to the NUH-UH.

I flip on the counter lights and preheat my two commercial ovens, then move on to the other machines I'll need. The grinders. The espresso maker. The batch brew coffee maker. I start a cycle of old coffee running through them to make sure

the cleaning agent from closing yesterday is out of the system. I'll do that twice, just to be sure. No one needs to be woken up by the taste of soap in their java.

While it cycles, I pull the doughs that Jena, my night baker, has left rising for a loaf of honey wheat bread and another for sourdough. One of the hardest things to learn my first year was how to anticipate demand so that I'm not left with too many unsold baked goods at closing. We start with two fresh loaves each day, and only bake another one when the first is three-quarters gone. While they bake, I shape and twist the cinnamon rolls and deliver them to the oven so they'll finish a few minutes after opening. Then I fill the bakery cabinets with the goods that can be served at room temperature and go to test the old coffee for any taste of cleaning agent.

These activities carry the weight of ritual, each one anchoring me to the new day, a routine I need more than ever this morning. I feel myself coming together, the buzzing feeling quieting in my mind, my jumpiness settling into fluid movements as I shape the bread loaves. By the time I'm mixing up my first batch of cranberry blondies, I am me again, and I give my first customer of each day, Dr. Boone, principal at the high school, the usual smile as she comes in for her coffee and flaxseed muffin before braving the youths of Creekville.

Celia comes in at 7:30 as business picks up and takes over barista duties so I can cook the breakfast orders. It's a limited menu with a couple of omelet and egg choices that don't

change, but they're popular, and I like cooking them myself, although Celia is fully capable of doing it too.

The morning follows its normal rhythm, the last wave of customers being the busy moms who swing through after elementary school drop-off to treat themselves to their morning coffee. The traffic tapers around 9:30 as usual, and we'll have a couple of light hours before we get a lunch rush.

I'm as grounded as my fresh coffee beans now, and I've worked out what to do about kissing Levi—again. It's not new ground. Like every other time since high school when I've felt a crush on him trying to form, I'll ignore it. If Levi comes around today, it'll be Taylor-and-Levi-as-usual.

Relief ripples through me when I reach this conclusion, which is how I know it's the right one. It makes the rest of the morning far easier to deal with. Anytime my brain tries to replay any part of last night, I hum "Feliz Navidad" loudly, because while it's wildly cheerful, it is zero percent romantic. It's very hard to feel how much a kiss shook you when you're humming that melody.

Not that the kiss shook me. Not like in an "Oh, Levi!" swoony way. Just in a "Well, that was awkward" kind of way.

This works well until the day delivers a plot twist: Levi himself. He arrives with Sara right after the lunch rush. My stomach flips, and I realize it has been getting none of my brain's messages about how we feel about that kiss. And seeing Levi. Who, unfortunately, looks like he's been created

by an AI prompt that said “Make a man who is Taylor’s perfect physical type.”

I don’t like musclebound guys or dudes who look like they spend more time on their grooming routines than I do. I like smart guys. And funny ones. And Levi is both of those things, but now wrapped in the perfect package of being tall but not too tall, good-looking without being distractingly beautiful, and lanky without being twiggy. Today, he’s wearing gray jeans with a navy cardigan open over a white thermal shirt, all beneath a black fleece-lined hoodie.

It’s not fair. He’s practically been assembled from a kit of all my favorite things. Also totally unfair that he can pull off a cardigan. They are for grandpas. They look *right* on grandpas. The only semi-young guy I see wearing them is Henry Hill, but he’s a college professor of old things. And, yes, he’s kind of the same “type” as Levi, so I get why Paige Redmond snapped him up when they became neighbors last year, but honestly, I never could get past his cardigans. So why is it fine when Levi wears one? I’d bet anything it’s his dad’s, but here he is, making “kindly town doctor’s cardigan” look like a new trend.

“Hey, Taylor,” he says as Sara goes to put her stuff in my office. “You busy?”

“Yeah, sorry.” But my mind blanks, and I stand there.

He narrows his eyes. “Doing what?”

I glance around. “Blondie stuff.” I grab the tray of them out of the case. They’re already iced with a citrus-infused cream

cheese frosting, and *that* is already topped with drizzled white chocolate, but they need more. Right now. This very second. “Sorry about that.”

I disappear into the kitchen as Sara comes out, looking at me weird when I pass with the tray. “Gotta pep these up,” I say, letting the door swing shut between us.

I chop white chocolate then melt it in slow increments in the microwave, dip a fork into it, and drizzle it over the cookie bars. Is it too much? I frown at it. Yes. Yes, it is. But since the other option is going back out there, I drizzle more.

The door swings open, and Levi walks in. I’m working at the stainless steel prep table in the middle of our kitchen space, and he settles against the counter opposite me, leaning with his legs crossed at the ankles, like he’s here to model his stupid cardigan. “Hey. Need help?”

“It’s a one-woman job, but thanks.”

“Is it hard?” he asks.

“Not really.”

“Oh good, so you can talk at the same time.”

I freeze, which causes a large blob of white chocolate to fall on the blondie. It oozes there, deflated, like my hopes of avoiding an awkward conversation.

I set the fork back in the bowl with a sigh and look at Levi. “Okay. Shoot.”

Levi's eyebrows go up, like he was expecting to have to work harder. "So, last night."

"Game night?" I say, like I'm unsure what he's talking about. He smiles, which is what I was going for.

"Yeah, game night. Your mom cheated hard at Codenames, yeah?"

"Always."

"Oh, and also we kissed."

I pretend to be trying to remember. "Was that last night?"

"Yeah. What do you think about that?"

I smirk at him. "Are you here for a *performance* review?"

He rolls his eyes. "No. I'm a good kisser."

"Cocky much?"

He sighs. "Do you need someone to tell you you're a good kisser?"

"No."

"I don't either. But probably we should talk about it, since we're both so amazing at kissing, to make sure we haven't rocked each other's worlds to the point of making it uncomfortable. For example, it would be a shame if that whole situation last night made you feel like you need to avoid me anytime I drop by the café."

"I only came back here because I was trying to be respectful of you," I say.

Now he sends up an eyebrow that clearly means *I don't buy it*.

That's the trouble with lying to someone you've known your entire life; they can always tell. "Fine. It was kind of weird. But thanks to this conversation, I'm over it."

A muscle in his jaw jumps, something that usually happens when he's frustrated, but a split second later, his mouth twitches up on one side in a half-smile. "Just like that?"

I shrug and pick up my drizzle fork again, going back to work. "Yep. We're good. I'm not going to do anything weird like leave for four years and not come back."

"Really? We're playing hardball?"

I flick a glance at him. "You came in here wanting to talk."

"I always thought middle school peer pressure was the worst, but that's only because I can't remember preschool. That's clearly the pro leagues."

I laugh. "So we didn't want to kiss each other, neither of them counts, you can come back to Creekville anytime from now on, and I'm never drinking eggnog again."

I expect him to laugh and agree, but he's quiet for a long moment. When I look up from decorating, his eyes are fixed on me, an expression I can't read on his face. It's not happy or sad. It's kind of a thoughtful look, maybe? Like he's considering something? But I have no idea what.

"I'm glad we're good," he finally says. "My latest story got me thinking about roots and priorities, and I made it a point to

come home. You are a big part of that.”

A warmth washes over me, and it feels way too similar to the warmth of him pulling me against him last night. I silently curse him, Gage, my parents, his parents, and Sara for leading me to this kind of confusion. But only my body is confused. My brain is clear on how these two situations are different. All I have to do is keep reminding it the facts every time it wants to interpret a flood of affection as a wave of attraction. Levi and I are friends. End of story.

“I’m sure your parents are so happy you’re back. Even *my* parents are so happy you’re back.”

“And you? You’re glad I’m back?”

I flick some chocolate at him, and it spatters on his hand. “Of course, wonderboy.”

“Glad to hear it, weirdo. No more avoiding me?”

“Of course not.” I’m lying. We’re good, but it’ll be easier to stick to seeing him at family gatherings until my body behaves more responsibly.

“Then put me to work on Christmas Town stuff. I’m dying for something to do.”

“If you’re dumb enough to ask ...”

“Lay it on me.”

“Great. You can go hunt down Jeff Brume and find out why I haven’t heard back from him confirming the switch to LED lights on the Christmas tree.”

“On it,” he says. “But I’m stealing one of these as payment.”
He snatches a blondie and saunters out of the kitchen.

I smile. Levi can help as much as he wants, but I’m already working up a long list of things to do that will have him hanging out everywhere but here. Our talk was a good start, but it’s going to take more time than that to get back to where we used to be, Levi-and-Taylor who had no idea what the other one’s Christmas-flavored kisses tasted like.

I’m going to have to work off this curse of knowledge. Then everything will be fine.

Chapter Six

Levi



TAYLOR TOTALLY LIED TO me.

We're more okay now than if I hadn't gone in to talk to her about game night but not as okay as if we had never kissed. Twice.

Which is stupid. And kind of my fault. I want to say that I'd take both of them back if I'd known it was going to cause a strain between us. But I can't. That would be a lie.

I'm not sorry.

But Taylor is still in her regret era; she's making sure everything she gives me to do keeps me out of the café.

It's been two days of this, and that's enough.

I'd have wandered over to her parents' place on Sunday and invited myself to dinner, except her car never makes an appearance in the driveway. I'm ready to borrow my dad's car and go knock on her apartment door, but my mom decides

we're doing a family viewing of *White Christmas* when I'm about to ask for the keys.

We did a family movie every Sunday growing up, and she was so excited to have me there for one that I didn't have the heart to disappoint her.

But it's Monday afternoon now, and after spending the whole morning helping Mom reorganize her laundry room, I have no guilt about heading over to the café after lunch. I've already figured out this is their slow time, and Sara is happy for me to hitch a ride with her.

"Did you get to talk to Dean yesterday?" I ask. She'd mentioned that Sundays were when they got a chance to FaceTime.

"Yeah." But she doesn't sound happy about it.

"Not that it's my business, but is something wrong?"

She shoots me a tight smile and apologetic look as she pulls out of the neighborhood. "No. Yes. But it makes me sound like a crazy woman, so let's go with no."

"If it helps, I've thought you were a loony tune since I was in seventh grade, so you can tell me without it changing my opinion of you at all."

She laughs. "The Ty Holden Incident. You deserved every ounce of that manure."

I grin. She'd been a sophomore, on a date—almost—with the boy she'd been crushing on for a year. Ty wasn't that into her. He'd asked her out because it was an easy yes, which

Taylor and I knew because his brother in our grade told us. But Taylor didn't want to tell Sara because she didn't want her to feel humiliated.

Naturally, we'd decided we'd humiliate Ty instead. "Still some of our best work," I tell Sara.

It had involved waiting for him to come pick her up, then me stumbling out of the front door as he knocked to spew vomit all over him. We'd made a vinegar and canned dog food smoothie and microwaved it so it had that fresh-from-my-stomach warmth. Then Taylor had followed me out of the house shrieking like a maniac to keep him from noticing the "vomit" was actually being poured from a cup tucked inside my jacket. I enjoyed the memory of the warm spew hitting his chest. And crotch. And Air Jordans.

Turned out, Ty was a sympathetic puker: the smell and my retching noises made him throw up over the porch railing into Mrs. Bixby's lantana bush. Ty had left reeking of Alpo and too much Old Spice. We'd have gotten away with it too if we'd remembered to rinse out the blender. I honestly think it was using Mrs. Bixby's Vitamix that got us in real trouble, and we had to spend the next morning fertilizing her flower beds. *Natural* fertilizer that Dr. Bixby drove us to a friend's farm to shovel from his cow pasture into bins and bring back.

Still smelled better than Ty Holden had when he left.

"You still don't think you owe us a thank you?" I teased. Ty Holden now ran the only "gentlemen's club" in Roanoke. As my mom says every time it comes up—and vomit stories

always come up, pun intended—“not that you could find a gentleman in there if your life depended on it.”

“He called me E. Coli for the rest of high school,” she says. The first time she’d caught wind of his nickname for her, she’d come home and hollered at Taylor and me for almost twenty minutes straight until Mrs. Bixby took her to the salon for a manicure as a bribe to calm her down.

“Only makes my point,” I say.

“Fair,” she says, smiling. “You’re right.”

“So is Dean okay?”

“He’s fine.” She sighs. “I know this doesn’t make any sense, and I know I should be grateful that we have the technology to keep in touch so we’re not waiting every week for letters. But those calls ... the boys live for them, but then after, they’re always worse. They both get so sad, and they don’t know how to deal with that, and it comes out in ... well, let me put it this way: I spent most of last night cleaning crayon graffiti off the walls in the upstairs hall, and that’s been one of the easier disasters.”

“Makes sense to me,” I said. “I spend enough time around soldiers to get it. They look forward to each call with their families so much, but they’re always in a funk after. But at least they have an outlet for their feelings. Guaranteed, whichever guy you see going hardest on his workout is the guy who most recently got off a call with his wife or kids.”

She nods. “Thanks for that side of it. It helps.”

“Sure. For what it’s worth, it’s still those calls that keep most of those guys going.”

Another nod. “Yeah. I know he’s in an area that’s safe. I know he’ll wrap up his tour in three months, totally safe and sound, but those three months feel even longer than the nine he’s already been gone.”

“I’m sure it’s even harder at Christmas.”

She doesn’t speak for a minute, and I sense that she’s getting her feelings under control. “For me, it is. I miss him. I wish he didn’t have to miss a Christmas with the boys, ever. But for them, all the holiday stuff is exciting, so it’s been good to help keep their minds off stuff. And it’s been so great for them to have Christmas Town to look forward to.”

“Any luck getting Rome’s wish out of him?”

“No.” She makes the turn into the parking lot behind the café. “I really, really hope I can pull off whatever it is he wants.”

“Mall warrior.” I thump my chest. “We got you.”

She gives another small laugh, but it does sound less stressed. “Thank you, Levi. You’re the real MVP.”

We park and walk into the café, and I’m guessing the over/under on how long it will take Taylor to give me a job that sends me out of the café. I’m betting on just over a minute. She’s sent me on at least four different tasks that she could have handled with an email, but I haven’t called her on it.

That changes today.

But when I walk through the café door, she's not behind the counter. Celia is. "Hey, y'all. Christmas Town drama started early today. She's in her office on a call."

"Poor Taylor," Sara says. "This is crunch week. Let's go see what's up." She waves for me to follow her. "Probably the band director complaining about the weather this weekend."

"It's definitely chilly today," I say. It's at least ten degrees colder than when I got into town Thursday.

"There's a cold front moving down from Canada or something," she says. "I haven't paid as much attention because I'm already in Creekville, not trying to figure out if the weather conditions will keep me from getting here in time for Christmas."

I can hear Taylor through the partially open office door, and Sara and I trade looks. Taylor's speaking at a normal volume, but her tone is ... off. Pleading, maybe?

"Mr. Earl, I understand why you'd want to be cautious, but the town has never been so excited for Christmas Town, and it's all because of your reindeer. They loved having two, but eight? It's literally been the talk of Creekville."

Sara's eyes grow wider, and she hurries forward to open the office door all the way. Taylor holds up a finger to tell her to wait, her face a wreath of frowns as she listens.

"I get that, sir. I really do. And I don't want you to put your health at risk. I'm hoping there may be an employee you trust

to bring the reindeer down and oversee everything. We'd be happy to pay a bonus for his trouble since this is last-minute."

There's an unmistakable emphasis on the last two words. It's obvious what the problem is, and I'm only surprised she's not *more* stressed. She listens again, worry lines showing up around her eyes now.

"But Mr. Earl, there is so much riding on this." She darts a look at Sara, but I have a feeling it's her little nephew on her mind. "Please, isn't there anything that we can do to make this happen?" Another long listening pause. "A reindeer handler. Right." She slumps. "No, I understand. I respect that you want to keep your animals safe." More listening. "Can't say as I do understand gout, no." Listening. "I understand, sir."

She rests her elbow on her desk and massages her temples. "I understand," she repeats. "But I hope you also understand that I'll be requiring the return of the fee we've already paid you." She listens. "No, sorry. You get to keep the deposit if we fail to meet *our* end of the contract. I really do sympathize with being sick, but I can't let you keep the town's money because I feel bad. Good. Glad we're clear on that." Another pause. "Yeah, you too. Merry Christmas."

She hangs up the phone and her head droops until her forehead rests on the desk.

"I've never heard such a sad 'Merry Christmas,'" I tell her.

"You too can sound this pathetic if you imagine the looks on the faces of your twin nephews when they find out there are no

reindeer coming this Friday. Then you try saying ‘Merry Christmas.’ Super effective.”

“So there’s a problem with the reindeer?” Sara asks. It’s that tone that says she’s trying to fake calm when she’s very anxious about the answer.

Taylor doesn’t even look up. “Yes. The reindeer man has the flu. Came down with it yesterday. Says sixty-five isn’t too old to survive the flu, but it’s too old to handle the reindeer while getting over it.”

“Fair enough.” Sara sags against the office doorframe. “He doesn’t have a backup reindeer person?”

Taylor sits up and fixes Sara with an apologetic look. “I’m sorry. I tried everything. He says he has a grandnephew who helps him out, but he’s seventeen, and Mr. Earl trusts him local, but not for a long trip like this. It’s a four-hour drive.”

“Rome will be okay if the reindeer don’t come, but he won’t believe Mr. Groggins is the real Santa, so he’s not going to tell him his wish. He’ll count on ‘real’ Santa guessing it, and he’s not going to be okay if Santa doesn’t. And that means a double disappointment on Christmas. No special gift and no more belief in Santa. And he’ll take Gage down too.” She leans her head against the doorframe. “Sorry, Tay. Not trying to make you feel worse. I know you can’t do anything about it.”

Poor kid. I want to help. Maybe ... “Have you tried—” I start.

“Yes,” they both say together.

“We’ve sicced my parents on him, Dean via Facetime, letters to Santa, apps that let you ‘call’ Santa, all of it,” Taylor says. “He’s only talking to the ‘real’ Santa, and apparently, that Santa has reindeer, end of discussion for Rome.”

Sara gives me a tired smile. “I know it sounds ridiculous. If this were any other year, I’d be fine with talking about who Santa really is, but this year...” She looks at the floor, struggling to control her emotions. “This year is so hard for them with Dean gone, and they’re still so young. I was hoping I could give them at least this one thing to look forward to. Have at least one more year before they grow out of believing.”

“There’s nothing we can do?” I ask Taylor. “Could you try your old reindeer, uh, supplier?”

She shoots a look at Sara. “It’s a long shot,” she warns, “but if they have reindeer available, it’ll be two at best. That’s why I tried this new place.”

Sara gives her an encouraging nod. “Rome would be happy with two. We’ll tell him the other reindeer are...training?”

“I’ll give it a shot.” She looks through her phone for a number, takes a deep breath and makes the call.

After a short conversation, it’s a bust.

“They don’t have any available,” Taylor says, setting her phone down. “And they made sure to get in a dig about how if I was a loyal client, they’d be able to do more for me. So

basically, unless either of you knows a reindeer wrangler, I'm out of moves."

I hesitate, then I raise my hand. She and Sara look at me with confused expressions.

"This isn't class, Levi," Taylor says. "You don't have to raise your hand to ask questions."

"I'm not," I tell her. "I have reindeer-wrangling experience."

There's a long silence while Taylor stares at me. Then she looks at Sara while digging into her ear with a pinky. "It sounded like he said he had reindeer-wrangling experience."

Sara shakes her head. "No. That wouldn't make sense. He said he wears reindeer Wranglers."

"How does that make any more sense?" I ask, but Taylor's nodding.

"Girls go nuts for Wrangler butts," she says. "Levi would definitely chick bait them with Wranglers."

"You can just say you don't want my help," I tell them.

"We love your help in general," Taylor says. "But we're talking about real live reindeer here."

"Guess I don't need to ask if you read everything I write." I slide my phone from my back pocket and do a quick search, annoyed with myself for being the tiniest bit hurt that Taylor doesn't remember this article. I pull it up and hand her the phone.

"What is it?" Sara asks.

“On the remote Russian peninsula of Kamchatka, a gentle but fierce nomadic people tend to their herds as their ancestors have for centuries. Not sheep or goats. Not even cows. The Even people—this land’s indigenous tribe—watch over reindeer,” she reads aloud.

She glances at me, looks back to the phone, skims further, then sets it on her desk. “You’re saying you’ve spent time watching people herd reindeer?”

“I’m saying I’ve spent time wrangling reindeer with my own two hands,” I tell her.

Sara slowly lifts a finger and pokes my arm. “Who are you?”

“Levi the Reindeer Wrangler.” I do halfhearted spirit fingers.

“You’re for real,” Taylor says. I watch the realization dawning on her face. “Would you—”

“Go to Mr. Earl’s house to wrangle reindeer and save Christmas? What else is a world-class journalist and high school best friend for?”

“Seriously?” Hope drives up her inflection at the end.

I shrug. In less than two seconds, I’m squished in a Bixby sandwich as Sara and Taylor compete to squeeze me the hardest.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” they say, tripping over each other’s words.

I work an arm free and pat Taylor’s head. “I’m doing it for the twins, of course.”

They let me go, and Taylor grins at me. “Of course. Let me see if Mr. Earl will go for that.”

It turns out the answer is yes, but only after Taylor puts me on the phone to answer his questions about the care and feeding of reindeer to his satisfaction. It’s a long conversation, and I sort of feel like I’ve done an oral defense of a master’s thesis in reindeer wrangling before Mr. Earl begins to sound too tired to be on the phone.

“All right, son,” Mr. Earl says. “If you and Miss Taylor will agree to listen to whatever my nephew tells you to do, and you’ll turn around and bring those deer back to me Sunday after resting them up in a large enough barn somewhere local to yourselves, then I suppose I can agree to that.”

We’ve been on speaker this whole time, and Taylor swoops in to speak directly to him. “It’s a deal, Mr. Earl. Thank you for working with us on this.”

He coughs and gives a phlegmy snuffle. “I try to be in the business of saving Christmas whenever I can.”

“You’ve certainly done that here, Mr. Earl,” she tells him. “I’ll email you with further details later today.”

I end the call, and Taylor and I stare at each other, both of us smiling.

Celia’s head pokes in from the kitchen. “Sorry, could use some help, Sara.”

Sara immediately heads out, but Taylor gets up to follow, so I do too. We all emerge behind the coffee bar to find that the

line at the register is four people deep, including a face I know very well.

“Mrs. Green,” I say, hurrying around the counter to the elderly woman standing in line. Although elderly doesn’t feel like the right word. She’s at least eighty now, and she has a head covered in snowy white curls, but between her perfect posture and the twinkle in her eye, it’s hard to think of Lily Green as old. She’s more like timeless.

“You may call me Miss Lily, Levi,” she says, holding out her arms and turning her cheek up for a kiss.

I hug her and drop the expected kiss on her cheek. “You remember me.”

“It hasn’t been *that* long since you were last in town,” she says. “Besides, I’m not likely to forget one of the most brilliant writers I ever taught, am I?”

In one of the luckiest strokes of my life, I’d had Lily Green for sophomore English in her last year before retirement. “You are being way too generous, Mrs. Green.”

“First of all, it’s Miss Lily,” she corrects me. “You’re not my student anymore.”

“You’re always going to be my teacher,” I say, but when she fixes me with her finely honed teacher “look” that only proves my point, I quickly add, “but I’ll call you Miss Lily.”

She gives a satisfied nod. “Secondly, have you ever known me to be given to empty flattery?”

“No, ma’am.”

“You’re a brilliant writer if I say you are. Now come sit with me while I drink my tea.”

“Oh, but do you need to order?”

She waves at the register. “Taylor knows my order. Come and visit.”

We sit and catch up, and it reminds me how much I adore this tiny woman. I’m floored to discover she’s kept up with my work.

“Why wouldn’t I?” she asks, twinkling at me again. “I bought a subscription to *World View* so I can read your articles. You truly have a gift, Levi Taft.”

Taylor arrives with a cup of tea and one of those cursed blondies. “Here you are, Miss Lily.”

I groan at the sight of the blondie and rub my stomach. “Worst thing that’s happened to me in forever.”

“Because of deliciousness?” Miss Lily asks, eyebrow arched.

“Because of deliciousness,” I confirm.

“Agreed. It’s a terrible thing she’s done to us with these things. You’ll have to eat half of mine, of course.”

“I can’t. I think I’ve reached my cranberry blondie limit. For the decade.”

She purses her lips. “Hmm. You’d rather be responsible for a little old woman developing type 2 diabetes by making her eat the whole thing alone?”

“Definitely not,” Taylor says, picking up the untouched fork and dividing it in half. “Do your good deed, Levi.”

“Indeed, Levi,” Miss Lily says.

I reach for my half and settle it on a napkin in front of me. “I mean, someone’s gotta be the hero.”

“Taylor, you’ll come back and tell me what’s got you so stressed out when the line dies down,” Miss Lily says.

“It’s nothing,” she says.

Miss Lily’s eyebrow goes up again. “You, my dear, always wear a cheerful face. You’d think nothing ever went wrong for you, ever. So if I can tell something is off by looking at you, it is. And it’s not small. Come back when the crowd settles down.”

Taylor’s mouth falls slightly open as Miss Lily delivers this pronouncement. She blinks at her, then at me. I shrug. I’ve already been Lily Green-ed. I clearly can’t help.

“Okay.” Taylor nods. “Back in a bit.”

Miss Lily and I chat about her grandkids. I know Landon somewhat. We’d see each other at the community pool sometimes when he spent summers with his grandmother.

Ten minutes later, Taylor moves a chair over to join us.

“Tell me your Christmas Town woes, dear,” Miss Lily says.

Taylor gives her a wry grin. “You don’t miss a trick, do you?”

Miss Lily gives her a knowing smile. “I’ve played bridge with Glynnis Hunsaker every week for fifteen years. I know exactly what a beast this tradition is, and it has to be the problem this close to Christmas.”

Taylor sighs and tells her about the call from the reindeer guy and the hastily formed plan to save the situation.

“It sounds like an efficient solution,” Miss Lily says. “Why do you still look stressed?”

“Because I’m realizing I can’t leave my business and the whole town four days before the huge event I’ve been putting out fires for all month.”

“You’re fine, Taylor Bixby. Look.” She nods toward the coffee counter. Sara is ringing up the last customer in the backup, and Celia is already filling the order. “Are they willing to cover for you while you’re gone?”

“Yes.”

“And do you trust them to?”

“Of course. But that’s a lot of hours, and—”

“They’ll be fine,” Miss Lily says in a way that allows for no argument. “Your biggest headache is the riot you’ll have if there are no cranberry blondies for three days.”

“My mom can make them,” Sara calls. “Who do you think taught Taylor to bake?”

“Then there’s no problem,” Miss Lily says.

Taylor's forehead is still a mess of worried furrows. "There's all the Christmas Town stuff, and—"

"Refer them all to me," Miss Lily says.

Taylor sits back in her seat. "I'm sorry?"

"You're not one of those young people who thinks senior citizens can't get things done, are you?" Miss Lily asks.

"No one, and I mean not a soul in this town, would ever think that of you, Miss Lily," Taylor says.

"Seconded," I add.

"Good," Miss Lily says, then pauses to sip her tea. "Did I not tell you I listened to Glynnis go on about this for years? I know everyone involved, from the mayor to Mr. Groggins. If you get an email or phone call, forward them to me. I can handle it for two days while you fetch reindeer."

I wait for Taylor to object, but she sits in silence, studying Miss Lily. "Everyone will do what you tell them, won't they?"

Miss Lily smiles. "Yes. Except Joyce Hardy. But I can handle her."

"Oh, she's already had her outburst this week," Taylor says.

"Suggestive birdcalls. Rotary club," I explain.

"Ah," Miss Lily says. "That would do it. I do hope you told the Rotary Club to make their display extra prominent and possibly even demonstrate them anytime Joyce is near?"

"That seems to be Mr. Winters's plan," I tell her.

“Then the rest of the week will be easy,” Miss Lily says. “Not to take anything away from you, Taylor. You’ve been doing a fine job. But now you must go on a reindeer rescue mission.”

Taylor stares at Miss Lily with something like awe. Then her eyes meet mine, and a smile turns up the corners of her lips. “This is going to work,” she says.

I nod. It’s hard to doubt Miss Lily.

“I can’t thank you enough, Levi,” Taylor says, reaching over to clasp my forearm. She leans forward, her eyes serious. “When you walked in on that call, I was sure Christmas was wrecked for the town *and* Rome. I can never repay you for this. You’ve got a favor to call in for life. Multiple favors, even!”

Miss Lily notes Taylor’s hand on my arm and takes another sip from her tea cup, but I could swear it’s hiding a smile.

“Oh, you can repay me, all right,” I tell Taylor. “You’re coming to my parents’ house after the café closes and breaking the news to my mom that you’re hijacking me for a few days after she barely got me back.”

She gets a hunted look. “You have a dragon I can slay instead or something?”

“Nope.”

“But your mom is going to kill me.”

“There’s a good chance, yeah.” When she looks like she’s second-guessing this whole plan, I add, “Remember the kids,

Taylor.”

She casts a beseeching look at Miss Lily.

“I’m sorry,” Miss Lily says. “That one is beyond my abilities. But remember the kids.”

Taylor squares her shoulders. “For the kids.”

I nod. “For the kids.”

“So, um, when is your mom less likely to be violent when I drop this on her?”

“Never. You’re most likely dead meat.”

“Levi ...” It’s pretty much a whine.

“For the kids, Bixby?”

She heaves a deep sigh. “For the kids.”

Chapter Seven

Taylor



LEVI AND I STARE at Dr. Taft and my dad poring over a road map spread on my parents' kitchen table. It's one of those old ones that folds down from the size of Antarctica to the size of one of my dad's Invisalign brochures—assuming you're an expert in complex origami.

“What do you think?” I ask Levi as we watch. “Do we break the news to them about map apps?”

“You know the only thing worse than your smartass kid?” Dr. Taft says to my dad.

“Your neighbor's smartass kid?” my dad asks.

“Bah dum dum.” Levi drums out a rimshot on the counter.

“None of y'all are funny,” I inform them.

“I better hear some courtesy laughs for my husband coming from you, Taylor Bixby,” Mrs. Taft calls from the TV room, where our moms are glued to the Weather Channel.

“Hahaha,” I laugh, making it sound nervous. “Do I sound sufficiently humbled and also scared of you?” I call back.

“It’ll do,” she answers.

Levi and I exchange smiles. She’d taken it about as well as we could have hoped. I only had to promise to help her plant her entire garden in April as penance.

A minute later, she and my mom appear in the kitchen.

“What’s the good word?” Dr. Taft asks.

“There isn’t one,” my mom says. “That storm is definitely coming.”

“It’s okay, Mama B,” Levi says, and she gives him narrowed eyes. He only calls her that when he’s trying to butter her up. “It won’t hit until Wednesday morning, right? We’ll make it into Morgantown tomorrow night in plenty of time. Let the storm blow through while Mr. Earl and his nephew help us figure out the reindeer. We’ll leave Thursday morning when the roads are plowed and get back well before dinner.”

“For the kids,” I remind her. Sara is upstairs trying to bathe those kids, and it sounds like a naval battle. Thumps. Sonic booms. Loud splashes.

My mom presses her lips together and shakes her head. “I don’t like it. I know they have their hearts set on Christmas, but there are plenty of other things we can do to make this Christmas so memorable that they forget about wanting to see reindeer.”

“It’s not just them, Mom,” I tell her. “The last two years, I did Christmas Town exactly the way Glynnis always did it to prove I could handle it. But I had so many ideas, and this year, it’s my chance to put my stamp on it, to add a little of the magic I always want to see at Christmastime. And that means a full team of eight reindeer, not the usual two.”

“Is it worth driving livestock through a blizzard?” she asks.

“There won’t be any blizzard driving,” Levi says. “I promise. We’ll get into Morgantown well ahead of the storm and leave when it’s clear. And I have no trouble hauling the trailer.”

“He did grow up hauling our boat out to the lake,” Dr. Taft adds.

“Think of the kids,” my dad says with an encouraging smile. “Levi and Taylor will be fine.”

They have a whole conversation in an exchange of looks, and my mom sighs. “All right. I’ll try not to worry.”

“Come look at this map, kids,” Dr. Taft says, meaning us this time, and that’s the end of that.

After some intensive planning in which our fathers plot four different routes depending on weather while our moms pack road trip supplies, I finally beg off to go to sleep so I can open the bakery in the morning.

Levi walks me out, carrying my “trip bag” to the car. “Man, they are something. My mom forgets that I’ve lived on jerky in freezing temperatures in the steppes of Mongolia for a

week.” He opens my trunk and puts the bag inside, laughing as he rifles through the contents. “Flashlight, batteries, matches, first aid kit, and so many snacks.”

“I have duplicates of everything except the snacks in my car already.” I shake my head. “They really do forget we’re grown, huh?”

“Going on thirty, even.” He shuts the trunk.

“Does it sort of feel like they packed us to go on a school field trip or something?”

“More than sort of,” he agrees. “Confession: I don’t mind being fussed over. It’s been a minute.”

“They’re all glad you’re back,” I say. “Confession: me too, wonderboy.”

“Get out of here, weirdo. Get some sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll leave the café around 3:00 and swing by to get you,” I say. “That work?”

He nods. “It works.”

I drive away, and when I check my rearview mirror at the end of the street, he’s still standing on the sidewalk, his hands in his coat pockets, watching after me.

I shouldn’t be so excited about having to drive four hours north to go fetch reindeer. It means leaving my café during a busy season, having to put out Christmas Town fires via cell

phone when and if I can get a signal, and spending hours pent up with Levi when it's been awkward between us.

But as I park behind the café, I'm worried about how much I'm not worried about any of that, and how much I can't wait for 3:00 tomorrow.

Chapter Eight

Taylor



SARA WALKS INTO THE café during the middle of the lunch shift the next day.

“Hey. You’re early.” Two hours early, almost.

“Yeah, so the storm’s moving fast, the moms are stressed, and I’ve been sent to tell you to get on the road now or Mom might chain herself to your car to keep you from leaving.”

“Wait, what?”

“Check your texts.” She nudges me gently from the register and pushes me toward my office as she smiles at the next customer in line.

I hustle to get my phone. I would have checked it as soon as we hit a lull. Usually, I haven’t missed anything besides Sara sometimes telling me she’s running a bit late, but I have about four missed calls from my mom and several texts.

I scroll through them. They start with my mom telling me that the storm is moving in faster than expected, followed by a couple more weather updates from her. Then there's a text from Levi asking if we should leave earlier because my mom has come over at least six times to ask him that. Then there's a text from Sara saying she's coming in early so I can get on the road because Mom is driving her crazy. The last one is also from her, and it's my favorite.

SARA: Also, I love you no matter what, but I extra love you for going to get these reindeer for Rome.

I call my mom first. "Hey, I got all the texts. I'll leave now."

"You will?" She sounds relieved.

"Well, twenty minutes. I need to change and come get Levi, but yes. Basically."

"Oh, good, honey. This town doesn't deserve you."

"Hyperbole much?"

"Just the truth. Hurry over. I have more stuff for your road trip."

I tell her I love her and hang up, not even trying to dissuade her from the extra stuff. Guilt niggles at me that she's going to so much trouble, but I remind myself that it's how she loves, and I decide to appreciate it instead.

I pop my head out long enough to tell Sara I'm leaving. She waves without looking at me, busily ringing up another order.

“Drive safe!”

Fifteen minutes later, I’m pulling into my parents’ driveway dressed in my comfiest sweats. I honk, and Levi is out of his front door before I’m even out of my car. I pop the trunk for him, and he tosses a backpack in there.

“I packed light, but that’s impressive,” I tell him as he shuts the trunk.

“I’m a highly skilled packer,” he says. “You ready?”

My mom comes charging out of the house before I can answer, barely visible over a giant armload of stuff she’s carrying.

“Car door, please,” she says, and Levi zips around to open the back door of my Civic on her side.

He grabs a blanket and pillow from the top of her pile, and her face appears as he deposits them into the backseat. Then he adds another blanket and pillow from her pile, and I try not to laugh.

“Mom, it’s four hours. I don’t think we’re going to need a nap along the way.”

“You never know. Isn’t that right?” she calls to Mrs. Taft, who is coming over from next door, equally overloaded.

Field trip, Levi mouths as he transfers the last of my mom’s load into the car. It appears to be ... an afghan my grandma crocheted for me when I was seven?

Mrs. Taft reaches us, leaning to one side under the weight of a grocery tote holding two gallons of drinking water. She starts a monologue as soon as Levi reaches to take the bag of water from her.

“We talked to Warren and Liz, and we all agree: get on the road now, fill up before you leave Creekville, then stop again for gas when you get to Elkins. You could make it all the way to Morgantown without refueling, but if that storm catches you, you’ll wish you had a full tank.

“Call us every two hours.” She’s tossing things into the backseat, and I watch two snow beanies and two pairs of thick winter gloves punctuate each of her orders. “Liz signed you up for AAA, so you call them if you have any problems.”

My mom opens Levi’s door to tuck a paper into the glove compartment. “This is your temporary membership, but it’s valid. Levi, you download the app on her phone while she drives, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The fussing continues for a few more minutes until Levi puts his arm around Mrs. Taft, who is rearranging the pillows in the backseat, moving them from one side to the other as she determines which side they’re better stacked on. “Ma, we have to get on the road to beat this storm.”

She glances up at the sky as if she’ll be able to see the storm—still several hours away—coming. “Okay.” She gives a short, tight nod. “Okay.” Then she leans into his hug. “Y’all both drive safely, you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” we say together.

One more round of hugs and we’re finally in the car, me reversing out of the driveway while Levi holds my phone up to the window to show he’s already downloading the AAA app. Our moms hug each other in the driveway and wave.

We wait until I turn the corner before we start laughing.

“That was worse than when they sent us off to fifth grade science camp,” he says.

“It definitely was,” I tell him. “I’m surprised your mom even lets you do your job if that’s for a four-hour road trip.”

“It’s probably because she doesn’t get to fuss over me before my assignments,” he says. “That was all the fussing she’s been banking for years.”

“That explains *your* mom,” I say. “I have no excuse for mine.”

“Aw, it’s just Mama B love.” He waggles my phone at me. “I’m screenshotting evidence of the fully downloaded app and sending it to her.”

“Good plan. Then pull up my audiobooks and let’s find something to listen to.”

He twists in his seat to give me a surprised look. “Taylor Rose Bixby, are you telling me we will not be spending this entire four hours having an awkward conversation about that mistletoe kiss?”

“Because one talk wasn’t enough? I’d rather drive us into the first snowbank I find.”

He chuckles and leans forward to study the sky through the windshield. “Hard to believe we’ve got snow coming. You think it’ll make it down to Creekville?”

“We had a white Christmas about three years ago. Before that, the last time was ... hmm. Maybe when we were seniors?” Too late, I realize I probably should not have resurrected that specific memory. I hold my breath for a moment, wondering if Levi will remember it too.

The pause between us is long enough for me to think he might be remembering the same part of that snowfall that I am. We’d gotten in a snowball fight in our front yards, and Levi had tackled me after I’d shoved a fistful of snow down his collar. Somehow, I’d ended up flat on my back, Levi fully on top of me in a way that would have had my dad dragging him off me by the scruff of his neck if we weren’t laughing so hard—and if it wasn’t Levi.

Levi, the reliable friend. Levi, the boy next door. Levi, who’d never given my parents a second of worry.

But for the first time, I’d found myself almost wishing he would. I remembered the strangeness of that feeling, of knocking him off me so I could smoosh more snow in his face, desperate to change or at least hide the weird vibe. It was an early warning sign of a crush, which made no sense.

I was a veteran of crushes, like most seventeen-year-olds were, and I knew how they could form out of nowhere. Some

boy who'd been around for years would suddenly say or do or wear something that caught my eye, and then boom. I'd be a goner. I'd spent half my junior year crushing on a senior baseball player because I'd spotted him reading a D.H. Lawrence novel, and I thought it meant he had hidden depths. It was a thrilling and secret discovery. Later, I found out he'd only been reading it because he'd heard it was scandalous and he was looking for the dirty bits. My crush died as fast as it started.

So when I'd felt those early warning signs—caught full-frontal between Levi and the snow as his eyes sparkled down at me, and I'd suddenly noticed the nice shape of his bottom lip, and that he had an appealing weight to him—I'd performed an emergency bailout.

It was a feeling that would try to sneak up on me every now and then over the next few years during college. Maybe I'd glance over at him while he studied, sprawled out on my bedroom floor, and notice that he was due for a haircut as a shock of it hung over his eyes. And then I'd think it looked cute like that, and then—

I'd hop up on a mission for a snack, and I'd make sure I was too busy to hang out with Levi for a few days until the early warning signs retreated.

I'd thought I'd outgrown that right around the time George Mason University conferred my bachelor's degree on me. But I experienced that same jolt of awareness last Friday night

when I discovered that four years after our first mistletoe kiss, no matter what, Levi always tastes faintly of cinnamon.

“I’ve had a lot of white Christmases that didn’t feel like Christmas,” he says. I let out a quiet sigh of relief when I realize he’s not thinking about the snowball fight that apparently imprinted in my genetic code somewhere. “Seems like I’m always somewhere cold overseas at Christmastime.”

“A smarter man would pitch an article about Australia,” I agree.

He laughs. “Probably. It does have a lot of little towns.”

I shoot him a confused glance. “Why does that matter?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. That’s just what I tend to write about most. The small town experience all over the world.”

I’m dumbstruck for a few seconds, and then a bark of laughter escapes me. “You totally do. How have I never noticed that?”

“Because on the surface, they seem pretty different.”

“But they’re the same when you dig down?”

“More similar than not, I’m beginning to realize. Even when I think there’s no way, that *this* place is way too different from other places I’ve reported on, at some point, there’s some interesting point of sameness.”

“Is that a good or bad thing?” I ask.

He thinks for a moment. “It’s just a true thing.”

I'm about to ask him for examples, to dig deeper into this observation and its implications, but my phone buzzes with a text and it displays on my dashboard screen a beat later.

SARA: Also don't make out with Levi again.

My jaw drops as the words scroll across the screen. I lunge for it, but Levi grabs my wrist and holds it away from the buttons.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, what is this?"

"I have no idea." Why would Sara even say that?

"You don't know why Sara is warning you against making out with me?" he asks, smirking.

"I really don't," I grit through clenched teeth.

"You must talk about wanting to do it all the time."

"I literally do not."

"Sure, sure," he says, letting go of my wrist far too slowly. "People always just say stuff like that out of the blue for no reason."

I stab at the screen, wishing it was Sara. "In this case, yes."

He's still smirking. "If you say so."

"Fine, I'll let Sara say so. Call Sara," I order my car. *Ringing ... ringing ...*

"Forget something?" Sara asks when she picks up.

“Sara, have I ever mentioned wanting to make out with Levi?”

“No. Am I on speaker?”

“Hi, Sara,” Levi says.

“We were discussing why you would text me about it,” I tell her. “I have no idea. Have I ever mentioned wanting to kiss Levi?”

“No.”

“Told you.” I shoot him a brief triumphant glance.

“You don’t need to though,” she says.

I roll my eyes. “Thank you for giving me permission to not want to kiss Levi.”

“No, I mean you don’t have to say anything. It’s written all over your face.”

Levi snorts as I gasp. “It is not.”

“*Both* your faces,” she adds.

Levi’s smirk disappears as I give a loud, accusatory, “Ha!”

“Bye, Sara.” He disconnects the call.

“See?” I say. “She makes stuff up.”

He makes a noncommittal noise exactly like my mom makes when I swear I’m getting enough sleep.

“You don’t have to believe me,” I tell him. “It doesn’t change the truth.”

“Wouldn’t think it did.” He scrolls through my phone. “I’m snooping on your audiobooks to see if your taste is still as bad as ever. This is, like, eighty percent celebrity memoirs.”

“I have a lot of parasocial relationships.”

“Okay, weirdo. We’re not listening to any of these.”

“Let me guess. Dead president biography?”

“Wow, it’s like you’ve known me my whole life,” he says. “How about a curveball and we listen to one about *two* dead presidents?”

“Sounds riveting.” My tone is dry as the windshield that has none of the snow our mothers were freaking out about. But the truth is, I liked it when he made me listen to presidential biographies when we’d drive home from DC for long weekends.

In Creekville, November and a lot of December are mud season, but we still have a fair amount of green. By the time we’ve gone an hour north, even with lots of evergreens along the roadside, it’s becoming brown and gray. But it’s okay because Levi’s pick is about Teddy Roosevelt and Taft, and even though I tease him about choosing it to rub in that he has a presidential last name, any story about Teddy Roosevelt is an interesting story.

That’s good because Levi and I both know this part of the drive well. His family has a cabin a couple of hours out of Creekville, up in a West Virginia resort area, and they’ve invited our family up for all kinds of things over the years.

We'll pass the turnoff for the cabin soon, and after that I won't know the route as well, but it's not complicated, based on the directions. It's more or less one highway until we get to the outskirts of Mr. Earl's town, which isn't actually Morgantown. It's an even smaller town called Bruceton Mills.

Another hour north, and the sky has grown darker than I would expect, even for late afternoon.

"Do you have enough signal to check the weather?" I ask Levi.

Before he can, an incoming call from my mom shows on the screen.

"Honey, are you in the snow yet?" she asks, her voice anxious. She's on speaker, and I wonder how many parents are listening.

"No, Mom. We've still got a few hours before we have to worry about it." I hope I'm telling the truth as I study the sky.

"You don't," my dad says. "The storm is moving faster than expected. I'm not sure you can beat it to Morgantown."

"Go to the cabin," Mrs. Taft says.

"Mom, we'll be fine," Levi says.

"I won't," she says, her voice flat. "I was already nervous with this storm. It's not going to matter to the reindeer man if you stay at the cabin tonight and get to his farm in the morning, will it?"

“No,” Levi admits. “We’re not planning to be there until morning either way.”

“It matters to me,” Mrs. Taft says. “I’m a mess. The cabin is pretty well-stocked right now because we were up there for Thanksgiving and planning to go up again for New Year’s, so you’ll probably find things in the cupboard and freezer you can eat. I’ll feel better knowing you’re not going to be caught in the storm, and that should count for something.”

“I’ll feel better too,” my mom adds.

“So would I,” my dad chimes in.

“Hold on.” Levi hits mute and says, “What do you think?”

“I think we’re not going to get caught in this storm,” I tell him.

“Me either. But ...”

“They’re right,” I say. “We’re not planning to get to the farm until the morning anyway. A couple of hours won’t make a difference. “We’ll just get on the road early.”

He unmutes the phone. “Okay, we’re going to stay at the cabin.”

“Good boy,” my mom says. Levi rolls his eyes but smiles. “Call us when you get there.”

They extract a promise from us at least three more times before he can end the call.

“It’s better than a motel.” He settles my phone back in the cupholder.

I nod. “True.”

“And the turnoff is coming up in about twenty minutes anyway.”

“Worth it if they’re not losing sleep, right?” I’m trying to talk myself into this because the idea makes me nervous, and it’s not exactly a mystery why. Last time we were here was four years ago, invited up by the Tafts for New Year’s. There was still mistletoe and eggnog in play. And rum. And highly questionable decision-making.

No, that’s not right. I can’t even say that was a decision. It was a thing that happened, not something we decided.

“Right,” he says. “It’s a pretty simple way to calm their nerves, I guess.”

Maybe. But all I know is that this change in plans is stretching mine even tighter.

Chapter Nine

Levi



TAYLOR DOESN'T HAVE MUCH to say when I hang up with the parents. The audiobook fills the silence as we reach the cabin turnoff from the state highway. It puts us on a county road for seven miles, then a final turn puts us on a private road for another mile. The private road winds up the mountain, and there's evidence of the last snowfall still frozen in clumps around the base of tree trunks where the sun isn't as strong, and along the tops of small boulders and shadowed patches of earth.

"Getting colder," Taylor says, her eye on the dashboard temperature display. It had dropped by ten degrees already on the gentle incline of the county road, and it's dropping more as we climb toward the cabin.

I lean forward, an old, familiar excitement percolating in my stomach like it used to do when I was a kid waiting for our first glimpse of the place. Whether it was for a week of

summer delinquency or gatherings at Thanksgivings and New Year celebrations, coming here had always meant fun.

Doctoring makes my dad decent money, but they gave up a lot of things to afford this cabin. They bought it when I was about eight, and it became every family vacation after that. Sometimes I wished we could go cool places that other kids traveled to, but I'm already smiling before the cabin even comes into view. It's so full of good memories, and I wouldn't trade that for Disney World.

A battered white post about four feet high with a reflector on it marks our turnoff, and I point it out to Taylor. "There's the driveway."

"Driveway" might be an understatement. It's a road leading to two cabins. A smaller gravel one, but still a road. Ours is first. The one farther up belongs to a family called the Egberts, who we know well enough to say hello to but not well enough to hang out with. They have a couple of girls, but the oldest one is at least ten years younger than me.

After a half mile, we reach the cabin, and Taylor pulls around the back, where we've always parked between the cabin and the detached garage.

She turns off the car. "I'm not used to being here without a metric ton of stuff to schlep in."

It's true. Usually there are suitcases and bags of groceries to haul. It's pretty weird to be grabbing only my backpack. "I guess we can bring in all the food the moms sent us with so it'll feel like old times."

“Deal.”

We climb out and Taylor squeaks, immediately reaching back in for her winter coat. “It’s thirty degrees right now,” she says.

I nod. “It’ll get colder when the sun sets in an hour.”

“Better do this then.” She pops the trunk, and between the two of us, we still aren’t going to get everything into the cabin on one trip. We’ve each got two bags of groceries and our overnight bags, but we’ve barely made a dent.

Taylor shakes her head as she eyes the backseat. “The whole Target bedding section is stuffed back there.”

“I’ll come back out to get the water jugs, but other than that, we’re probably good to leave the rest of it.”

She follows me to the door, where I enter the code for the keyless lock.

“Your mom’s birthday?” she guesses.

“My dad is consistent,” I say as the lock whirs open.

I reach in to flip on the light, but nothing happens. “I’m going to have to check the circuit box. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable.”

After I set my load down, I go back outside and check the breakers on the side of the house, but they’re all fine.

“No luck?” Taylor asks when I come back in.

I shake my head. “I’m just going to do what any grown man would do in this situation and call my dad.”

She nods. "I'll go check out the kitchen situation."

My dad must be done with patients for the day because he answers his cell on the third ring. "Everything okay?" he asks.

"Kind of, except I'm here and there's no power. I already checked the circuit breakers."

"Huh. I'll see if I can get hold of any neighbors, but the Egberts are the only ones there year-round. If I can't get them, you could try walking up to their place to see if anyone is there and ask if they've lost power too."

"But in the meantime ..." I prompt him.

"Ah. In the meantime, there should be plenty of firewood so you can use any of the fireplaces, although you might do better to stay in a smaller room for warmth. And there's the woodburning stove too. It'll keep that side of the living room pretty warm. There's a gas generator out in the garage. Not sure how much gas is there, but if it's full, it'll run the whole house for about five hours before it needs refueling. You can check and see if the water is running, and you should have enough nonperishable stuff in the cabinets to tide you over until you're on the road in the morning."

"Thanks, Dad. Let me know if you get hold of the Egberts."

We hang up, and I give Taylor a look.

"I got the gist of it," she says. "He doesn't know what the problem is?"

"Nope." I recap the info about the Egberts and the generator.

“Divide and conquer?” she suggests. “I’ll figure out a dinner, you get the generator, and we go from there?”

“I’ll get a fire started first,” I tell her.

I head back outside as Taylor heads for the kitchen. The cabin is two stories, but the back part—the side we entered—has all the bedrooms. The front third of the house has a vaulted ceiling and wall of windows overlooking the slight downward slope of the mountain. This makes it sound fancy; it isn’t. It was built in the sixties, I think, and it’s comfortable and cozy, but it’s mainly serviceable. It has the same furniture and bedding that my mom thrifted when they bought it.

There are five bedrooms total, and two of them have double bunkbeds for when kids—first my friends and now my niece and nephew—visit, and the other rooms have queen-sized beds for couples. How much space you have to maneuver *around* those beds depends totally on which room.

I fetch a cord of wood from a stack on the side of the house. The air smells different here. Creekville has fresh air, so that’s not it. I pause, trying to figure out what I’m sensing, but it’s too cold to stand there thinking about it.

I enter through the front of the house this time and smile as I walk into the large, welcoming living room. It’s full of overstuffed leather sofa and chairs, most of them cracked, wisps of their stuffing poking through in a couple of places. The giant beanbag I used to fight over with Zeke is still there, and I wonder if his kids squabble over it now.

Before I even decide whether to start with the woodburning stove or the fireplace, I realize we've got another problem.

No, not *we*. I have no problem. But Taylor is going to have a problem when I break this next info to her.

I hear her rattling around in the kitchen, so I set the wood by the fireplace and go in to get it over with.

"It's pretty well-stocked," she says when I walk in. "I'd be able to do more with heat, but we'll be okay for dinner. Also, the fridge is still cold, so I don't think the power has been off too long."

"That's good. We should probably see if there's anything we need to stick outside to keep cold until the power is back though."

"Good idea." She heads for the fridge.

"Taylor," I say then stop.

"Yeah?"

"You have to sleep with me."

She turns. "What?"

"Sorry, that came out wrong. I have to sleep with you."

"That's not better."

"Right. Okay, we have to sleep together."

She crosses her arms and looks at me. I've seen this look on Mrs. Bixby's face when she's caught us getting up to no good, like the time she waited for us in their driveway at 3:00 in the

morning when we'd snuck out to go toilet paper a friend's house.

"I'm kidding but not," I say. "We've got plenty of wood for the stove and the fireplace, but without the heater working, it's only going to be warm if you're within about ten feet of them. Maybe eight. A lot of it escapes up to the ceiling."

"Okay, Dr. Physics."

"My parents' room has a fireplace, and it'll stay much warmer in there, so it's going to be the best place to sleep tonight."

"Great. I'll take it."

"Yeah, me too. That's the problem. I don't mind. I think you probably shouldn't mind, but I bet you do."

"You know me well."

"It's not a big deal, Tay. It's the smartest way for both of us to stay warm and comfortable if the power doesn't come back on soon."

"I live by *myself*, Levi. I like my space. I wouldn't care if you were Sara or Harry Styles, I wouldn't be thrilled about crawling into bed with you."

I give her a disbelieving look. "Harry Styles?"

"Fine, I'd be thrilled to crawl into bed with Harry Styles."

I *tsk* at her. "Shocking."

"I'll find you some pearls to clutch."

“Think of it not so much as crawling into bed *with* me as *by* me.”

She scowls at me. “Aren’t you the guy that has to sleep in snow forts in subzero temperatures when you’re on an assignment?”

“Yes, but minor detail: that’s necessity. This is not. I will take a bed over the ground every time it’s offered. But, I repeat, this is not a big deal.”

“Make a pallet and sleep by the fireplace in the living room.”

I press my lips together and hope I look annoyed, but I’m fighting a smile, and if I lose, Taylor will probably beat me with a fireplace log. “I agree it’s not a big deal, so why are you making it one? Are you having a hard time resisting me?”

She reaches for the counter, and I duck out of the kitchen just in time to avoid being hit by the box of crackers she chucks at me.

“You’re sleeping on the floor!” she calls after me.

“I’m doing you a massive favor by coming on this trip, so *you’re* sleeping on the floor. I’m going to get more wood.” I grin when I hear her irritated growl from the kitchen. If she wants to invent problems where there are none, she can deal with them herself.

The sun is below the horizon now, and it’ll be dark in a few minutes. I grab another cord of wood and turn to bring it in when a light winks on up the hill. The Egberts. This is good.

“Tay?” I call, stepping back inside. “A light went on at the neighbors’ house. Want to go over with me?”

She comes out of the kitchen. She doesn’t say anything, but she elbows me in the stomach as she walks past me, pulling on her coat.

“Oof.”

“Baby.”

I follow her back out, and we walk up to the Egbert place. The lights could be on timers, but since I see an interior light too, I doubt it. “I wonder why they have power and we don’t,” I say, as another light comes on upstairs.

“Generator?” Taylor guesses.

We knock and Jon Egbert opens the door. “Hey, Levi. I didn’t expect to see y’all until New Year’s Eve.”

“Hey, Jon.” He’s about ten years older than me, and I don’t know him well even though they’ve lived in their place since I started college. “This is a surprise visit. We were heading near Morgantown, but we’re staying at the cabin tonight so we don’t get caught in the storm.”

“Good thinking.” His gaze lands on Taylor, his face curious.

“This is my friend, Taylor,” I tell him.

“Oh, I remember meeting you a couple of times,” he says, his face clearing.

“Me too,” she says. “Probably at a few of the summer cookouts.”

“Probably right,” he says. “Y’all need some supper. Why don’t you come on in?”

“That’s okay,” I tell him. Jon himself isn’t super talkative, but his wife, Tammy, could talk your ear off. “I guess my dad didn’t call?”

“Recently?” He shakes his head.

“The power is out at our place. I’ve checked the circuit box, but I can’t figure out the problem.”

“Need somewhere to stay?” he asks.

“No, wondered if you might have any ideas on how to fix it.”

“No. It’s strange we have power and you don’t, but I can’t say why that would be. Happy to come down and take a look.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell him. “We’ve got firewood and a generator, and it’s more than enough to hold us over until morning.”

He scratches his head. “I feel kinda bad though. Sure there’s nothing we can do to help? I can send you home with a three-gallon can of gas.”

“We’ll be all right,” I say.

“How about fresh eggs and a camping stove?”

“Yes,” Taylor says before I can decline. “It runs on propane?”

“Yep. Come on around to the shed.”

“I can make something way better if I have heat,” she tells me.

Ten minutes later, we’re on the way back to the cabin with six eggs and a green Coleman camp stove. Taylor is smiling. “I have so many memories of my parents cooking on one like this when I was little.”

“Me too,” I tell her. “I wish we had marshmallows to roast. Then I’d really feel like a kid again.”

“Hmm. Didn’t see any marshmallows, but I have something that will help. You’re still sleeping on the floor. That will be like camping.”

“Dream on. In the bed next to me. Where we will both be sleeping. And you’ll be safe from my wildly seductive moves.”

“What are your—” She snaps her mouth shut and shakes her head.

“What?”

“I have an image of you doing what you think is a sexy dance but looks more like an exorcism. I can’t decide if having you clear that up will make it better or worse.”

I shove the camp stove at her. “You don’t deserve a demonstration.” Then I stomp toward the cabin while she laughs after me. I walk inside, smiling. We’re back on normal footing, and that’s exactly what I want. Me and Taylor on the same page, always.

Chapter Ten

Taylor



“I AM SO GOOD.” I say it out loud because the world needs to know.

“What’s that?” Levi calls from the living room.

“Dinner is served.”

He appears a moment later, smelling faintly of firewood.

“Awesome. What are we having?”

“Comfort food. A tomato reduction with crispy crostini.”

He looks at me, his forehead wrinkled. He’s so cute when he’s confused, maybe because his expression is one of either curiosity or amusement at his own internal narration of what he thinks is happening.

“Kidding,” I tell him. “Don’t get too excited. I’m more of a baker than a cook. I doctored some canned tomato soup I found in a cabinet and used some of the crackers and cheese one of our moms packed to be our grilled cheese substitute.

Although I did melt the cheese a little so the crackers would stick more like a sandwich.”

“You could have told me tuna from a tube and stale bread, and I would have been happy.”

“No, you’re supposed to pretend like you like this because it tastes extra good, not because you’re starving.”

“That’s what I meant. You sit. I’ll serve.” He nods to the kitchen table.

“Can we do a picnic by the fire? It’s pretty chilly in here.” Now that I’ve turned off the cooking flame, I can feel the cold creeping in.

Levi opens his mouth, locks eyes with me, and closes it again, nodding instead.

I don’t even ask as I walk out to choose a blanket Mrs. Tate keeps in the basket by the fireplace; I know he was about to make another seduction joke. This is Sara’s fault. Good thing he can read me well enough to know I’d dump the soup over his head if he doesn’t leave it alone.

I get it, I really do. It should not be a big deal for us to share a bed in a freezing house if it means we can both sleep—and only sleep—in front of a fire. But even though our conversation is as easy as ever and all of our silences are comfortable, it’s taken me a minute to adjust to being at the scene of the crime.

Well, kiss. So far, I’d avoided the front door and the porch completely. That’s where the mistletoe had been hung last

time, and I remember the scene clearly as if it just happened. It's probably a sense memory triggered by walking into the familiar cabin, but honestly, I don't need to bring it any more to life.

This whole situation is getting ridiculous. We've talked about the kiss. Well, the most recent one, and kind of that first one. The air is cleared. I don't know why I feel so ... I don't even know the words. I'm not on edge, exactly. But I'm definitely jumpy in a way I can't explain. And his dumb jokes make it worse. I wonder at what age guys outgrow the part of them that's still in sixth grade. It doesn't seem to be at almost thirty.

I spread a flannel blanket on the floor and settle on it, crisscross, as Levi hands me a plate with a bowl of soup and cheese crackers. Then he sits too, and we eat.

"This is unreasonably good for canned soup," he says after his third bite.

"Meh. Evaporated milk and some basic spices, and you too can be a kitchen hero."

He salutes and we eat in silence, but I have to admit: on a cold day, tomato soup and cheese with carbs hit the spot.

"Sorry about getting us stranded here," I say when my bowl is empty. I set it aside and lean back on my hands to enjoy the warmth and a full stomach.

"It's a detour. We're not stranded. It's only going to make a two-hour difference when it all shakes out tomorrow."

“Thank you for being nice about it. And for even coming in the first place.”

“Of course.” He shrugs like it’s not a big deal to go hours—and days—out of his way. He glances around the cabin. “It’s pretty great to be back here.”

“How long have your parents owned this place? I can barely remember a time that we weren’t coming up with y’all at least once a year.”

“Since I was in third grade. They saved forever. Like, we never traveled much when I was a kid, for example. We took cheap camping trips where we brought our own food—or fished for it—and it was always somewhere you could reach on a single tank of gas.”

“That’s funny. I always think of your family as being pretty comfortable.”

“They are, but you don’t remember how aggressively cheap they were when we were growing up.”

“I remember you didn’t have cable.”

He laughs. “We didn’t even have Netflix. We checked out movies from the library. And my mom would always go to the day-old shelf at the grocery store before she’d hit any of the other aisles. It meant we got piano lessons from Hailey down the street for ten dollars each lesson because she was only fifteen and didn’t know how to protest labor exploitation.”

“You can’t blame her that you were bad at the piano. You never practiced until you learned to play that Bruno Mars song

for Mirai Khatri in tenth grade.”

He grins. “Oh, yeah. But it paid off big-time.”

I shake my head at him. “Shameless.”

“Any more shameless than you bleaching your hair that summer because you heard Justin Reilly liked blondes?”

“Let us never speak of it.” It took a full year of regular hair masks to repair that damage. Also, blonde hair had made me look like I was a Victorian tuberculosis patient.

“Fine. Change of subject.” His expression loses some of its humor, and that weird, almost nervous feeling bubbles in my stomach, so I cut him off.

“Games? Yes, I’d love to.”

He pauses. “Okay. I’ll clean up dinner. You pick the game.”

The games are in the cabinets of the large entertainment system that covers the opposite wall in the living room, and I sort through them until I find one I like. I set it up in front of the fire, and when Levi walks in from the kitchen, he cracks up.

“Marble Drop? Really?”

“Yes. It’s fun.” It’s also the one game that I’m sure he can’t turn into a reason to flirt. Levi has always been like that with other girls. He almost can’t help being charming, but he’s never tried it on me until now.

Why don’t I like his jokes about making out? Or sleeping “together”?

There's something about him turning his charm on me that makes me kind of sad. Like we've shifted from being old friends to more like friends who knew each other a long time ago.

It also gives me that nervous feeling, and I hate it. As we take turns removing plastic spokes from the marble-filled cylinder, trying not to let any of the marbles drop, I force myself to think about why.

It's because that kiss at game night reminded me of how much I liked the first time we'd kissed. Here. I'd semi-successfully turned it into a hazy memory, but it's no use now. I know the exact texture of his lips and the taste of cinnamon when his tongue brushes mine.

At this very second, I'm wondering if he kissed me again whether I'd still get cinnamon or the faint herbiness of the tomato soup.

There is real danger lurking here. Emotionally, anyway. The crush warning signs are obvious, but somehow, the fall feels further. Like if I tip this time, I might keep going.

But so will he. Back to Europe. Central Asia. North Africa. Scandinavia. Freaking Patagonia, for all I know. But come January, he'll have a new assignment, and he'll be off. For weeks. Months. Maybe another four years.

I can't deal with that. My life is in Creekville. And whoever I fall for, I want them to be in Creekville too. That's what having a life together looks like.

“Taylor.”

I glance up, blinking. Talk about getting way ahead of myself. Not sure how I got from kisses to my life plans.

“Your turn.”

“Right.” I stare at the game and realize I don’t want to play it. That awful feeling of praying a marble doesn’t drop and wreck everything mirrors how I feel inside. I study the game carefully, then reach over and pull out a stick, satisfied when a loud clatter of marbles follows.

“Ooh, not a good move, Tay. I don’t think you can win now.” He’s stretched out on his stomach, chin resting on his hands as he studies the remaining sticks.

“You’re right. And honestly, I’m tired. Let’s put this away, and I’ll make a pallet so I can sleep.”

“It’s only 6:30,” he says, his tone surprised.

“Driving makes me sleepy. My mom said she’d drive me in the car for an hour when I was a baby to get me to sleep. Probably still works.”

“Okay.” He sits up and starts taking the game apart.

We work quietly, and the whole thing is boxed in less than a minute. He gets up and puts it away while I tug the blanket basket closer to find the thickest ones for my bedroll.

“Are you really going to sleep in here on a wood floor when you could be in a bed near a fireplace?”

“Are you offering to trade?” I look up at him, faking delight.

“You wish,” he says. “I told you, I have to rough it enough that I’m going to take a soft bed anytime. If you didn’t have another choice, I’d take your spot in a heartbeat. But you do. And you’re being weird about it.”

“I told you, I’m way too used to my space.”

I feel his eyes on me as I layer the blankets to make a soft base, but I don’t look up. Finally, he sighs. “All right. I’ll be in the warm room with the comfortable bed if you need anything.”

“I won’t.”

I swear I can almost hear him shaking his head as he walks out.

It’s already been a long day, and I fall asleep fast. If only I *stayed* asleep.



I have no idea what time it is when my eyes blink open to discover that the fire has dwindled to a few weak embers. I sit up and groan, my body letting me know it does not appreciate being put to bed on a hard floor.

I shuffle to the bathroom using my cell phone flashlight to shine the way, and that’s when I learn it’s 2 AM. When I return from the bathroom, I freeze halfway across the living room as I register something else: there is snow outside.

I turn off the flashlight so it won’t reflect in the floor-to-ceiling windows, but even in the near blackness, I can’t

mistake the white mounds pressing against the glass. I hurry over, my stomach sinking as the sound of wind picks up closer to the glass. I peer out at an endless blanket of white. A blanket of white who knows how thick. A blanket of white that will only grow deeper as fat flakes drive down faster than I've ever seen snow fall. This is completely different from the gentle snowfalls we get in Creekville.

I'm freezing away from the fire, and I hurry back to it, shivering, but I don't sit down. I can't stand the thought of trying to get comfortable on that hard floor. I glance in the direction of the hallway leading to Levi's bedroom. His fireplace. A bed. With a mattress. A bed that is not the floor. A bed where I'm sure Levi is fast asleep and won't mind at all if I rest my achy bones on the other half.

I scoop up a pillow and one of the thicker quilts and pad down the hall to his room, easing open the door. Warmth billows out. This is definitely the right call.

I slip inside and shut the door behind me, making sure I close it as quietly as a teenager sneaking out of her house on a school night. The floorboards stay silent beneath my socks as I pad over to the bed. Levi is sleeping on his side, a comfortable-looking mound beneath a thin coverlet. I'm glad I brought the quilt with me.

It takes me nearly a full minute in comical slow motion to settle onto the mattress, hugging the edge to leave him as much room as possible. Finally, I'm nestled, satisfied that no

one has ever slipped into a bed with greater stealth in the history of the world.

My head hits the pillow, and my eyes close in bliss. Beds are a miraculous invention. How is it possible that I forgot this for even a single second to choose the hard floor? Foolish mortal.

I draw a deep breath and let it out in a quiet sigh. This right here? Clinging to the edge of a mattress in the middle of the night at a cabin where I'm stranded? Absolute luxury.

No question I'm an idiot for being so stubborn earlier. Sharing a big old bed with Levi is so not a big deal.

Chapter Eleven

Levi



I WAKE UP TO a warm, pliant woman draped over my body.

Watery gray dawn is making a half-hearted attempt to leak through the plaid curtains, but Taylor is gold and rosy, even the weak light picking up the subtle tones in her hair. Her head is on my chest, her hand tucked beneath her chin, her whole body pressed against mine. Her leg is thrown over my thighs, her heel almost notched behind my knee, like she's trying to create a safety bar to keep me there.

I'm in no danger of moving.

Instead, I'm torn between competing desires: I want to wrap my arm around her back, tucking her in tighter, but I also don't want to risk anything that will wake her up and put an end to this. Holding her feels more right than anything has in a very long time. It's a feeling that's been growing since I walked into her café last week. A feeling of a piece snapping into place.

Taylor is ... everything. Somewhere along the way, I fell for her. Was it college? Was it even before that? I don't know. But I know I've been fighting it hard for four years without even realizing it.

I care about her way too much to put our friendship at risk if I wasn't sure that there's something more. There is. Maybe there always was. But lying here with her in my arms is the sweetest torture I've ever experienced. I want to both devour her and protect her. Consume her and slay dragons for her.

Or at least fetch reindeer.

I decide not to risk moving. I don't want to wake her up, but more than that, if she does wake up, it would take everything I have not to flip her on her back, swoop down, and drink from her lips until we're more buzzed than any eggnog could get us.

We lie like this for several more minutes. My right pectoral falls asleep where her head rests, all the way through my shoulder, but I still don't move. Only my T-shirt separates her skin from mine, and I wish I'd gone to sleep shirtless so I could feel the silk of her cheek against me.

Maybe this should feel like it's coming from nowhere, but it doesn't. I'm not freaked out or worried. I'm not even surprised. We've clicked into our rhythm as easily as if I never left.

That's not to say I know what to do about it. I love my job, and it doesn't lend itself to the kind of domestic bliss Taylor values. She loves family underfoot and nosing in her business even when she complains about it. She loves being in the

middle of the town mix, nurturing the town's most beloved traditions, all while handing out "smart cookies" and smelling of baked goods, as if that isn't stronger than the most powerful pheromone for the average man. Her vanilla and warm oven smell is far more lethal to good intentions than a designer fragrance.

I study her, my angle letting me see the straight line of her nose, the dark lashes against her fire-pinkened cheek. She looks like a sleep-tousled angel. A fallen one, with her leg wrapped around me like that. An angel who will wake with a drowsy blink and not a single good intention.

I could be projecting.

She stirs, and her free hand flattens against my chest, pauses, then moves upward, a slow, smooth stroke, like she's enjoying the way I feel against her palm. So, yeah. This is going to be trouble, and I don't care.

She makes a soft sound, somewhere between a murmur and a sigh, shifting and resettling, somehow pressing into me more fully, leaving no gap between her curves and my planes and angles.

After several seconds, her body tenses, her hand clutching a fistful of my T-shirt. I don't say anything, deciding to take my cue from her, but hoping with literally every molecule of my being that she's going to lean into this. Into me.

I'm so attuned to her tiniest movement that in the blink of an eye when she coils to push herself up and away from me, I use the arm and leg she's resting on me to leverage her over onto

her back and keep her there, my forearms braced on either side of her head as I smile down at her.

“Don’t freak out,” I say, keeping my voice soft. “I’ll let you go in a minute, but I think if I let you up right now, you’ll streak out of here, and then I’ll find you in the kitchen in five minutes acting like you didn’t wrap around me like a tinsel garland.”

Her eyes slide away from mine.

I lower my head so it’s near her ear. “True or false, Taylor?”

She shivers, and I know it’s not the cold. She doesn’t answer.

I shift to murmur in her other ear. “So you’ll stay for a minute?”

Another shiver. Maybe more of a quiver. Still no words, but she reaches up to touch my shirt, following the outline in the faded A of “Hoyas,” which means she’s tracing right over my heart. Doesn’t take a writer to see the symbolism there.

I can’t help myself and I trail my nose down to the side of her neck, drawing in her sweet, now faintly smoky scent. It is perfect, like the heat of the fire has licked her and left behind the part of itself that conjures up long nights and warmth.

“Levi ...” Her voice is soft and rough from sleep, and when I lift my head enough to brush the tip of my nose against the line of her jaw, she gives a gasp I can only hear because I’m as close to her as it’s possible to be.

I skim my lips from her jaw to the corner of her mouth and speak quietly, letting the puff of my breath send another shiver

through her as I say, “This is not just me, Tay.”

She turns her head slightly, away from me, her eyes falling shut.

Even more quietly, I ask, “Am I wrong?”

For a handful of seconds, she says nothing. She doesn't move except for her breathing, and it makes me even more aware of how we fit. At every point, curves into hollows, angles into curves.

Finally, she slides up her other hand and flattens it against my chest, her thumb pressing lightly as it follows the edge of my pec. I did not know that my pecs were so sensitive, but they have suddenly become one of the favorite parts of my body.

Then she shoves me as she says, “Off.”

I roll onto my back as she slides away, climbing out of the bed to stare down at me. Her gaze travels over my face, down to my chest, back up to meet my eyes.

“I'm going to make breakfast,” she says. “I'd love for you to go out and start the generator so that it's easier for me. Come find me in the kitchen when you're hungry. I'll be the one acting like I wasn't wrapped around you like tinsel.”

She turns and walks out, her skin still flushed, her hair poking up in the back, and she has never been more adorable.

But I am way too smart to say that out loud.

Chapter Twelve

Taylor



JIMINY FREAKING CHRISTMAS. WHAT just happened?!

The facts are straightforward. I woke up wrapped around Levi like a garland. He's not wrong about that.

I liked it. That's undeniable.

It doesn't mean I have to say that out loud to Levi. Why does he even need me to?

Levi liked it.

This is ... a new development. It's barely less shocking than it would have been even a few days ago, but I guess that kiss on game night was a taste of things to come. A *literal* taste. And once again, it is cinnamon. Levi tastes like cinnamon and bad choices.

Immeasurably bad choices. The kind of choices that wreck friendships and ruin family alliances and get charming midfence gates padlocked because that's what happens when

your adult kids ruin the quasi-arranged marriage you've planned for them with a superhot makeout.

Or almost do. That superhot makeout is technically theoretical, no matter if every one of my bones, all the flips of my stomach, and every hair standing up on the back of my neck is certain that it will be scorching.

Not today, Satan. Or Levi Taft. Or whoever is trying to ruin Christmas in Whoville with a poorly considered fling.

I do not have flings. I definitely do not have them with people I've adored since childhood just because they stroll into my café after four years looking good enough to eat.

This is ridiculous. I need to go stand under the bitterly cold shower until my brain resets. Wait, my brain is fine. My hormones are the problem.

"Whoa," Levi says from the living room. He must have spotted our newest headache. "What the—"

I hear the front door open, followed by a yelp, silence, and the front door closing again. Levi appears a few seconds later, hair dotted with clumps of snow as he stares past me through the glass top half of the kitchen door leading outside.

"I guess we didn't miss the storm."

"Nope."

"Snow from the roof fell on my head."

"Sure looks like it."

“Is this you pretending everything is one hundred percent normal between us?”

“Yep.”

“Cool, cool. Just making sure I’m in the same part of the script. We’re going to only talk about the snow now, right?”

“Correct.”

“I’ve got thirty percent battery and a signal. Let me call and make some inquiries as to what one does at the Taft cabin when a storm tries to swallow it whole.”

“Great. And then you can have the generator generate and I’ll make some breakfast.”

“I can cook,” he says.

“Sure, but I can either cook or overthink, so ...”

“I’ll get that generator started.” He disappears into the living room and after some rustling as he pulls on his coat and boots, I hear the back door open, followed by a curse.

I’d moved a package of bacon from the freezer to the fridge last night with an eye toward cooking it up this morning. I could do an egg scramble on the camp stove, but I’ve had about enough of improvising for the last twenty-four hours. If Levi can get us some electricity, then I want to cook on a subpar electric stovetop, dang it.

A few minutes later, I hear a soft hum, and the overhead light blinks on. I know the generator is probably rattling loud enough to wake the entire forest, but it’s not too bad in here. I

turn a burner knob on the stove, and the red light blinks on. We're in business.

I expect Levi to reappear, but he doesn't. I fry some bacon to the perfect crispness and crumble it into the scramble I made with Havarti cheese slices one of the moms threw in—it feels like a Liz Bixby move. Levi still hasn't appeared. I cover the skillet with a lid and shift it to one of the unused burners.

I don't see Levi through the side door, so I head to the back door. I spot him easily through the big bay window, shoveling a path from the back door toward my car. I haven't even wanted to look to see how dire the situation is. I brave a glance toward it now. Answer: it is up-to-the-car-windows dire. I've also never seen that much snow on the roof of my car.

I open the door, and a bitter spike of cold stabs me in the face. "Levi! Breakfast!" I slam the door on accident, but I want nothing to do with that cold. I'd thought it was chilly in here, but compared to that temperature outside, this cabin is clearly a wonder of modern insulation.

I hurry over to the fireplace to revive it, and once it greedily licks at a fuel log, I head back to the kitchen to check on the eggs. A minute later, Levi clatters in through the back, stomps his snow boots, and then he's in the kitchen in his socks.

"Smells amazing." He goes to the cabinet with the plates.

"Did you forget I rock a mean egg?" I serve up the scramble, divided between the two plates he brings me.

I set the skillet back on the stove and follow him over to the table, sliding into the seat opposite him as he sets the plates down.

He takes a bite and smiles. “No. I didn’t forget.”

There’s something in the way he says the words, an extra weight to them. We eat in silence, both too happy to have protein to start what is going to be a long—and most likely strange—day.

“I can make some more if you need to refuel after all that shoveling,” I say.

“No, this is plenty, thanks.”

Again, we fall silent. He doesn’t seem bothered by it, but to me, it’s full of unsaid things, and I try not to squirm.

When we’re finished, he takes my plate and walks to the sink. “I’ll handle cleanup, but I’m going to get the furnace and hot water heater started so that I don’t give myself hypothermia from arctic tap water.”

“Fair enough,” I say. “I’ll call Mr. Earl and explain the delay. Do we know how long we’re going to be stuck here?”

He pulls out his phone. “Let me try my dad again.” A few seconds later, his face softens slightly.

A pang of guilt mixes poorly with the heavy bacon in my stomach. He’s always so calm that it’s easy to overlook when things are getting to him.

“Hey, Dad. No, we’re fine. Yeah, looks like the cabin held up well.” He goes on to explain how much snow is on the ground and about getting the generator started. He has to reassure Dr. Taft twice that no emissions from the generator are getting into the house.

I know why Dr. Taft is obsessed with this: ten years ago, he had an older couple who had a bad heater and no carbon monoxide detector. They’d gotten carbon monoxide poisoning, and it had sent the husband to the ICU for three days before he stabilized enough to be on the regular floor and then eventually released.

“How do I light the furnace and the water heater?” he asks. “Oh, okay. That makes sense. Most places I spend the winter are on gas systems. Yeah, no, I know. Yes, I agree. So, how long before the roads get plowed up here?”

This is the information I’m most interested in, but as I watch worry lines appear on Levi’s forehead, I get the sense I won’t like the answer. They talk a little longer before Levi hangs up and leans against the wall with a sigh.

“Bad news?” I ask.

“This is a private road,” he says. “The county will get to the state highway first. That’ll get taken care of today. They may already be clearing it now. The county road will take longer. Depends on how bad the state highway is. They’ll eventually do this road, but it’s a lower priority. They expect anyone up here during this weather to have snow tires or four-wheel drive.”

“I’ve never needed them,” I tell him. “It’s not an issue in Creekville. I should have thought about getting snow tires yesterday, but everyone was so worried about getting us on the road, I figured the smarter play was beating the storm.” I slump. “I’m sorry, Levi.”

“Whoa, no, don’t worry about me. I’m not missing anything or needed anywhere but here. No apologies needed. If anything, I feel bad that we didn’t find a motel last night. It would have been on a main highway and already cleared by now.”

“That’s not your fault,” I say.

“Oh, good. So we both agree that we are excellent people who did nothing wrong.”

“Except potentially fail to save Rome’s Christmas.”

“Is that for sure?” he asks. “Have you talked to the reindeer guy? Maybe there’s still some hope.”

“You’re right. I’ll call him and let him dash my hopes for real.”

“Tay. Chin up. We’ll figure something out. I have never met a more stubborn person than you.”

I send him a warning look.

“I mean a more, um, perserverant person?”

“Dear writer: that’s not a word.”

“Persistent. I’ve never met a more persistent person. With a can-do attitude?” he adds when my expression doesn’t lighten.

“Who is also full of, uh ... ingenuity? And top-level problem-solving skills?”

“Heck yes, I am,” I say, snatching up my phone. He sags with relief, and I hide a smile. “Let’s see what Mr. Earl has to say.”

Fifteen minutes later, after more begging, bargaining, and reassurances and reindeer care facts from Levi, I hang up the phone and look at Levi. He’s taken the seat across from me, and he’s leaning forward, waiting for the verdict.

I pause to take a mental snapshot. Levi has no reason to care. Not really. Bummer if it doesn’t work out for Rome, but there’s no consequence for Levi.

“Why are you so invested in this?” I ask. “It’s not going to affect your Christmas at all.”

He studies me for a few seconds. “You care.”

“That’s your whole reason?”

“That’s my whole reason.”

I hold his stare for a couple of seconds, but it’s starting to feel like he can see too much, like how long I’ve held on to that first mistletoe kiss, tucking the memory of it somewhere inside of me so secure that even I fooled myself that it hadn’t mattered.

But we’re here now. The scene of the crime. And almost the scene of a new one not an hour ago in Levi’s sleep-tossed covers under the mesmerizing influence of his blue-gray eyes.

I flick my gaze down to the table. His eyes aren't fair.

"Did Mr. Earl give you a best-case scenario?" Levi asks.

"Yeah. It's not great. A lot of things are going to have to go just right."

"Let's hear it."

I explain that Mr. Earl is still willing to let us take the reindeer to Creekville as long as we can do it without unduly stressing them. It'll be stressful enough for them to be in the livestock trailer, and if we're rushing them, they'll sense it, and it will put them off their feed. Then we could end up dealing with colic, which is an enormous headache, and unfair to the reindeer.

"Bottom line," I tell Levi, "if we can get to Blitzen Farm around lunch tomorrow, Mr. Earl feels that's enough time for him to go over what he needs to and make sure we're working well with his nephew and that he's comfortable sending Rusty with us."

"The nephew is Rusty?"

I nod. "He sounds like he's going to be skinny and love Wranglers for real. Anyway, we basically need to get no more snow between now and then, *and* we've got to hope this road gets plowed a lot sooner than we're expecting. Those are big *ifs*, but if they happen, maybe Santa gets his reindeer."

"Okay. We're here a minimum of twenty-four hours no matter what?"

“And basically not an hour longer if we want to make it to Blitzen Farm in time.”

“Cross whatever you want to cross, say whatever prayer you want to say, and I’ll see if I can think of any prayers and gods I can borrow with apologies that will help the cause. There has to be some Celtic woodland rite that would help with this.”

“Getting snowplows here in time? Pretty sure the Celtic religion predates Santa by a lot.”

He looks thoughtful. “I should know that, but I don’t. I feel a google coming on.”

“Save it.” I wave toward the counter. “My charger is over there. Why don’t you let your phone charge while I update my parents and then I’ll charge mine?”

“And then we can figure out what we’re going to do the rest of the day?”

I don’t trust the smile on his face. “I know what I’m doing: worrying.”

“No way. We’ve just been handed a snow day from *life*. Those are rare, and we have a moral imperative to exploit it fully.”

My lips twitch. “A moral imperative, huh?”

“A *solemn* moral imperative.” He sits back. “Of course, if you’re not up for that, we could try one of the alternatives.” He looks too innocent not to be suspicious.

“Which are?”

“We could spend the whole day talking about feelings. About kissing. The two we already had. The one we almost had this morning that you were so bummed didn’t happen.”

“Is the other alternative murder? Like I kill you for being annoying?”

He scoffs. “No. It’s making out instead of talking about making out.”

“Snow day sounds great. Do you want to build a snowman?”

He laughs and gets up from the table. “Call your mom. I’m going to finish shoveling.”

My mom picks up on the first ring. “Everything okay, honey?”

“Considering we’re snowed in and I’m not sure we can make it to the reindeer farm in time, no. Not really.”

“You’re safe, fed, and warm?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s call it a Christmas miracle. Any other good things that come along will be extra stuffers in your stockings.”

We chat about the café and the boys. She says she made the cranberry blondies and they turned out great. She also tells me business is slow because they got snow too, so not to worry about Celia and Sara being overloaded.

“Any more snow in the forecast?” I ask.

“Not in the next few days.”

“That’s good.”

“Does that mean you’ll be able to pick up the reindeer?” she asks.

“Only if this road gets plowed out in time. My car won’t make it down their private road, and it’s too much for us to shovel ourselves.”

“Could you try?” she asks.

“To shovel a half mile of snow? What happened to making Christmas special even if we can’t get the reindeer?”

She sighs. “The twins know you’re stuck in the cabin. Rome woke up worrying about it. Then when Sara walked them to preschool, he said he wasn’t going to worry anymore because he’ll talk to Santa on Friday and get it all fixed.”

“Great.” Are there bigger problems in the world? Absolutely. But *this* is the one problem I was going to be able to solve, and that’s looking highly unlikely anymore.

“I don’t want to put too much pressure on you,” my mom says. “I’m trying to find the balance between reassuring you that we’ll figure something out if the reindeer fall through but not having you give up if there’s any chance at all of making it work.”

“Trust me, Mom. There is no danger of that.” At this point, it would be worth it to dig out this dumb road so I don’t have to deal with all the Levi tension. Not that it’s bad tension. But it’s freaking me out, and my circuits feel too overloaded with Christmas Town to handle confusing Levi feelings.

We hang up, and I decide it's time to go out and help Levi. I join him in my snow boots and jacket, kitchen dustpan in hand, and find he's now only about three feet from reaching the car.

"Not bad," I tell him.

"Beast mode," he explains, tossing another shovelful out of the way.

"Are you dying?"

He straightens. "What if I say yes? Does that get special TLC?"

"No. But flirting will get you a snowball in the face."

He smiles and bends to scoop another load of snow. "Why is that, Taylor? You doubt my sincerity?"

I push past him, breaking through the snowbank to climb on the hood of my car. I scoop a dustpan full of snow from its roof and toss it away from Levi. "Yes. I doubt your sincerity."

"You're supposed to say no." He straightens again. "Why would you doubt me?"

"As far as I know, you've been reporting from remote regions and mostly spending time the last couple of years with soldiers. Male soldiers. I can't blame you for being so overcome by my hotness that I seem like a good option to you. But you have to think through the long-term consequences." I scoop up more snow. This time I aim it square at his chest.

He grunts when it hits him but brushes it away and stares up at me. Then he starts laughing.

“What?” I demand.

“You think I don’t have options when I’m on assignment?”

I shrug. “Maybe with aspiring Baba Yagas.”

He grins and shovels more snow. “Eastern Europe has some of the most gorgeous women in the world. I get opportunities.”

A slightly scruffy American with a perfect jawline and eyes that are always smiling? I should have guessed, but I’ve never once imagined Levi with anyone. It’s throwing me. I don’t want to know if he’s taken any of those opportunities, but there’s something in the way he said it that makes me think he has. I don’t like the way it feels, and I remove more snow. Viciously.

“That upsets you,” he says. “You should consider why.”

“I’m not upset.” I hit him in the chest with more snow.

“Clearly.” His voice is dry. “Would it help if I tell you that I’ve always known you’re objectively hot, but there’s something that feels different being around you right now, and it has nothing to do with a dating famine?”

“I don’t care.”

“Yes, you do. You should process this.” He shovels another load of snow. “I have. And I’ve reached some conclusions.”

“Process what? And when did you process this?”

“Since the second I found myself heading straight to you instead of my parents when I got off the bus. I saw you, and I felt like I got hit by the Obvious Truck. And then we had game night, and the Obvious Truck reversed and backed over me again.”

“I don’t even know what that means.” I shove snow to the ground, but I’m paying way more attention to Levi than to clearing my roof.

“It means it was the most obvious thing in the world that I would come see you first. And when I realized that, it was obvious that I should kiss you. So Santa provided a way. And I thought that kiss would make everything obvious to you, but sounds like no?”

“No.” Such a liar. Santa’s bringing me coal.

“So interesting,” he says.

“Stop saying ‘interesting.’”

“No. It’s interesting that I always thought you were the smarter one between the two of us, but I’m the one who’s figured this out first.”

I take several seconds to think.

“Did you figure it out yet?” he asks.

“What? Your riddle? No. I’m thinking about all the ways I can do damage to you. How much snow can I push on you from the top of my car before you run away? Those kinds of things.”

He puts his hands on his hips. “I have concerns. You’re pretty good at word problems.”

“Crazy good.”

“So you’ve calculated how much snow you can shove on me before I take off running?” When I nod, he says, “And? What’s your conclusion?”

“Not as much as you deserve for how annoying you’re being.”

He nods. “Sure. I can see your dilemma. I have a solution.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Yes, you do. Try this: stop pretending you’re mad at me. Lean into this.” He wades through the snow to stand next to my car. “Climb down right now and kiss me like you mean it. Like you want to make me forget every Eastern European beauty queen who has ever crossed my path.”

I fling snow at him. He only ducks and smiles. He keeps his eyes on me and says nothing else.

I go back to snow removal. Levi doesn’t move. After a minute of this, I growl at him. “Stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Whatever you’re doing.”

“I’m literally doing nothing.”

“Well, knock it off.”

His eyebrows go up. “What would you like me to do instead, Tay?”

I shove more snow off the roof, but Levi stands unmoving, then I give up and jump into the soft snow below and face him.

“What was obvious to you when you came to see me first?” I ask.

“Why I haven’t been back in four years.” He leans slightly forward. “What will you give me if I tell you?”

I sigh, my breath an irritated contrail in the cold air. “What do you want?”

“Admit you like kissing me.”

“I like kissing you.”

His eyes widen. He clearly hadn’t expected me to make it that easy. “Admit you want to kiss me again.”

“No.”

“Stubborn.”

“That’s not a newsflash, Taft.”

“Last name, huh? I’m in big trouble.”

“The Obvious Truck got you again, I see.”

He clutches his heart. “So hurt.”

“Only metaphorically. But I would like to run an actual truck over you.”

“Make you a deal. Let me finish up here. Turns out we can run the generator all day if you want. There’s enough reserve gas for it. I noticed the ingredients for cocoa in the pantry. If

you'll make some while I finish this and dig out your car, I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

The weakness in my knees and churning in my stomach make me wonder if I *do* want to know. My mind is filling in the blanks he's leaving, or it's trying to. But every time my instinct whispers *This is what you want*, I push the thought away. This is *Levi*, not a stranger I can flirt with or even date who will cost me nothing if it doesn't work out. This is a lifelong friendship.

But there's no doubt what I'm going to do here. "I wanted cocoa anyway."

"Man, I'm glad it's working out for both of us."

I shove the dustpan at him and stomp into the house.

Chapter Thirteen

Levi



I SMELL THE WARM hot chocolate as soon as I walk in. I leave my snow boots beside Taylor's and unbundle myself, hanging everything on the hooks by the door. In the summer, they bristle with bright beach towels. Now it's my winter parka beside Taylor's puffy red one.

I spent the last half hour pulling my arguments together. This is going to be tricky. It shouldn't be. I wasn't kidding Taylor when I told her things had become obvious to me. Maybe in hindsight. Maybe later than they should have. But I see it now.

I have to make her see it, and she doesn't want to.

I walk into the kitchen, soaking up the warmth of the house as the furnace does its thing. Taylor is stirring a pot and staring at the wall.

"Hey."

She blinks at me. "Cocoa is done."

“My mom called again.” She tips the pan to pour the cocoa into the first mug, and as the steam curls up, I can almost taste the richness. “She got hold of Jon Egbert, and he said there’s a pretty good chance the road will get cleared tomorrow morning. He’ll come by later and let us know for sure.”

“That’s good news.” Taylor’s shoulders drop a fraction of an inch, and I realize how tightly she’s been holding herself.

Not at all like the warm and willing woman molded against me this morning. Time to find that Taylor again. “It is. With the generator running and your car dug out, we really do have a wide-open snow day in front of us because I know for a fact you don’t have anything else to do.”

She finishes filling the second mug and scoops them both up, handing mine to me as she leaves the kitchen.

“Running away?” I tease.

“Yeah, to my top secret lair by the living room fire. Hope you can’t find me.”

I trail after her, settling cross-legged next to her on the blankets still on the floor. I take another sip of my cocoa. “This is like being hugged from the inside.”

A smile tugs at her lips, one I can tell she tried to fight.

“Everyone kept telling me that Croatia has the best hot chocolate in the world, and I tried it. Several times. It’s good,” I say. “But all I could think was, they obviously haven’t tried Taylor Bixby’s.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

We sip our cocoa in silence. I can sense her waiting, wanting to know what I have to say, but Taylor is going to have to ask. I can only push her so far. She’ll have to set the pace here.

When my cocoa is half gone, she says, “Tell me what was so obvious.”

“You know how people will say they married their best friend?”

She shoots me a guarded look. “Yes.”

“Do you think they mean they became best friends during their marriage? Or they were best friends and then it grew from there?”

She answers by taking another big drink of her cocoa, so big I know she can’t actually be gulping it. She’s keeping her mug up to hide her face and play for time.

“I always thought they meant they became best friends after marrying,” I tell her. “But now I’m thinking not. Maybe it’s the other way.”

She makes a choking sound and sets down her mug. “Are you about to propose?”

Her eyes are big, and looking alarmed, like she’s bracing herself for bad news. I can’t help it: I laugh. “No.”

She relaxes.

“So flattering, Tay.”

“Wouldn’t you freak out if I suddenly got cryptic and talked about marrying my best friend?”

“Also no.”

Her eyes narrow. “I don’t believe you.”

“All right, let’s start with the best friend thing.” I shift so I’m facing her, but she stays facing the fire. “Are we best friends?”

“Yes.”

No hesitation, and I smile. “Making me feel hugged on the inside again.” It’s true. I love that even after not seeing her for four years, even after only keeping up with each other casually via texts, it’s still her response. “What makes me your best friend?”

“I’ve known you my whole life.”

I shrug. “I’ve known Sara my whole life. She’s not my best friend.”

“But you and I are the same age.”

I lean over and place a finger under her chin, turning her face toward me. “I’m here. I’m showing up. I want you to be here too. Will you?”

She holds my gaze for a long time. Seconds go by. Then she nods and turns to face me. “You’re my best friend because you know me better than anyone else but you still like me. You make me laugh. You know what causes my headaches. You know my pet peeves. My favorite books. My strengths and weaknesses. What scares me. What makes me happy. All of

that adds up to someone who you want to be around. Or did want to.”

“Still do. But we’ll get to the four-year gap.” I set my mug down and rest my forearms on my thighs. “You’re my best friend because however big of a goal I set, you always say it’s a great idea and cheer for me to get there. You just believe I’ll do it. You think the weird facts I know are interesting, and you never think I’m bragging when I share them. You think of fun things to do when I’m too serious, and I’ve puked on you twice in our lives and you didn’t make me feel bad about it. And none of that scratches the surface.”

She nods. “I’m a pretty great best friend when you spell it all out like that.”

“That kiss four years ago is when everything changed. The realest part of me knew that it was something I’d wanted to do for a really long time, and it scared me. Terrified me. I couldn’t acknowledge it. So I took off and didn’t come back.”

She stares at me, her lips slightly parted, silent.

“Taylor?”

She clears her throat. “Oh.”

I reach out and rest a hand on each of her knees, not to hold her there but to connect us. “That’s all you’ve got?” I say quietly.

She takes a deep breath. “This is what you figured out when the Obvious Truck ran over you?”

“Yes. Four years ago what scared me was figuring out that it was something I’d been wanting forever, maybe. That was so big, I couldn’t absorb it. Literally didn’t know how to let that all in, because ...” I trail off, frustrated that I don’t know how to explain this part better. I’m not a blurter, and the biggest part of my job is finding the right words for intense experiences.

Words don’t often fail me, but from the second I stepped off the bus and walked straight to Bixby’s Café, I’ve been operating on instinct.

“Because what?” she prompts me, her voice soft.

“Because I wasn’t ready.”

“But now ...”

“Now I am.” If this was a Hallmark movie, I think this is where she’d say “Same,” and we’d get to make up for all the kissing we haven’t done in the last four years.

In real life, she only watches me, her eyes roving over my face. Her expression looks more stressed than anything.

Anxiety creeps in. Since that Gage-instigated kiss, I’ve had this growing clarity, and I’ve been sure it’s the same for Taylor. This open wanting is a new thing for us, and I knew it might be awkward for us to figure out how to talk about it. But now, as I study the tightness around her eyes, the furrows in her forehead, I wonder if I’m wrong. I’ve been gone for four years. What if I’ve lost the ability to read her? “Do you want to say something now?”

“Let me make sure I understand.” Her voice is measured.

Anxiety buzzes louder. This isn’t a promising start.

“Four years ago, we were sloshed on my mom’s stupid strong eggnog, and we kissed on that porch.” She points over her shoulder without even looking. “You left town the next day. You have been passing time with European bikini models —”

“African and South American too.” Wrong joke if her sharp look is anything to go by.

“—and avoided your parents on Christmas for four years because deep down inside, kissing me freaked you out. Do I have this right so far?”

Trouble is coming. “Yes?” She gives me a hard look, so I say it again, committing to it. “Yes, that’s right.”

She sets her mug down. “Now you’re here, four years later, and we have another awkward mistletoe kiss, and you have an epiphany. You had feelings for me before. They’ve apparently been, what, dormant for four years?”

I open my mouth to answer, but she holds up her hand. “No. It’s fine. You have this epiphany, and you decide to start teasing me about it, and you come on this reindeer mission with me because why, Levi? Am I supposed to see all that too and be into you, and everything is fine?”

I’m not smiling anymore. “I’m ... not sure. Maybe?” She glares at me, and I try to explain. “We’ve always been on the same wavelength.” When she frowns, I shove my hand

through my hair, trying to sort through all this. What has been obvious for the last few days suddenly feels ... not. "Am I the only one who felt something? Because if that's true, I'm sorry." The weight of that hits me in the chest. "I shouldn't have assumed. Or projected. I shouldn't have been teasing you. And—"

She cuts my words off with a sharp wave of her hand. "Stop. Stop it. It's not ..." She leans over and buries her face in her hands.

All the warmth of "inside hugs" is turning to a hot wash of acid. "Tay." I reach over to touch her shoulder. "I blew this. Let me fix this. I'll—"

She surges to her feet. "Levi William Taft, you are the most frustrating man I have ever known. Ever!"

That last "ever" is almost a shout, but she is *not* done.

"Do you know how many crushes on you I've cut off? How many times I've felt myself slipping over the edge of something and hauled my emotions back to safety? How many stupid girlfriends I've watched you date who were all wrong for you? How many times I've had to scrub that first mistletoe kiss from my memory banks but it keeps coming back?"

"No?" Okay, so I'm in trouble. But I wasn't imagining things. There is a spark there. I have no idea where that leaves us in this moment.

"SO MANY TIMES." That's as close to a yell as it can get without being a yell. "But you decide after one near brush with

catching feelings that you'd rather disappear for four years than deal with it, you get burnt out reporting from countries I'm still not sure exist, you come waltzing back into town, and you decide now you're ready for these feelings, and you're going to snap your fingers, and I will just WHAT, Levi? What did you expect me to do next?"

I am not a stupid man. I do not answer the question. Still, she has given me a lot of information in that monologue. Information that is not without hope. But now is not the time for follow-up questions. I say nothing.

"Answer me, Levi. You want me to do what?"

Oh, wrong tack. Definitely say something. "I thought you would realize you have feelings too and admit that our moms called it from birth?" I say hopefully.

She doesn't smile. But I'm trying not to because the "crushes" she's been fighting ... I don't think crushes come and go and come again. If this is a thing that stays, and she keeps pushing it down, maybe that's not a crush. Maybe you don't get crushes on someone you've known your whole life when you're twenty-six. And maybe if it's only a crush, it won't still be holding on when you're thirty.

This is probably different for me because I never "knew" how I felt in the thinking part of my brain. But it was always in the *feeling* part of me. It drew me back here. And it got through to the thinking part of my brain when I walked into Bixby's and Taylor threw herself into my arms. I'd closed them around her, and I started to understand.

I realized I'd known it four years ago, so there was no thunderbolt. It was more like ... seeing things clearly.

"I'm going outside," she says. "In my coat, and big boots, and snow hat, and the stupid gloves your mom sent that I thought I wouldn't need, but she was right, and I don't know how she does this. I don't want you to come with me. I'll be back when I'm back."

"That's fair," I say. "But at what point is it okay for me to assume I should organize a search party if you haven't returned?"

"Never. I'll make sure I can see this house or the Egbert house. I won't get lost. But I'm not coming in until ... until ..."

I hold up my hands in a *say no more* gesture and keep my mouth shut.

She practically stomps to the door and wrestles on her snow gear. She pulls a beanie down on her head, and it makes her hair poof to the sides. I know that she is very angry, but this beanie has a yellow pompom on top, which is generally more in keeping with Taylor's disposition. I decide to take it as a sign of things to come, and I keep a serious expression until she disappears through the door, which she closes quietly behind her. Taylor is not a door slammer, not even when she's as mad as I've ever seen her.

Except I *do* know Taylor well. As well as I know any other soul on the planet. I'm pretty sure she's not mad. My gut says

she's scared. If I can get her to talk to me about why, we'll solve this.

I consider her scowl as she left.

Okay, she's definitely *somewhat* mad. Best to lie low and let her take it out on the snow, and then I think we're going to be all right.

I let out the grin I've been fighting since she admitted to playing Whack-a-Mole with "crushes" on me over the years. I slide my hands into my jeans pockets and walk to the big window where I can see her trudging toward the tree line. High knee, stomp. High knee, stomp.

Yeah. Taylor Bixby is into me.

As into me as I'm into her.

Dang. I am one lucky guy.

High knee. Stomp.

Chapter Fourteen

Taylor



LEVI . . .

Levi what? Loves me? He didn't use that word.

Is wildly attracted to me?

Not a stretch given the heat coming off him if he's within arm's reach.

Wants to be ... kissing friends?

Can't be. I don't believe that for two seconds. We may not have been as tight over the last four years as we were before that, but he values our friendship too much to risk it for something that ... flimsy? Yeah. Flimsy.

I climb over a large branch that looks like it broke off in the storm last night and enter the woods. I'll keep my promise not to lose sight of the house, but I need a different headspace, and that means a different physical space. A quiet forest qualifies.

So Levi ... what?

Loves me.

Of course he does. He's always loved me. I've always loved him. Except in middle school. But before and after, definitely. As I do now. As I always will.

We've said it before. Countless times. So many times, I've never stopped to think about it. "Bye, weirdo. Love you."

Are there times where a part of me tried to imagine what it would mean if he'd meant it like "I love you, so be with me forever?"

No. Because that's not what we were. *Are*. If I felt that bubbling up, then *nip*. Deadhead that stirring feeling like one of Miss Lily's prize roses with a sucker and save that energy for growing other things. Like potentially a relationship with another guy who is not Levi. One who I like as well. One who I eventually know as well. But one I can fall for because he will fall for me too.

There have been contenders. Some almosts. Ethan at the pharmacy and I went out, but I couldn't get past him being the guy who had to fill my antibiotic prescription for a UTI. I thought about that cute coach at the high school when he came into the café a few times, but then he went and fell madly in love with Grace Winters. Not that I can blame him. I'm straight, but I get it. She's awesome.

Paige snapped up the cute professor who moved in last Christmas before the rest of us even knew there was a new guy in town. But he's too old for me anyway. Or ... that's not right.

He's not that old. But he's got an old soul vibe; put that with his endless V-neck sweaters, and he doesn't feel young.

Anyway. Sometimes well-meaning friends will set me up. And sometimes, those setups even show some promise. But one way or another, they never end up being *right*.

It always feels right being with Levi. But not like *that*. We're friends. Then we became friends who kissed once and talked way less after that.

I've missed the full Levi William Taft experience the last four years. I like that we've started to get our footing back.

Except with more kissing.

"Aaargh," I growl at the tree in front of me.

It answers with a plop of snow on my head that slides down my face. I splutter and wipe it from my eyes and nose.

I give the tree my back and cross my arms. Well, kind of. It's hard in a puffy coat. I stare down at the ground, which is covered with less snow because the trees filtered it.

What if ...

What if I carefully consider the idea that Levi would not blow up our friendship for a makeout because he happens to be in town? What if I consider the implications that he stayed away for four years because that first kiss scared him at some level? That kind of scared comes when ...

When you love someone.

But he did not use that word.

And Levi's whole job is words. He'd have said it if that's what he meant.

And his job. His *job*. His job is faraway. All the time. Not in Creekville, ever. I hate that. But I love that he loves his work. He's not going to give it up for me. That means this—whatever it is for him—isn't love.

So what does it mean that I also know he wouldn't risk our friendship for a quick roll? Is there any implication I could be missing?

I pace around the tree as I try to work this out.

“He is misreading old feelings of comfort and easiness with each other as attraction.” That sounds possible.

“He is discovering his feelings go beyond friendship and have for a while, and that means he wants to kiss my cute face.”

I snort. Who wouldn't?

I stop and close my eyes, forcing myself to consider the big possibility again. What if Levi *loves* me loves me?

The part of my brain where I seal my crush behind vaulted doors tries to skitter away from this possibility, because that possibility? That is the code to the vault.

Know what I'm keeping safe in that vault?

MY WHOLE SELF. No biggie.

“Stop it, you chicken.”

I open my eyes. What if Levi Taft loves me? Like *that*?

I look from the snow to the house.

It is cold. It is very cold. I want to go back. Except Levi is in the house. The house where we first kissed. The house where we almost, this morning ...

Well, I don't know. I don't know what that was about to be.

Even if I showed up at the Egberts' house and begged for asylum from my emotions, I'd *still* have to drive two more hours with Levi in a car tomorrow.

I slide my phone from my back pocket. Two bars. That's enough of a signal to make a call.

"Mom?" I say when she answers.

"Hey. It's not snowing again, is it?"

"No. No more snow. No snowplows, but we hear we're getting out in the morning."

"That's good."

I pause. Her tone is ... calm. Too calm. She should be fussing. She should be coming up with a Plan A, B, and C in case we aren't plowed out tomorrow.

"Why aren't you worried about this?" I ask.

"Sheryl also said the road will be taken care of tomorrow, and she would know."

There is technically nothing wrong with her statement, but it still feels off. I can't figure out why. "I hope she's right. It's the only way we still have a shot. Has Rome said anything yet?"

“Still no clues,” she says. “Are y’all making out fine in the cabin?”

I choke on my spit. “Excuse me?”

“Everything okay there? David said you should be able to run the generator the whole time you’re there.”

“Everything is fine here,” I say. “Except ...”

“Except what?”

I hesitate. Am I unleashing forces I can’t control if I tell her about Levi’s ... behavior? “Mom, you’re on my team more than anyone else’s, right?”

“I am Team Dad first, Team Daughters second, Team Twins third.”

“But all of us ahead of anyone not born or married into this family?”

“A hundred percent.”

“Even Levi?”

There’s a long pause. “Yes.”

But it’s cautious. “I mean it, Mom. If I needed advice, you would tell me what was best for me and not what gives you and Sheryl Taft a chance to plan a wedding?”

“Honey,” she says. Her voice is so gentle that my eyes prick with tears. “I’m always on your side. What’s going on?”

“We kissed.”

“Yeah, we all saw that.”

“But it was not for show.”

Another pause. Then, “We all saw that too.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I’m confirming what you told me. This should not be news.”

“It’s news that everyone else noticed.”

“Oh, honey.”

That’s it. She doesn’t add anything to that even though I wait for several seconds. “Mom.”

She sighs. “What do you want me to say, Taylor?”

“Whatever you’re trying very hard not to say right now!”

“Oh, boy.”

“Mom.”

“Give me a second. I’m going to need some eggnog for this.”

The phone knocks against a hard surface, and I hear the distant sound of the fridge door opening. A minute later, she picks up the phone. “Okay, let’s do this.”

“What are we doing?” I’m sorry I called now. This feels like a good time to hang up and run back to the house.

Where Levi is.

Never mind. I’ll stay in these freezing cold woods.

She takes a deep breath. “When you say you weren’t faking it, it makes me think that you wanted to kiss Levi and ditto for

him. And when you want to kiss your friend, even after knowing him your whole life, it says something. Do you know what it says?”

“He’s pretty cute?”

She chuckles. “That he is. But that boy is intentional. Always has been. My guess is that kissing you wasn’t a whim for him. And don’t you tell me it was a whim for you.”

I sigh. “It wasn’t.”

“Am I to understand that after being snowed in at a remote cabin that contains a ton of shared memories, you two did some more kissing?”

“It’s *Levi*, Mom.”

“So that’s a yes.”

I groan. “Almost.”

“Thank goodness,” she says.

“Mom! You said you’re on my side.”

“Of course I am. That’s why I’m so happy.”

“I’m not! I’m confused, and kind of mad, and a lot miserable, and—”

“Scared?” she interjects.

“Yes.” I only wish the word had hard consonants so I could bite it out.

“As much as I would love to, I can’t tell you what to do here, Taylor. You’ll use me as your escape hatch.”

“Because you would tell me to go with this, and when it inevitably crashes and burns, I’ll blame you and say you talked me into it?”

“Taylor. I can’t tell you what to do.” She gives each word a slight punch.

“What if this blows up?” That’s the fear. Of course that’s the fear. That my feelings are stronger. That if I let them out, I won’t be able to deny their full strength like I have for years. That I’m so far ahead, he’ll never catch up. That he’ll never want to.

I’m even scared that he might feel as strongly as I do, but then what? His life is not in Creekville, but the town is who I am.

“What if it doesn’t?” she asks back. “Think about this. Hasn’t Levi always pushed you into your favorite adventures? And haven’t you always trusted him enough to let him?”

I let the words sit there. I make myself feel them.

She’s right.

“Tay?”

“I’m here. But I have to go.”

“You need to talk to Levi?”

“Actually, I think I need to listen.”

Chapter Fifteen

Levi



SHE'S BEEN GONE FOREVER.

I check the time on my phone. Twenty minutes. Time for a search party.

I pull on my gear and trudge out to the woods. "Taylor? You okay?"

"Fine," she calls. I'm about to cross the tree line to go to her, but she says, "Stop!"

I freeze, eyes darting around. "Is there a bear?" It's almost a whisper.

"A bear? What? No. They sleep in winter." She stops about six feet from me. "But look."

I follow the direction of her pointing finger. "Yes. Those are nice trees."

"See that weird poofy ball of green with white berries?"

“Oh, yeah. Mistletoe.” Excellent.

“It’s all over the trees in here.”

“I love this forest,” I say in a reverent voice.

She rolls her eyes. “Why are you here? I told you no search parties.”

I think about this. “Okay, how about if I missed you?”

“Did you?” She trudges toward me.

“Now and for four years.”

“Same, maybe,” she says when she reaches me. “All right, wonderboy. Let’s go talk in the house.”

“Orrrr—just hear me out—we talk here.” I eye some mistletoe.

She plods past me, trying to step in my footsteps in the snow.

“Coming,” I say, falling in behind her.

She doesn’t wait until we’ve trudged all the way back to the house.

“What do you mean you have feelings for me?” she asks over her shoulder. “In your mind, what happens next?”

I’m not giving this answer to her back. This deserves a face-to-face.

She looks over her shoulder.

“I’m thinking,” I tell her.

We slog our way back to the cabin. She steals glances at me as we kick our boots against the backdoor threshold to knock

the snow away. Inside, we hang up our snow gear again.

As she drapes her knit scarf on a hook, I know there's only one answer I can give here. It's an answer that deserves flowers and soft music, but she's asking now, and I'll give it to her now. I understand the cliff-edge feeling she described in front of the fire. My next words could be the landmine that ends everything, but I find the same courage that has propelled me into some of my scariest situations.

"I love you," I say. Because those situations always resulted in the best stories. The realest ones.

"Love you too."

I shake my head. "No, I *love* you. I'm *in* love with you."

She gives me a long look, then she steps toward me, grabs the front of my sweater, and pulls me down for a kiss.

I slide my arms around her and slip one up to cradle the back of her head, holding this wondrous woman exactly where I want her, her body molded to me, her lips warm and full beneath mine.

"Say it again," she demands, her words humming against my mouth.

"I love you," I tell her. I show her again with another kiss, this one deep and fierce, and when we finally separate, short of breath, she looks up at me with an unfocused gaze and swollen lips.

"We skipped a lot of steps," she says, her voice breathy.

Something in my core tightens, a sense of pride, that I did that. I made her struggle to speak. She pushes away, not a hard push, and I can't stand the idea of space between us, so I lean down and kiss her again, running my tongue along the seam of her mouth, gently teasing it open, until she's exploring me, tasting me, and it's a damn near out-of-body experience.

No one has ever made me feel like this with a kiss.

"Levi," she says after several minutes. She pushes against my chest. "I mean it. We're jumping over some key steps here."

"Are we? Or have we taken thousands more steps toward this than most people do before they get to this point? We know each other far better than couples who date for months. What do you need for us to know that we fit? That we're supposed to be together?"

She steps away from me, and my hands slide from her body as she withdraws. "What would this mean for the future? Will you flutter in and out of Creekville a few times a year between assignments?"

"I don't know." I don't point out that she hasn't said how she feels, even if I can sense it in her kiss. But I'm a words guy, and I badly want them from her. I can wait, but I want them. "We can figure it out."

"Can we?" she asks. "It's more than a normal long-distance relationship. Even if you lived in DC full-time and we only saw each other on the weekend, that would be long-distance."

But you're in entire other countries most of the year. How would this even work?"

"I don't know that either." But I'm not discouraged. She kissed me back. She used the word "relationship." It's a good word to start with. Her gears are turning. That's something. A good something.

"Creekville has never been enough for you, but it's all I've ever wanted. How does that fit into everything?"

I put my hands on her shoulders and pull her against me, slowly, letting her know she can walk away the second she wants to. "Honestly, Tay, I didn't know what I was here to do until I did it. I haven't thought all of this through, but I'm not worried about it. I know what I want now. It'll take creativity and compromise, but we can figure out the logistics. Are you up for figuring this out as we go, even if we aren't sure yet what happens next?"

She leans into me, curling her body against mine. She stands that way for a long time. I can almost hear the whirs and clicks of her brain sorting through this.

Finally, she straightens enough to meet my eyes. "What if this changes everything?"

I smooth back a piece of her hair, tucking it behind her ear. I study her face. Her gorgeous, expressive, tempting face. That mouth. Those eyes that say so much of what she's thinking even when she's quiet.

“We’re past that point. It’s changed. It’s a question of how it plays out next, and that all comes down to how you feel.” I cup her jaw and brush my thumb over her lips. “You haven’t said.”

She rests her head on my collarbone. “You’re asking me to wrap my head around a future that has a big blank in it. I need to think.”

It’s not what I want to hear, but I’ve forced this discussion, and I have to accept it. “We’ve got time.” I hope this is true. I hope that she’s much closer to a tipping point than she looks right now, and that she tips my way. “So what do we do—”

A knock at the front door interrupts us. We give each other a startled glance, and I walk over to open it.

My neighbor is on my doorstep. “Hey, Jon.”

“Hey,” he says. “Have you tried your power?”

“Generator’s running. We’re good.”

“I mean the house power. Might be okay now.”

I wonder what he’s basing this on, since he never lost power. “Sure, I’ll do that.”

“I’ll go cut the generator for you and you can check.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I say, closing the door as he heads down the front porch steps.

A minute later, the generator quiets outside. Taylor looks at me, shrugs, and reaches for the nearest light switch. The hall light leading to the grandkid rooms comes on.

“It’s back,” I say.

“It is.” She opens the back door and leans around the frame. “You’re right, it works,” she calls. I hear Jon call something, then she calls back to him, “Thank you! We appreciate it!”

She closes the door and turns to face me.

“Your move,” I say.

“I’m going to make lunch. I’m going to go through my emails and make sure there’s nothing I need to handle. I’m going to think. I’m going to overthink. Then I’m going to mull, followed by some pondering.”

“And then?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know. But I’ll tell you when I do.”

“I understand.” Maybe not really. But if she’s been having feelings for as long as I have that she’s been calling an intermittent crush, I can give her the time to catch up. To let a new word replace that one. To wrap her head around the fact that she’s madly in love with me.

I think.

I hope.

I take a deep breath. I *believe*.

She walks toward the kitchen but stops when she reaches me. She goes up on her toes and presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth, then catches my bottom lip between her teeth and lets it scrape lightly as she draws away.

My knees nearly buckle.

But she doesn't say anything and neither do I as she disappears into the kitchen. But I have hope. A whole sleigh full of it.



We spend the rest of the day quietly. Taylor works on emails and talks to Miss Lily for a while, but not only does Miss Lily sound like she has everything handled, she sounds like she's experienced glee while handling it.

Eventually, Taylor pulls a jigsaw puzzle from the game cabinet and works on it.

I dig out one of my dad's Louis L'Amour novels and get lost in the Old West. We're not ignoring each other. It's mostly quiet, but it's comfortable. This is something Taylor does; she sometimes goes deep inside herself to work a thing out, and as impatient as I am for us to begin a new chapter—one that opens with lots of making out—I'll wait.

When I start to worry she'll decide we're better as friends, I force myself to review everything I remember from the reindeer herders until I relax, running through the steps in my mind, recalling the scents and sounds, the sounds the herders made depending on what they wanted the reindeer to do.

When the worry settles, I go back to the Old West.

She gets up to make dinner, but I won't let her. "I got it," I tell her. "I'm as good of a cook as you are."

“Fine by me.” She goes back to her puzzle, and it looks like she has the majority of the thousand pieces in place.

A half hour later, we eat bacon, egg, and tomato sandwiches. “I’d have used lettuce, but our moms didn’t pack any.”

She shakes her head. “They remembered water crackers and a bottle of wine, but no lettuce. Wonder what they were packing us for?”

“Pretty sure I know.” But she doesn’t follow up the comment, and it’s as close as we get to touching on the decision she’s mulling.

I run through reindeer care in my mind again.

We settle back into our book and puzzle, but after an hour, I decide it’s useless, and I get up from the sofa. “Do you have a preference on rooms tonight? It doesn’t matter to me with the heater working. You want the fireplace room?”

She looks up from her puzzle. “You’re going to bed?”

“Yeah. I’m guessing you want to leave as soon as the road is cleared. I want to get enough sleep in case it’s really early.”

“Oh. Good idea. You take your parents’ room. I’ll pick a room when I’m tired.”

I think I’m too wound up to sleep, too on edge waiting for what Taylor will decide, but I’m wrong. I doze off, and I’m not sure how long I’ve been asleep when Taylor climbs into the bed.

“Tay?”

“It’s still warmer in here,” she whispers. “Don’t get any ideas. I’m here to sleep.”

“With me? All cuddled up like you love me?”

“Shut up and shove over.” She doesn’t sound mad. More importantly, she doesn’t deny it.

I scoot closer to the middle to make room for her, then hold up the blanket to invite her in. She burrows right into me, her back against my chest, her hips tucked into mine. I settle the blanket over both of us, and within a couple of minutes, her breath falls into the steady rhythm of sleep.

I stare down at this armful of woman with something like awe. I don’t know if many people get to love someone this much. Whatever happens, I’m grateful I’ve grown up enough in the last four years to realize it.

A wayward strand of hair clings to her cheek, and I tuck it behind her ear and feather a kiss against her temple. “Love you forever, Taylor Bixby,” I whisper. “No matter what.” She gives a soft, indistinct murmur and snuggles further into my chest.

I lie awake for a long time watching her sleep, until finally, it pulls me down too.

When I wake up again, it’s to empty arms and loud rumbling outside. It’s still dark through the crack in the curtains, and I get up and shuffle out to find Taylor and identify the noise. Light from the kitchen spills into the living room, but it’s still dim enough to see clearly through the front windows.

The problem is I'm not sure what I'm looking at. It's a truck. A big Chevy diesel. I open the front door and step out into the cold to peer at the driver.

"You have got to be kidding me." That's—

"What's going on?" Taylor asks behind me. She's too smart to step out on the porch.

I come in and shut the door before I answer. "That is Jon in a big old truck with a snowplow blade on the front, clearing our driveway."

Her forehead wrinkles, and she blinks at me, trying to make sense of this.

"He started at his house. He's working his way down to the road."

"Which means he could have done this yesterday," Taylor finishes.

We stare at each other. I'm not sure what's going through her mind, but in mine, I'm replaying some odd conversations and moments involving four suspicious parents.

"I've got some calls to make when we get on the road," I say.

"Permission to join as co-interrogator."

"Can I be bad cop?"

"They don't deserve good cop. Let's both be bad cop."

"I like the way you think," I tell her. "I'm going to shovel the last bit of snow between your car and the road."

“I’ll pack up food.”

An hour later, the sun still hasn’t peeked over the eastern mountains, but everything is washed in faint predawn light, and we’re ready to go, the car packed, the path clear all the way to the end of the private road.

We settle in, and Taylor wants to drive again. She puts two coffee tumblers in the cupholders. “Cocoa,” she says. “We can stop for coffee later if we see anything promising.”

“Taylor for president,” I say. “It’s not seven yet. Is it too early to call our parents?”

“Probably.”

“Good.” I stab my mom’s number, putting her on speaker. “Hey, Mom. Hope I woke you up.”

“Levi?” Her voice is groggy. “Is everything okay?”

“No. Working on an explosive investigative report.”

“Wha—”

“Was the electricity ever really out in the cabin?”

A long silence. “You couldn’t turn it on, could you?” she finally asks.

“That’s not an answer.”

More silence. Taylor and I trade looks.

“Does Jon usually plow this road for you?”

“That’s not Jon’s job,” she says.

Taylor shakes her head at me. More evasion.

“Mom, did you and Mama B plot to trap Taylor and me in the cabin to make us live out a warped Hallmark fantasy?”

This is met with the longest pause by far. She clears her throat. “Well? Did it work?”

“Sheryl!” Taylor splutters.

“See you Friday, Mom.” I end the call, and we sit in silence. I’m not going to tell her that I’m not even remotely upset with our meddling mothers.

Then Taylor starts to laugh. “They’re crazy.”

I shake my head and sip my cocoa. “They must be dealt with.” But soon I’m laughing too.

When we settle down, Taylor calls Mr. Earl to inform him we’ll be there midmorning.

“Should be a good amount of time if your reindeer fella knows his stuff,” he says.

The call is on speaker, so I answer for myself. “I do, Mr. Earl. I won’t let you down.”

“See you soon then.”

When Taylor hangs up, I expect her to relax now that we know we can get the reindeer, but she doesn’t. She stays slightly hunched, her fingers tight on the steering wheel, periodically peering up through her windshield, like she can’t trust the sky not to snow.

I wish I knew what to do to help, but she probably won’t feel better until those reindeer are trotting down Main Street in

Creeksville.

Maybe not even until Rome tells Santa his wish.

I suspect I know it. I suspect all the Bixbys know what it is too. It's what any kid whose dad is gone for Christmas would ask for. He wants his dad *here*. But I have a feeling the Bixbys are clinging to a faint hope that it's going to be something they can deliver more easily—like an impossible-to-find toy.

There's nothing I can do to help except show Mr. Earl that his reindeer are safe with me. I brought a stack of ten Franklins to help convince him if my knowledge isn't enough. It'll be worth every penny to set Taylor's mind at ease, if that's what it takes.

After about an hour and another of her windshield checks, she darts into the road shoulder and brakes fast.

I'd been sipping the last of my cocoa, and I dribble some on my chin. "What was that? Is something wrong with the car?"

"I want to show you something." She's already getting out of the car, so I wipe my chin with a gas station napkin and follow her.

She walks quickly over to a tree and waits until I join her. Then she points up. "What do you see?"

I squint and recognize the green sphere. "Mistletoe."

She cocks her head. "You know what to do."

I do. I definitely do.

I pull her against me and kiss her. It's not soft. I've been wanting to do this since yesterday, and after the delicious torture of having her sleep in my arms all night, I'm hungry to taste her.

She returns the kiss with just as much passion, her hands coming up, one to clutch the front of my shirt, the other sliding into the hair at my nape to hold me there, like she's making sure I won't go anywhere.

Zero danger of that.

As she pulls at me, trying to stretch up to meet me, angling for a deeper kiss, I decide caution is overrated. Words are overrated. I'll let my kiss do the talking.

I smooth my hands over her hips and around to the back of her thighs, giving them an insistent squeeze, and she understands the assignment, helping me lift her so her legs can twine around me. Our mouths are even, neither of us breaking the kiss.

It goes on, me tearing my mouth away to drag kisses along her jaw before she greedily redirects me to her mouth. It's like she can't get enough of me any more than I can of her, and I give her what we both want, the kiss growing half-wild until the honk of a passing car penetrates the haze we're lost in.

She rests her forehead against mine with a soft laugh, her finger outlining the edges of my lips.

"No complaints here," I say. "But what was that for?"

She presses against my shoulders to be let down but hooks her fingers into the front pocket of my jeans to keep me close as she looks up at me.

“I love you, Levi Taft. You taste like cinnamon, cocoa, and forever, and I’m addicted.”

I hold her against my chest, hoping she can hear how fast she’s making my heart beat. “Thank Santa and all his reindeer. I was afraid I was going to have to beg our moms to let me join their next plotting session.”

Laughing, she hops up, and I catch her, and I lose count of how many more car horns we hear, but none of them break us up, not for a long, cocoa-flavored time.

Chapter Sixteen

Taylor



LEVI PASSES MR. EARL'S inspection. We spend the day practicing attaching the traces to the sleigh, harnessing the reindeer, and walking them around the nearest fallow field. It's a far more involved process than I realized, especially for eight reindeer with all of the individual straps and buckles. Rusty Earl is quiet but polite, efficient with the reindeer, and thankful for the extra holiday money he'll be earning for the trip down to Creekville.

The day is also spent trading lingering glances with Levi and stealing kisses every time Rusty is out of sight. Poor kid starts finding more and more tasks in the barn and anywhere that isn't by us. I don't know if he's sick of watching us act lovesick, or if he's trying to help us out, but either way, I'm thankful.

Levi tells me at least a dozen times he loves me before dinner. I love hearing it as much the twelfth time as the first. I

say it back just as often.

That night, Mrs. Earl feeds us beef stew and Levi plays footsie with me under the table, causing me to blush at least twice. This in turn causes Mrs. Earl to frown and ask if the stew is too spicy and fuss at her husband about seasoning behind her back.

I'd like to save Mr. Earl, but I'm not going to confess Levi is making me want to lose my mind by tracing his foot along the contours of my calf.

She puts us in small guest bedrooms, each plain with a small dresser and a twin bed. And if she hears Levi sneak over after lights-out to deliver on his promised makeout, she doesn't let on at breakfast.

Levi rides with Rusty early Friday morning while I drive my car back. It seems insane to me that a seventeen-year-old is allowed to haul a livestock trailer with three thousand pounds of reindeer in it, but apparently, that's fine because the total weight with the trailer is still okay. I can't argue that Rusty looks comfortable behind the wheel.

They'd sent me off to fill up my car while they loaded the trailer so we can get on the road and drive straight to Creekville. The truck, a Ford F-350 Super Duty, is already gassed up, and Mr. Earl explains that Rusty will refuel it in Creekville *before* he hitches the livestock trailer back up to return. Much easier that way.

Then we're on the road.

After all the delays—from the flu to the blizzard—it hardly seems real. It takes six hours to get back—Rusty has to go slower to accommodate longer braking times with all that weight hitched behind him—but we drive it straight through, and by midafternoon, we’re pulling into Leland Whipple’s farm. He’s been nice enough to let us stage and then stable the reindeer here. On Sunday morning, we’ll all help load them back up with lots of pats and chin scratches and sweet hay so Rusty gets home in plenty of time for Christmas with extra spending cash for his trouble.

Levi jumps down from his side of the truck and jogs over to me. I roll the window down, and he leans in for a long and hungry kiss.

“I missed you,” he says.

“Even though I was fifty yards behind you all day?”

“Especially because you were so close but out of reach. I’d love to show you how much I missed you, but you have to get over to town. Go.”

I look at the livestock truck and back to Levi.

“We’ve got it covered,” he promises. “Go make everyone’s favorite tradition happen.”

“It’s not that. I want to stay with you.”

“But you can’t.” His eyes are soft, like he gets how I’m feeling.

“But I can’t.” I sigh and put my car in reverse. “See you tonight?”

“Absolutely.”

I drive into town, smiling at how the snow has ended up working in my favor here. Or at least, it’s worked in favor of Christmas Town. Creekville got far less snow than the cabin did, but just enough has stuck on north-facing roofs and in spots of landscaping here and there to give downtown even more of a snow globe effect.

I park behind the café. Sara will be in there with Celia, likely with a friend or two of Celia’s. Celia had asked before I left if she could bring extra help to make up for my absence.

I walk in through the back, and when I step out onto the sales floor, Sara waves at me but then calls, “Go! We got this. Go help Miss Lily.”

“On it.” It’s packed in the café like it is every Christmas Town weekend. All the people helping with set up duck in to fuel with coffee, and people who arrived early for prime parade space send in delegates to get trays of hot drinks for their groups.

I toss my purse onto my desk and set off at a jog for the town green, three blocks down.

Miss Lily is easy to find, her petite figure standing erect on the dais where the mayor will meet Santa to welcome him to Christmas Town. She’s wearing a bright red beret so there’s no missing her.

“I’m back,” I tell her, jogging up the steps.

She turns and smiles at me. “That you are. With roses in your cheeks too.”

“I ran from the café. I’m so sorry it took an extra day.”

She pats my arm. “Don’t worry, Taylor Bixby. Everything is falling apart right on plan.”

I survey the hive of activity as people scurry back and forth, yelling for tools or calling out orders as they hurry to get their booths complete in the two hours remaining before sundown. Miss Lily’s right; this is the normal level of chaos at this point, where it doesn’t seem possible for it to come together.

All the booths are up, but some are still missing their signs, only half of them have their lights strung or staked, and all of them have people inside trying to get their goods set up for sale. But the “town” is there in the booth facades, the mock village skyline that changes each year as groups and vendors change their themes. I’m not worried; it always comes together when Santa hits the switch. Suddenly, it will glow in the new-fallen darkness, a merry Christmas village, prepared to serve up delicious treats and handmade treasures.

I give her a hug. “Thank you for doing this, Miss Lily. You are the only reason I didn’t worry about not making it back in time to oversee setup this morning.”

“My pleasure,” she says. “But I’ll probably take next year off.”

I laugh as she hands me her clipboard and pretends to wipe her hands clean of the whole mess.

“I’m off to enjoy tea and a scone,” she says. “Then I’ll wait for my grandkids to join me for the parade.”

“Thank you again,” I tell her as I wave goodbye. Then I text Sara that Miss Lily is not to be charged today or all of next year for anything she wants from the café.

I hop down from the dais and inspect the progress, going from booth to booth, answering questions, offering praise and encouragement for the handful who have it together, stopping to see if the ones behind the curve need anything. They all need the one thing I can’t give them—time, so I offer reassurances instead. “You can do it! You’re so much closer than you think. This is looking even better than last year’s. You’ve got this!”

I field constant texts too. Mr. Groggins lets me know he’s at the Episcopal church, which is at the end of Main, where the parade will start. He’s dressed and ready to go.

Levi texts updates on their progress. They’ll wait until the last possible minute so as not to spoil the surprise of the *eight* reindeer pulling Santa, but by the time I hear the distant sound of the Albemarle marching band tuning, he texts that they’re in place and hitching up the reindeer.

My parents text that they have the twins at our usual spot, which I always stake out in front of the café. Sara had handled that this year.

At last, dusk falls, and the Main Street lamps come on. A classic Cadillac convertible will come down first, blaring cheerful Christmas music, driven by the mayor’s husband

while she rides in the back, waving to the crowds on the sidewalk. I stay beside the dais, clipboard in hand, Bluetooth earpiece in, answering texts and a couple of panicked phone calls. Jeff, the grounds guy, finds me.

“Lights are good to go, boss.”

“Thank you, Jeff.”

It’s not a long parade, and even taking its time, it’s only about fifteen minutes before the mayor reaches me. Then her husband helps her down and drives the Caddy down Chestnut Avenue, the street that borders the green and serves as the parade route exit.

Mayor Derby climbs to the dais and waves to each group of marchers as they reach the end. The Cub Scouts, the little girls from the dance studio in sparkly costumes, the animal shelter walking a half dozen of their available dogs. I’m particularly proud of that. I invited them to participate last year, and every single one of those dogs ended up as a gift on Christmas Day. They’re all happy-looking mutts dressed with gift bows on their collars, and they’ll draw a crowd as soon as Santa opens Christmas Town.

Several more floats come down. The high school football team, the basketball team, the sheriff. He always has the “Grinch” cuffed in the back of his unit, his green face scowling through the window at the kids to their shrieks of delight.

At last, it’s the marching band, and as they come into sight, they begin playing a jazzy version of “Santa Claus Is Coming

to Town.”

We’ve heard the cheers following him as he’s made his way down Main, but this is the most crowded part of the route, and the cheers are deafening. Everyone knows what it means when the marching band starts this song.

Sure enough, the band stops in front of the dais to finish the song. They bow to the mayor, who waves, and then they peel off to march around the dais to the right to take their space in the green, softly playing another verse of the song.

Only two trumpet players remain at the two front corners of the dais, and at a cue I don’t see, they raise their trumpets to blow a fanfare with strong nods to “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” The band director had emailed me with his idea for this embellishment, and I had no idea how well it would work.

I only wish Levi was standing beside me, watching the magic unfold.

And then, there’s Santa. The Santa-est Santa who ever Santa-ed. He’s waving his white-gloved hands as Rusty, wearing a Santa hat and sparkly suspenders beside him, handles the reins. The reindeer look magnificent, bells jingling on their halters, tinsel woven all over the place, and the gasps of awe feed my Christmas spirit.

I catch the expressions on the faces of two young sisters, their eyes growing huge at the sight of the reindeer.

The older one turns to the younger one, and I can read her lips plainly. *It's the real Santa.*

An arm slides around my waist, and Levi bends to rumble in my ear, "Merry Christmas. You did it."

I give him a kiss, one that couldn't possibly read as friendly to anyone, but I don't care who's watching. There will be a million aggravations between now and when Christmas Town closes tomorrow night, but it's here. We've done it.

The rest of the night goes as planned. Santa steps from his sleigh to the dais, and the mayor makes a short speech welcoming him and thanking him for officially opening Christmas Town.

Santa gives a jolly *ho ho ho* and tells the crowd in his rich baritone how delighted he is to visit with the good boys and girls tonight and tomorrow.

Then, with a countdown from the crowd, he throws the switch, and Christmas Town blazes to life behind him, the green transformed into a magical alpine village promising wonders and delights.

Once the mayor walks Santa to his photo set complete with his large, comfy chair, we officially remove the velvet ropes on either side of the dais, and the crowd spills into the green, chattering and laughing to the cheerful strains of the band playing "Jingle Bell Rock."

Tucked against Levi's side, I watch the people stream past.

"Worth it?" he asks.

“Every year,” I tell him. “It made Christmas magical when I was a kid, and I’m so glad Glynnis Hunsaker let me take over.”

“Tata!” an excited voice calls, and I spot Gage running toward me, slightly ahead of Rome, who hangs back, holding hands with Sara and my dad.

I crouch and scoop Gage into a hug. “Hey, buddy. Are you so excited to go talk to Santa?”

“Yeah!”

“You too?” I ask Rome, who nods.

“Then as an early Christmas present, I got you a special front-of-the-line pass.”

Gage cheers and Rome gives me a big smile. I remove a piece of cardstock from my clipboard and hand it to Sara. “Give this to the girl dressed like a snowflake. She’ll know what it’s for.”

“Thank you, Tay,” she says. “You’re the best.”

“Couldn’t have pulled any of this off without you. Now go see Santa.”

They hurry in his direction, but my parents stay, my dad watching us closely as Levi keeps me snug against his side.

“It’s perfect so far, honey,” my mom says.

“Hey, Dr. B,” Levi says. “I’m dating your daughter now.”

My mom’s eyes widen and dart between us, a smile lighting up her face.

“You’re dating my daughter,” my dad repeats. “And you’re not asking me?”

“No, sir.”

My dad narrows his eyes, then shrugs. “You floss. I trust a man who flosses.”

“What about the fact that he grew up next door and has always had my back?” I ask, fighting a laugh.

“I suppose that counts for something too,” my dad says. “But you do travel too much, Levi.”

“Mostly because I was scared of Taylor, but I didn’t realize it,” Levi says. “We’ll figure it out.”

My mom gives a happy sigh and presses her hand to her heart.

“Enough of that,” my dad grumbles. “Let’s go watch the twins meet Santa.”

They hurry off, and Levi wraps his hand around mine as we follow more slowly behind. “You okay with me telling them?” he asks.

“Sure. Can you break it to your parents too?”

He glances around. “Soon as I see them. I’m sure they’re with my brother and his kids. But also, there’s no chance your mom isn’t texting my mom on the way to Santa.”

“True,” I say, grinning.

I enjoy the short stroll over, my hand in his, no one paying us an ounce of attention or needing anything from me. We stop

near my parents. Sara is standing inside the low candy cane fence in the parent waiting area in front of them, watching Gage. Santa uses his kind and jolly voice to ask what he wants, and Gage's answer is much quieter. They chat for another minute or two before a helper in a sparkling snowflake costume beckons to Gage with a friendly smile. Santa sets him on his feet and hands him a candy cane.

Gage walks over with the snowflake helper, who says something quiet to Sara, who nods. Gage hugs her, then runs over to my parents. "I told Santa I wanted a Megazoid Battlebot, and he said he'd see if he could put one aside for me," he tells them.

Sara twists to give us a thumbs up.

"She's already got that," I tell Levi. "I'm sure she's relieved he hasn't changed his mind."

She's already completely focused on Rome, who sits on Santa's lap with a serious expression on his face. Then he rests his hands on either side of Santa's beard and gives a light tug. Sara gasps, "Rome," but Santa only laughs.

"It's real," Rome says with a note of wonder.

"Indeed," Santa says. "Keeps my face nice and toasty in the North Pole. Why don't you tell me what you'd like for Christmas this year, Rome?"

Rome leans in so he can speak softly to Santa. Santa listens, then nods and shoots Sara a somber look before settling his hand on Rome's back and speaking to him so gently we can't

hear him. Rome nods, then he nods again, his shoulders droop, and Santa gives him a hug before setting him on the ground.

“You’re a brave lad, Rome,” Santa says. “I’m proud to know you.”

The snowflake walks Rome over to Sara and quietly relays Rome’s Christmas wish. I can practically feel my parents holding their breath, and it makes me realize I am too.

Sara turns toward us, her face distressed, and mouths what I’d worried she was going to say. *His dad.*

My parents look at each other, their expressions resigned. Apparently, we’d all had a feeling this was what Rome would say. Levi doesn’t look surprised either, but he rubs my back as I watch Sara walk over, Rome holding her hand, his chin set in a firm line.

“What did Santa say?” my dad asks, using his most cheerful voice.

“He said I was a good boy, but he’s not sure he can get me my wish. He said that’s not his kind of magic.” He stops and looks at the ground before he speaks again. “He said if I could think of just about any toy in the world, he could probably get it for me. But if that’s the real Santa, I know he can get me what I want.”

I exchange a worried look with Levi. I’m not sure anyone but the highest-ranked general in the army could deliver Rome’s wish, and my heart breaks for him and every other kid who has to share their parent on Christmas Eve.

Sara scoops him up with some chatter about going to play the ring toss game, and it works, Gage trotting beside them with my parents following behind to help keep him distracted.

“We’ll find a way to make it special,” I tell Levi. “We’ll do something really cool. It won’t be the same as having his dad there, but hopefully we can do something awesome enough to get him through Christmas and hold him over until his dad comes home in March.”

“I’m in,” Levi says. “I’ll do whatever you need.”

“Thank you, wonderboy,” I say, squeezing his hand. “Want to walk the booths with me?”

“I want to do everything with you.”

I start toward the nearest booth, but his light tug on my hand stops me as he hauls me against him.

He smiles down at me. “You know what my Christmas wish is?”

I rest my hands against his chest. I will never get tired of being able to touch him whenever I want. “Do you want a Megazoid Battlebot too? If you’re nice to Gage, he might share.”

He reaches up and pushes a loose strand of hair behind my shoulder. “I wish everyone in the world could be as happy as I am this Christmas. I love you, Taylor Rose Bixby.”

“Love you more, Levi William Taft.”

“Call it a tie?”

“Deal.” And we seal it with a kiss.

Chapter Seventeen

Taylor



I SURVIVE CHRISTMAS TOWN.

Christmas Town itself might even have thrived. Barely past midnight on Saturday, the last booth is hauled off in the last truck, and the cleaning crew will be up before the sun to take care of anything left behind. But one thing I love about Creekville is that everyone takes care of the town. From the booths to the guests, people have made an effort the entire weekend to make sure the town green stays tidy.

By the time Levi walks me back to my apartment, I'm almost asleep on my feet with the kind of exhaustion that only hits when your body finally knows it's safe to crash.

He helps me up the stairs to my apartment, and when I hand him my keys and lean against the wall, eyes closed as he unlocks my door, he scoops me up to carry me in.

Other than a faint squeak, I'm too tired to laugh or protest.

It's a decent-sized apartment for one person—seven hundred square feet, smartly laid out so every room feels spacious, even the galley kitchen. He heads for the hallway and spots the open door to my bedroom at the end, walking right in and gently setting me down on my bed.

“Sorry,” I say, eyes fluttering shut. “I’m not doing a good job of giving you the grand tour.”

“Stop,” he says. “I was in your apartment a million times in college. I know your vibe. I can get a tour later.”

“Mmkay,” I say, burrowing into my pillow.

He pulls off my shoes and wiggles my comforter out to tuck me in. I sense him leaning down to kiss me, and I turn my lips up to meet his, but instead, he stops beside my ear. “Taylor.”

“Mmm?”

“I don’t want to leave.”

I give him a drowsy blink, then smile and hold the blanket up, scooching backward to make room for him. He smiles and kicks his shoes off before climbing in with me. This time, I’m the one who curls around him, his back to my chest, feeling the steady breaths he draws.

“Levi?” I mumble sleepily.

“Yeah?”

“I’m really mad it took you this long to figure this out.”

I feel more than I hear his soft laugh. “Me too. But are you trying to say you already knew?”

I'm not awake enough to think that through, so I just say what's true in my gut.

"Deep down, I always knew." I'm more asleep than awake, but I think I hear him say "Me too."

When I wake up the next morning, Levi is gone, but there's a note with my name on the nightstand.

Helping downstairs. Sleep as long as you want.

He scrawled a heart next to his name. I pick up my phone and squint at the time. It's almost 8:00. That *is* sleeping in for me, and I feel awake and amazing. I grab a quick shower and head down to the café.

We always open later on Sundays, but on Christmas Eve, my night baker and Celia both come in at 6 AM to start baking and preparing the goodies people will stop in for all day to round out their Christmas feasts.

Or at least, they will until we close at 3:00 so we can all enjoy Christmas Eve with our families.

I grin when I spot Levi behind the counter in an apron. Even more interesting, his parents are sitting at a table enjoying some coffee and croissants.

"Morning, Taylor," Mrs. Taft says.

"When we realized Levi hadn't come home last night, we thought we'd stop by here to see what he was up to," Dr. Taft adds. Loudly.

Celia stifles a giggle, and every head in a six-foot radius turns to watch me redden.

“Knock it off, Dad,” Levi says without any heat.

“You owe me double for your breakfast,” I tell Dr. Taft, and Mrs. Taft gives me a wink and a nod as he chuckles.

I walk around the counter to press a kiss to Levi’s cheek. “I love that you’re helping.”

“Whatever you need,” he says, smiling as he rings up a bag of bread stuffing. It will be our biggest seller today.

“If you mean it ...”

He looks up, his eyes alert. “What do you need?”

“You mind going over to my parents’ house and listening to their strategizing for what to do about Rome’s Christmas wish?”

“Would you rather go?” he asks.

“Yeah, but ...” I wave at the nearly full café. “It’s going to stay like this until we close.”

“It’s okay, I got it,” he says. “I can’t make a decent cup of coffee to save my life, but I’ve got the rest of it down okay. Right, Celia?”

“It’s true,” she says. “He’s a fast learner.”

I look at him, and I love that I’m not surprised. Not surprised he’s a quick study, and not surprised that he’d do this for me. “I’d love that. Thank you.”

“Of course. Go.” And he gives me a loud kiss on the forehead.

“Surely you can do better than that,” his dad complains.

“I’ll never tell,” I say to Dr. Taft as I hurry into the back. “See you tonight!” The Tafts have always been part of our Christmas Eve tradition.

I drive to my parents’ house and walk in to find the boys zoned out in front of a Disney show. Sara and my parents are at the kitchen table, speaking in low voices.

I pour myself a cup of coffee and join them. “Is there a plan?” I’m pretty sure I already know the answer from the way Sara is slouched over her mug, not touching it.

“Maybe,” my mom says. “We’ve probably come up with the best Plan B possible.”

“Oh, I have faith in you. We should have put you and Mrs. Taft on this. The two women who conspired to make us believe we were indefinitely stranded in a cabin without electricity are unstoppable.”

Sara looks up. “What?”

My mom sips her coffee. “Don’t know what you’re talking about. You act like we made that blizzard happen.”

I roll my eyes and smirk at Sara. “We would have beaten that blizzard to the motel near the farm, but these two boo-hooed about how worried they were and made us promise to stay at the cabin and head out again the next morning.”

I lean forward, my voice conspiratorial, ignoring my parents. “We can’t prove it, but we’re pretty sure they got the Tafts’ cabin’s neighbor in on it, so he messed with the power.”

Sara looks at my parents. “Why would you do that?”

“Hallmark, we think,” I tell her. “Pretty sure Mom and Mrs. Taft got it into their heads that we’d have to cuddle for warmth. And *then* they also failed to mention that the neighbor has a snowplow blade on his truck and could have plowed us out as soon as the snow stopped.”

Sara’s jaw drops.

Mom takes another sip while my dad shakes his head.

“It worked, I guess?” Sara says.

“Within an hour of telling Mom that it turned out Levi and I both have big feelings, suddenly the electricity is working and we find out we’ll be able to leave the very next morning.”

Sara looks at my mom like she’s a new and alien creature. “Dad ...”

“I know. I tried to cancel the Hallmark subscription, but she said I could tell her what she can and can’t watch just as soon as I give up golf.”

Sara nods. “Any good ones on tonight?”

“*Holly’s Jolly Holiday*,” my mom says.

“Tell me the Rome plan,” I say.

Sara explains, and I can see how hard they’ve tried. They’re basically leaning on redirection and substitution. First, they’re

going to have Santa bring the boys mini electric ATVs so they'll be amazed and excited by a gift they never even knew they wanted.

“They max out at five miles per hour,” my dad reassures me.

I am not reassured. The twins will still find a way to do some major damage.

“I ran over to Roanoke and got two body pillows,” Sara says. “Those long ones? They're six feet, which is about Dean's height. And I'm going to put flannel Christmas pajamas on each pillow and tell the boys to squeeze their pillow tight when they Facetime Dean tomorrow. He missed our FaceTime on Friday, but he emailed and said they've been having some technical problems, and he's positive it'll be fine by Christmas. Then I emailed him last night and told him about the pillow plan. I'm going to have him think of some, like, magic spell or something? I don't know.”

She slumps again, and I look at my parents for help in filling in the rest of that thought.

My dad explains, “She's thinking he can tell them a story or a poem about how a part of him is here with them anytime they hug that pillow until he can be with them too.”

“We're waiting to hear his ideas to see if there's anything we can add to it to make it feel like Christmas magic,” my mom adds. “Like crushed-up candy cane powder that they sprinkle on the pillows? Or something not sticky.”

“He hasn’t emailed back yet, but he’ll do whatever we ask him to,” Sara says. “I haven’t told him what a big deal this is to Rome, but he’s their dad. He knows.”

I reach over to grab her hand and squeeze. “How can I help?”

“Just be here and act more excited about this than you’ve ever been about anything in your whole life,” she says. “Maybe they’ll buy it?”

But her doubt is clear, and even though we all reassure her, we know that this barely has a chance to work on Gage, much less our little skeptic, Rome.

“I’m proud of you, sweetie,” my dad tells Sara. “Dean is doing a good thing, and the boys may not totally get it now, but they will. They’ll forget about this Christmas with all the future ones coming.”

“Ones where it’ll be too late to keep Rome believing in Santa,” Sara says, “and when he’s not convinced tomorrow, he’ll take Gage with him.”

My mom rubs Sara’s back. There’s nothing to say. There’s nothing left to do but hope for the best.

I clear my throat. “Anyone want to help me think of what to get my brand-new boyfriend that I’ve known my whole life for Christmas?”

This wins a reluctant laugh from Sara, and we get her laughing for real with our increasingly ridiculous suggestions. A nose grooming kit. A singing fish. When my mom offers to

let me borrow her sexy Mrs. Claus outfit, everyone is appalled. I decide it's my cue to leave, and I do, trying to push that particular image from my brain by loudly singing "Rudolph" twelve times in a row in my car.

It's fine though. I already know exactly what to get Levi. I park at the café but walk over to the town's only bookstore, finding what I need in record time. I decline an offer to wrap it and hustle it up to my apartment before I go down to pitch in for the last holiday push.

I walk in and Levi smiles at me. "Is there a plan?"

I shrug. "They've probably come up with the only one with a chance of working."

I start to tell him about it as I tie my apron on, and I'm to the part about "candy cane dust" as I stir the final hot cocoa batch of the day.

"Oh, hang on," he says, reaching into his pocket for his phone. "I'm getting a call, and that's always my parents or the magazine."

My stomach clenches at the thought of work calling. He frowns down at the number and answers. "Hello?"

His forehead doesn't smooth, and he shoots me a look, pointing to the back to indicate he needs to take the call back there.

I nod and try not to worry as he walks out. He's gone for almost ten minutes, and when he comes back, I search his face. "Everything okay?"

“Yeah, fine.”

There’s something in his voice that catches me, but I can’t quite figure out what it is. He gives me his usual smile and takes back over the register to ring up another customer for stuffing.

About an hour before closing, we’re nearing the last of our baked goods inventory. There’s nothing left to serve diners, and we’re down to a steady but slow stream of customers.

“I feel a headache coming on,” he says. “Do you mind if I head out now? Am I stranding you?”

“Of course not,” I tell him. “Go. I’m sure your mom wants you back home. I’ll see you later?”

He looks at me, his expression confused.

“For Christmas Eve?” I remind him. I know he hasn’t forgotten that our families spend it together literally every year, so he can only have forgotten that today is the twenty-fourth.

“Duh,” he says. “Of course. The best way to spread Christmas cheer—”

“Is singing loud for all to hear,” I finish. The evening starts with a book exchange and concludes with a group viewing of *Elf* in which anyone who gets a single word of the dialogue wrong is shamed and ridiculed. With love, of course.

He gives me a kiss. “My parents are hosting this year, right? I’m going to ask my mom to put up so much mistletoe you’re going to barely have time to breathe.”

“Better take an Advil and rest up then,” I say. “I’ll be over around 7:00.”

“I’d like to report a toxic work environment,” Celia complains. “I’m choking on cheese.”

Levi laughs as he leaves, and I smile at Celia. “I have a Christmas bonus for you that will probably help you feel better about your job.”

“I’m cured, boss. It’s a miracle.”

We sell out of the last of our goods and lock the doors early, which means I’m upstairs by 3:30 after we finish our closing routine.

I pull out the book I bought for Levi and lay it open on my kitchen table, then I get to work. I bought the slimmest book I could find for this gift—I’d gotten it in the kids’ nonfiction section. But this is still going to take forever, even working at top speed.

It’s after 7:00 when I finish, but it’s done, and I think Levi is going to love it. Maybe one day, one of our kids will—

Whoa. One of our kids?

I go still, but I let the words dance through my head before I smile. Those words don’t scare me. I want to push them out to the universe and do a happy dance. We got to this place in both an insanely short amount of time but also forever. And that’s why it’s going to work.

I grab the goodies I set aside from the café, my gift for Levi, and my overnight bag. I’ve had the gifts for my family under

their tree since before Levi showed up. I always stay at my parents' house on Christmas Eve because watching Christmas morning with kids is the purest form of Christmas joy.

But this year, I'm looking forward to Christmas Eve the most. I can't wait to see Levi's face when he opens his present.

As soon as I walk into my parents' house, the twins grab my hands to hustle me over to the Tafts' house. I barely have time to drop my stuff for tomorrow before they're towing me through the gate to the happy chaos next door.

Levi's brother came in Friday afternoon for their kids to enjoy Christmas Town, and now their toddler is running in circles around the living room, while the baby coos in his sister-in-law's lap. The twins join the toddler's game without even requesting the rules, and they're running loops around the first floor too.

Dr. Taft is making drinks for everyone, Mrs. Taft is making sure there's popcorn and movie candy at every chair and blanket on the floor.

But there's no Levi.

I wait a few minutes, and when he hasn't made an appearance, I text to ask him where he is.

There's no answer.

I try to catch Mrs. Taft's eye to give her a questioning look, but I never do, almost like ... she's avoiding me.

After fifteen minutes, I'm too restless to make small talk with his brother, who also mysteriously doesn't mention Levi.

I give up and show myself upstairs. If he's feeling bad, I'd rather lie beside him quietly than be in the middle of the party downstairs.

His room is the second on the left, and when I knock, he doesn't answer. I turn the knob and poke my head in, calling his name softly. "Levi?"

But he's not there. His bed looks like he hasn't touched it.

What is going on?

I head back downstairs and straight to Mrs. Taft, who darts for the kitchen, murmuring about needing another popcorn bowl.

"Mrs. Taft?"

"Hello, dear. You look so pretty," she says, not even turning around. "Now, I know there's another bowl in here somewhere." She rummages through a cabinet.

"Sheryl."

She sighs and turns around. "Levi isn't here."

"I figured that out. Where is he?"

Her eyes fill with worry. "He asked to borrow Dave's car, and he left about two hours ago. Said he had to take care of something in the city and that he'd be late. Said we shouldn't wait up for him."

It's like she scooped out my insides with the dull edge of a juice glass.

"Are you okay, Taylor?" she asks.

“Fine, Mrs. Taft. Thank you for telling me.” I’m frozen for a minute, unsure of what to do. Do I go home and crawl into the queen bed I’ll share with Sara? Stay like nothing is wrong?

The last thing I want to do is cast a pall over anyone else’s Christmas—especially when tomorrow is already so iffy with Rome. I force a smile for Mrs. Taft, then turn and walk into the living room. I don’t have it in me to make small talk with anyone, but I sit in my spot on the love seat where I always watch *Elf* and wait for everyone else to finish chatting and eating to start the movie.

Eventually, my parents take their seats beside me, but not before I’ve played ten levels of Tetris on my phone while running through all the possibilities. What kind of assignment could the magazine give Levi on Christmas Eve? Why did he say yes to it? Why didn’t he tell me he was leaving?

The worst part is the anxiety that keeps flaring when I think about how I’ve avoided reality for the past few days, living in a love bubble, trusting that the future would magically work out. But it won’t. It can’t, not if Levi is always gone.

It’s going to be so much harder now. I can’t feel like this for weeks at a time. I want Levi to want me—*us*—enough to choose something different, but I’m never going to give him an ultimatum and force him to choose anything besides his dream job.

Finally, as the movie reaches the scene where Buddy the Elf’s little brother begins leading strangers in the park in some off-key caroling, my phone vibrates with a text from Levi.

LEVI: I'm so sorry, something came up. Trying my hardest to get back.

I don't answer. The fact that work has called him out on Christmas Eve tells me everything I need to know about how things are going to play out between us.

When the movie ends, I pick up the book I wrapped for him, and I slip out while the rest of my family is still saying their goodbyes. By the time Sara gets the excited-but-overtired boys into bed, it's late. She slides under the covers on her side and whispers my name. But I pretend I'm asleep. I don't know what to tell her.

I don't have any words for how bad this feels.

Chapter Eighteen

Taylor



SARA JOLTS STRAIGHT UP in bed, and it wakes me up too.

“What? What’s wrong?” I demand.

“I heard a thump. The boys are awake. I told them they had to wait until I came to get them out of their room, but we’ve got about five minutes before they try to sneak down.”

“Let’s go,” I say.

Both of us are in thermal Christmas pajamas. We’d each had a pair waiting on our side of the bed last night, another Mom tradition.

We pass the boys’ room, and I hear muffled arguing. Sara rolls her eyes and gestures for me to be quiet as we creep down the stairs, avoiding the creaky spots.

In the living room, I stop and smile, grabbing her hand. The tree is lit, the presents stacked in generous piles beneath it.

Two small green ATVs sit with big red bows on the handlebars, a helmet on each seat.

“They’re going to be so excited,” I tell her.

Her smile dims the faintest bit. “At least for a little while. But it’s as ready as it’s going to get. Let’s go fetch everyone.”

She goes up to get the boys, and I head down the hall to my parents’ room, knocking and poking my head in.

“Morning, honey,” my dad says, sitting up and stretching.

“Sara’s about to bring the boys down.”

“Ohhh, let’s go.” My mom struggles up from the bed and tries to put on her bathrobe, but my mom before coffee is about like a 3 AM drunk trying to put on his coat when the bar closes.

I help her into it and follow them into the living room, then stand at the bottom of the stairs and call up to Sara, “You can release the kraken.”

The thunder of small feet follows, and the boys practically fling themselves down the stairs, skidding to a stop halfway across the floor. They spot the ATVs at the exact same time, and they turn to look at each other with open mouths and wide eyes.

“What the dirty heck!” Gage yells, then lunges for the nearest one.

I give Sara a look.

“He’s trying out swearing,” she says. “I don’t react to any of it so he won’t know when he’s hit on a real curse. But I take notes, because some of them are pretty good.”

“I might borrow dirty heck,” I say.

The boys are trying to shove their helmets on while tearing off the ribbon, and Sara laughs and helps them. There’s a touch of hope on her face. I know she’s wondering if the diversion is going to work.

I can tell it’s going to be a minute before they move on from the ATVs, so I nip back upstairs to get my phone, and my heart skips when I see a text from Levi. It came in about an hour ago.

LEVI: I’m back. Can’t wait to spend Christmas with you.

I walk slowly back down the stairs, reading the text several more times, then set my phone down while I make coffee.

He’s back from where? He could have spent Christmas Eve *and* Christmas with me, but he disappeared without telling me. He sort of apologized in a text last night, but I still have no idea where he’s been.

Does it matter?

I guess that’s the bottom-line question, and I chew on my lip as I lean against the family room doorway, watching the boys push all the buttons on their new machines.

“Can we go outside and ride them right now, Grandpa?”
Gage begs.

My dad looks to Sara, who nods. “Better let them get it out of their system.”

The twins whoop and begin dragging and pushing their ATVs toward the front door, my dad laughing as he follows behind them, coaching them. My mom stays on the sofa, blinking sleepily.

If you didn’t know what was missing, you’d almost think it was a perfect Christmas morning. An ad-worthy portrayal of “Ideal Christmas.”

But Dean is missing. That’s going to start feeling obvious all too soon.

And now, Levi is missing, something I wouldn’t have felt as keenly even a week ago.

The size of the space inside me where I’m missing him is my answer about my bottom line: no, it doesn’t matter why he was gone or what he was doing.

Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out. He’s too much a part of me. Always has been, and now he is in ways that I wouldn’t choose to unsee even if Santa granted me the ability to forget.

The boys play outside for a good twenty minutes, during which I get some coffee into my mom and start some German pancakes baking in the oven.

Finally, the front door opens and I hear their socked feet thumping back inside.

“I can’t believe you’re already done,” I tell them, settling down to watch them open the rest of their presents.

“We would have stayed longer, but we weren’t dressed for the cold,” my dad says.

He takes his seat beside my mom. Sara settles on the floor by the boys, and I curl up in my dad’s favorite recliner. My mom’s rule is that the kids get to open all their gifts first, then the adults can exchange their presents while the children run around committing mayhem with their new loot. That used to be Sara and me. The first Christmas that the twins were allowed to tear paper off boxes was strange for me, realizing that I truly had crossed over to the grownup side for good.

They open a few more Santa gifts, including Hot Wheel cars and books, some Pokémon figures, and other things that make them cackle or exclaim. But Sara is eyeing the sofa; she’s hidden the oversized pillows behind it. And Rome has gotten more subdued, still smiling at each new gift, but also looking around the room like he’s missing something.

It’s not going to work, and my heart breaks for Rome and Sara. And for Dean, who would never shirk his duty, but who I know is probably struggling today, being away from his family.

I gather myself, trying to hype myself up to be Most Excited Tata ever as Sara gets ready to FaceTime her husband.

When the last gift for the twins is opened, Rome stands up and looks around. “Santa didn’t bring me my wish.”

“Are you sure?” Sara says. She’s trying so hard to sound cheerful. “Because as it just so happens, there’s one more surprise for you, and it’s about your dad.”

Rome’s eyes light up, and I force myself not to cringe. I’m not sure this is the right approach to get them excited.

“I’ll be right back,” Sara says. She disappears into the other room and returns a minute later with her iPad.

Rome’s expression goes flat. “He’s on Facetime?”

“He will be in a minute,” she says, pulling up his contact. “And he’s got something special for you.”

Gage sighs but looks resigned. Rome is still blank.

“It’s dialing,” she says brightly, and everyone is so focused on that iPad that I’m the only one who notices the front door opening.

Levi! I think I’m going to smooch his face off before he even gets to the explanation I was so sure I needed more than anything last night. It’s funny how many things are clearer in the morning. How much I love him is one of them.

But there’s some shuffling, a bump, and ... Dean comes through the door.

At this point, everyone has heard the noise, but I’m the only one at an angle to see who’s here for a couple of seconds, and I look at my parents with shock as Dean clumps into the room on crutches. His leg is in a brace, but he’s wearing a Santa hat and a huge grin.

“Merry Christmas!” he shouts. Levi slips in behind him and quietly closes the door.

There’s a pregnant beat of silence, and then pandemonium. Sara climbs to her feet sobbing, Rome yells, “I knew it!” over and over, and Gage gives a wordless cry and flings himself at his dad about a millisecond before Sara and Rome.

Soon they’re all in Dean’s arms—or one of them—the other one keeping him balanced on his crutch. A bigger mess of boohooing babies I’ve never seen in my life. That includes every last Bixby and a Taft too.

Levi gives them plenty of room as he walks over to pull me up from the recliner, and I catch the glint of tears in his eyes.

“What the dirty heck? Is this why you were gone?” I ask him as he hauls me into a hug.

“Yeah. I’m sorry I couldn’t say anything, but it was touch and go until very early this morning as to whether this was even going to work. I’ll tell you about it later.”

The story comes out after breakfast. Dean tells Levi to give us the details while he and Sara go out—dressed for the cold this time—to watch the boys on their ATVs.

“He was injured in the line of duty,” Levi says, smiling. “Four days ago, he tore his meniscus while playing soccer with some of the kids on base waiting to meet Santa.” He tells the rest of the story, how Dean had been entertaining some of the younger kids while they waited in the long line, well used to the kind of trouble little ones can get into if they get too

restless. “He was pretending to let them beat him at soccer, he twisted something, his knee popped, and boom. He was in the infirmary.”

“Okay, but how ...” My mom points outside then at the table.

“How’d he end up here?” Levi guesses.

She nods.

“He can’t be on active duty with that injury,” Levi explains. “By the time he’s done with surgery and physical therapy, he’ll have four weeks left at most in his tour. Someone in medical over there was feeling the Christmas spirit and put in a request to ship him stateside for surgery at Walter Reed by Christmas. Dean didn’t want to say anything to Sara at first until he knew what kind of injury he was dealing with, then he didn’t want to tell her he might get sent back. The paperwork on stuff like this can be ... well, let’s say the army is only efficient about some things.”

“Where do you come into all this?” I ask.

“He called me when I was at the café yesterday. Explained Sara had mentioned I was home in her email, and he wondered if I would be on standby to meet him at Walter Reed if his transport worked out. It all hinged on him making it to Landstuhl in Germany in time to catch the last flight out before Christmas. It’s a nine-hour flight but a five-hour time difference. He called me in the twenty minutes between when he landed at Landstuhl and caught that last plane. It was 6 PM.”

Here he pauses and looks at me, but I've already started working on the story problem. "Wheels up in Germany at 11 PM means touchdown at Bolling by 2 AM."

Levi smiles. "Yeah. Then he went straight to Walter Reed. They said he could wait until after the holidays to do the full assessment and surgery, so he'll go in right after New Year's."

"So you drove out there last night, waited, threw him in the car, and drove straight here?"

"Not quite. It took a few hours for him to get processed, so it was close to 5 AM before I got him."

My mom gasps. "Levi Taft, you boys drove here from Bethesda in two hours?"

Levi answers by taking a long drink of orange juice.

I laugh and pull him to his feet. "Come with me, wonderboy. We've got a whole Christmas Eve to make up for."

Twenty minutes later, I'm snuggled against him on his bedroom's too-small double bed as he tears the paper off the book I got for him. He reads the title aloud, smiling. "*The World's Most Interesting Animals.*"

"Look inside," I urge him. It's a kid encyclopedia, basically, the glossy pages packed with animal facts and full-color photographs. He turns to the first page and starts laughing. "What did you do, Taylor?"

"African armadillo," I read aloud. "Armadillos are nocturnal insectivores. They mostly feed on ants and termites. They have sharp claws, which they use to dig burrows where they live

and raise their young.” Then I get to the part I neatly lettered at the end of the typed facts. “An aardvark can take any mammal under six feet tall in a fight when armed with a butterfly knife.” I printed and taped a switchblade to the end of its snout. I would have glued it but there had been no time to let it to dry. The text goes on to explain, “The aardvark is undefeatable when armed with a flamethrower regardless of the opposing mammal’s size.”

“What about an orangutan?” he argues.

“You’ll just have to see when we get there.”

He closes the book and puts it aside.

“Hey, I worked really hard on that,” I object.

“I’ll definitely finish it,” he says, “but I already know it’s the best present anyone has ever given me. Right now ...”

“Right now?” I prompt him as he repositions me so he can look into my eyes.

“Right now...” He reaches behind him, feeling along the headboard until he finds what he’s looking for, and brings his hand down to reveal a sprig of mistletoe.

I rest my forehead against his. “Just right now?”

He nods. “Well, and forever, if that’s okay with you.”

I shrug. “It’s already been that long for me. Might as well double down.”

Then we lean into another mistletoe kiss.

Epilogue

Taylor



One year later...

“Game night is *on*,” my mom announces, adjusting her Santa hat. “Dean picks the first game this year.”

He holds up his hands. “I’m a good person. I don’t deserve this.”

Levi is next to me on the sofa, and he chokes back a laugh. “I feel that deeply,” he says low enough so only I can hear.

“You’re a veteran of our armed services, Dean,” my dad says. “You can handle the pressure.”

Dean sighs, and I can almost see his wheels turning as he runs his eyes down the stack of games, looking for the one least likely to turn into an active combat situation. Ultimately, he decides on none of them. “Charades,” he says.

“Parents against their kids,” Sara says. “I’ll tell you now that all the ones I act out are going to be bowling ball, speed bag,

pumpkin.” She looks down at her very pregnant belly and rubs it. “Maybe elephant.”

“Quit being mean to my wife,” Dean says, giving her a soft kiss.

My mom plops a bowl on the table. “I knew someone would pick charades, so I have strips ready to go. Warren, why don’t you start?”

“You got it.” He picks his paper, thinks about it, and stands. It’s a place. After pulling up the tip of his nose for them to guess “pig” and wiggling his hand until they get “spider,” Dr. Taft guesses *Charlotte’s Web*. My dad gets them to guess a house, then several houses, and finally Mrs. Taft guesses, “Charlottesville.”

“I’ll go,” Dean says. He tells us we’ve got a person, and we quickly guess “newspaper reporter.”

Mrs. Taft goes, and her team eventually guesses the jingle for a jeweler whose commercials jam the radio nonstop from December to February.

“You go,” Sara says, waving me up when it’s our turn.

I don’t want to. I want to stay right here, curled beside Levi on the sofa. He’s been back in town for a week, and he’ll be here until mid-January, but I always feel the pressure of making every minute of our time together count. For the last year, he’s been home at least as much as he’s been away, and that’s been a good thing. But every time he’s back in town,

almost from the minute he's here, I feel my internal clock already counting down to when he has to leave again.

"Up," my mom orders me. "Your turn."

I groan and push myself off the sofa, plucking my word from the bowl. *Get me to the church on time.* I wrinkle my forehead, trying to remember where I know the phrase from. Oh, *My Fair Lady*. The town did a production of it over the summer, and Eliza Doolittle's dad sings it as he's off to get married.

It takes almost the full minute for my team to guess because Sara keeps unhelpfully yelling, "It's time for church!" Ultimately, Dean comes up with the answer at the buzzer, and the score is tied.

Dr. Taft gets our parents to guess "BFF," although my mom has to explain the acronym to my dad.

"My go," Levi says, standing and looking at everyone. "We've had an interesting range of clues tonight." He points to my dad and then each person who has played, in order. "Charlottesville, newspaper reporter, a jewelry store jingle, get me to the church on time, and BFFs." He thinks for a few seconds. "I'm going to do my own clue, see if I can tie it all together."

I wait for the parents to boo him, but they look fine with this.

Hold on.

Something is up...

I run through the clues again, as Levi nods for his dad to start the timer on his phone. *Charlottesville. Newspaper*

reporter. Jewelry store. Get me to the church. BFFs. Is that supposed to mean something?

Levi points to me. “Taylor,” my mom says.

He points to his heart. “You love Taylor,” Sara says. “She’s your BFF.”

He makes a big circle shape in the air with his hands. “You love her more than anything in the whole wide world,” Dean says.

Levi makes airplane arms then holds his arm out, palm facing us. “You want to stop traveling and settle down near here. Maybe Charlottesville,” my dad says.

My heart pounds hard, my blood making a pulsing sound in my ears.

Levi waves his hand to encompass the whole room. “You want a home of your own,” Mrs. Taft says.

Then he gets down on one knee in front of me, and my hands fly to my mouth.

“Oh,” Dr. Taft says, “I know this one. That means he wants to get married.”

Levi slides his hand into his pocket and pulls out a ring box from the jeweler in the radio jingle.

“Taylor Rose Bixby?” He has a small, tender smile on his face as his eyes meet mine.

I swallow hard. “Yes?”

“Every clue in the game seems to say I should take the job I’ve been offered at a newspaper in Charlottesville, find a place nearby, and think about what I want in the future.”

“So weird the clues all worked out like that.” I steal a quick glance at our families, all of them in on it, all of them grinning, except for our moms who are hugging each other while they watch us and sniffle.

“Have to say it got me thinking,” he says. “It’s a good thing I have this engagement ring, because it turns out that my future *is* you. I love you so much, Taylor. Will you marry me?”

“My turn again.” I stand up, draw a slip from the bowl, and hold up my index finger.

“One word,” my dad says.

I nod, then I tackle Levi and knock him flat on his back, pressing kisses all over his face while he laughs.

“I think that means yes,” Sara says.

Levi reaches up to hold my face still between his palms for a moment. “Is it true, Taylor? Are you saying yes?”

I kiss him again. “Yes, Levi Taft. I’m saying yes to you, now and forever.”

Then our moms both sigh and say, “Best Christmas ever,” which causes them to burst out laughing.

I look over at them, then back to Levi, smiling. “We were doomed from the start, weren’t we?”

“Lucky us,” he says, smoothing his thumb over my cheek.

“Lucky us,” I agree. “And it really is the best Christmas ever.”



For a free bonus chapter peeking into Taylor and Levi’s future—and a free book from me—visit my website here!

Enjoy my new *Betting on Love* series about a mischeivous matchmaking roommate who finds the perfect guy for each of her besties—even when they look like the worst possible fit to start. There’s something about that Ruby...

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Melanie Bennett Jacobson is an avid reader, amateur cook, and champion shopper. She lives in Southern California with her husband and children, a series of doomed houseplants, and a naughty miniature schnauzer. She holds a Masters in Writing for Children and Young Adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. She is a *USA Today* bestseller and a four-time Whitney Award winner for contemporary romance.