

CHRISTMAS
Falls



GET
Frosted

AMY AISLIN

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Title: Get Frosted

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ABOUT GET FROSTED

For years, Mik has wanted nothing more than to put coal in Rudy Snow's stocking.

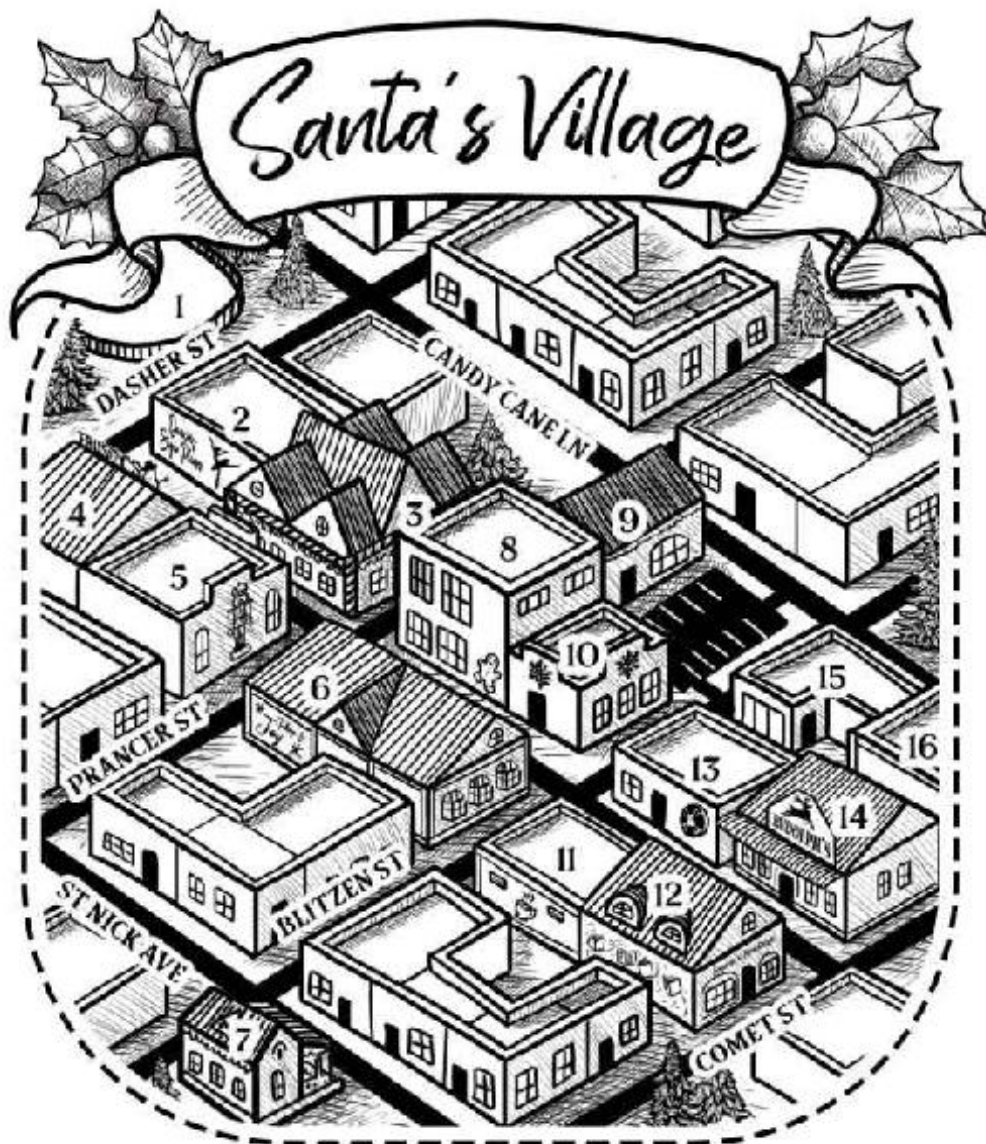
As former pro hockey players, they've been rivals for years. It started in Mik's rookie season, when a reporter pitted him against his older brother's best friend. Rudy pushes Mik's buttons like no one else, going out of his way to one-up him at every turn.

Now they're both pub owners in a small town that takes Christmas to a level best seen in Hallmark movies, but not much else has changed. They're still rivals, this time pitting gingerbread martinis against pomegranate sangria.

But when they're forced to work together to plan a special holiday party, sparks ignite. Maybe it's a bad idea to put coal in Rudy's stocking after all. They both might just catch fire.

Then again, what better way is there to stay warm on a cold winter's night?

Christmas Falls is a multi-author M/M romance series set in a small town that thrives on enough holiday charm to rival any Hallmark movie.



- 1. Ice Rink
- 2. Dancing Sugar Plums
- 3. Santa's Workshop
- 4. Frosty's
- 5. Nutcrackers
- 6. Tidings & Joy
- 7. Gingerbread Cottage
- 8. Ginger's Breads

- 9. The White Elephant
- 10. The Snowflake Shack
- 11. Jolly Java
- 12. Season's Readings
- 13. Mistletoe Movies
- 14. Rudolph's
- 15. Christmas Falls Festivals Inc
- 16. Festival Museum

CHAPTER
ONE

Mik Gilmore's outdoor Christmas decorations were majestic.

Okay, maybe *majestic* was the wrong word, but they were certainly fun. He'd be the talk of the neighborhood, especially considering his neighbors hadn't done much to decorate their own houses yet.

His looked like a winter wonderland.

Well, a wonderland, anyway, seeing as there wasn't any snow on the ground. Mid-November in Christmas Falls, Illinois, could bring all sorts of weather, and any snow that had fallen recently had already melted.

Standing on the sidewalk, Mik snapped a photo to send to his older brother, Josh, whose own house was decorated in what Mik called pretty, but boring. Mik captioned the photo *Mik's Toy Shop*, a reference to the inflatable on his walkway, and hit Send. The inflatable was made up of two ten-foot-tall towers, the peaked roof of which was striped red and white. The columns were green with mock windows near the roof. And at the base of the columns were five-foot-tall nutcrackers in red-and-gold outfits. The two columns were held together by a banner proclaiming *Santa's Toy Shop*, complete with a rocking horse atop the banner.

With the lights Mik had strung along his roof, around every window, across the porch railing, and over the bushes, it would look hella festive when the sun went down.

“Looking good, Mik,” called his neighbor as she descended her porch steps, her greyhound on a leash.

“Thanks, Hanna.”

Mik’s phone pinged. Josh had sent a gif of the house from *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*.

Rolling his eyes, Mik shoved his phone back in his pocket. His house wasn’t that bad. Just that it was his first Christmas in his new place in his hometown after retiring from a decade in the NHL at the end of last season. He had to do Christmas right.

Another ping. Another text from Josh.

JOSH

Seriously, though, it looks great! Very festive.
Very you.

Yeah, that was Josh. Always there with a kind word or encouraging pep talk, even if he teased Mik at the same time. Then there was Mik—the younger brother, the mini Josh in every way except personality, always hovering in his big brother’s shadow.

Mik had been content to live in that shadow until he’d made it to the NHL a year after Josh, and sportscasters and bloggers began referring to him as Josh Gilmore’s little brother.

Gilmore’s Baby Bro, Following in His Footsteps.

Gilmore Junior Signs Multi-Year Deal with His Big Brother’s Team’s Rivals.

A Gordie Howe Hat Trick Tonight for Josh Gilmore’s Little Bro.

Like, he had a *name*, fuck you very much. Why didn’t anybody ever use it? Mik wasn’t the same person as his brother and had never tried to be, no matter how much he’d always looked up to him. At almost exactly twelve months apart, they’d come as a package deal for most of their lives, a fact that hadn’t bothered him until he was old enough to want

to be seen as his own person. Mik had retired from hockey six months ago, and upon the announcement of his retirement, one headline had read *Baby Gilmore Set to Retire at End of Season, Plans to Follow Josh to Illinois*.

Mik hadn't followed anyone anywhere. Christmas Falls, Illinois, was his hometown. His parents were here. His gran was here. The people he'd grown up with were here. The family pub he and Josh had been expected to one day take over was here. Where else did people expect him to go?

Couldn't the headline have read *Mik Gilmore Set to Retire at End of Season and Join His Brother in Running their Family Pub?*

"You certainly know how to make a splash," said a dry voice at his elbow, shaking him out of his irritation.

And setting into motion a new kind of annoyance that fizzled in his blood. "No one asked you," he said to Josh's best friend.

Rudy Snow raised one dark eyebrow, because *of course* he could do that. When Mik tried, he ended up with both eyebrows at his hairline.

"It's certainly . . ." Rudy cast his gaze around, taking everything in. "Unique."

"It's majestic."

"It looks like the Island of Misfit Toys. All you're missing is a Charlie-in-the-Box."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Mik clenched his teeth. "You're not allowed to judge. You don't even have a wreath on your front door."

Rudy made a sound in the back of his throat, a rumbly laugh that made the back of Mik's neck itch. "Do you often happen to find yourself outside my house, Miki?"

Mik's stupid feelings went all gooey at the nickname. Or maybe that was just hunger. "It's on my way to work."

"Sure. If you take the long way."

God. Why did he have to be so annoying?

And hot.

And annoyingly hot. All dark-haired and dark-eyed and scruffy-jawed, with a natural tan to his skin that perpetually made him look like he'd just come from the beach. He stood a couple of inches taller than Mik's five feet eleven. At a year older than Mik's thirty-one, Rudy was as fit now as he'd been when he'd played in the NHL, even two and a half years post-retirement.

Josh and Rudy had met way back in youth hockey, at a hockey clinic Mik hadn't met the age requirement for, so Mik hadn't met Rudy until his rookie NHL season.

Mik had considered himself lucky to be drafted to Josh's team's rival. With Mik playing for Washington and Josh playing for Pittsburgh, it had given Mik the chance to step out of his brother's shadow and assert himself as his own person. And playing up the rivalry between their teams had been all sorts of fun at family get-togethers.

The problem Mik hadn't anticipated had been twofold.

First, because Josh's rookie year had been the gold fucking star of rookie years, Mik had been instantly compared to him when he'd been drafted a year later, forevermore casting him in the role of Josh Gilmore's little brother.

Second, there was Pittsburgh defenseman Rudy Snow. And Pittsburgh defenseman Rudy Snow wasn't shy about checking his teammate's little brother into the boards during Mik's first Washington versus Pittsburgh game.

"It's no secret in the league that your brother and his teammate Rudy Snow are good friends," a reporter had said to Mik during the post-game interview after that game. "What do you have to say to your brother's best friend after that check in the second period?"

Um, nothing?

He'd barely known Rudy. Plus, checking was what hockey players did.

While both those things were true, that hadn't been what the reporter wanted to hear. So Mik had smirked and said, "That he better watch out. He won't get the jump on me again. In fact, next time, I'm going to swipe the puck out from under him and score. Just wait and see."

Mik had later learned that Rudy had responded to that with a pithy, "He can try."

And that was it. Instant rivalry.

Rudy posted a photo of himself working out on social media? Mik told him his dumbbells looked a little light. Mik went on a rant about Swiffer dusters doing nothing more than moving the dust around? Rudy filmed a commercial for Swiffer.

To be fair, Mik hadn't had to listen to his agent when Tom encouraged him to play up that rivalry on social media. It would keep him in the spotlight and ensure he was talked about. Which, considering the Josh-Gilmore's-little-brother thing, hadn't necessarily been a good thing.

That rivalry between them had turned into a game of one-upmanship, even after Rudy had been traded from Pittsburgh. And here they were, a decade after that first game, still trying to outdo the other.

The fact that they now managed rival pubs was purely coincidental.

Now, as Rudy slowly made his way between the lawn ornaments—a trio of presents, an elf, a reindeer family, a couple of Minions on a sled, a Charlie Brown's Christmas tree, and a sign proclaiming *Welcome to Whoville*—Mik pulled his gaze from his long legs and looked behind him. Rudy's car was at the curb.

"What are you doing here anyway?" he asked. "You on your way somewhere?"

"Just getting back, actually."

Mik pulled the sleeve of his coat back and checked his watch. Just after nine a.m. "Walk of shame?" He didn't know why the thought stiffened his back.

“Not that there’d be anything wrong with that,” Rudy said with a pointed look.

Mik raised both hands. “I didn’t say there was.”

“But I went for a morning hike at one of the nearby state parks.”

Now that he looked closer, Rudy’s boots were caked in mud. That didn’t explain what he was doing here, though. Mik rocked from his toes to his heels. “Do you often happen to find yourself outside my house, Rudy?”

Rudy’s smile lit up his eyes. “It’s on my way home from the highway.”

“Sure. If you take the long way.”

Smile widening as he rounded a gnome, Rudy opened his mouth, no doubt to chirp back, but jumped back with a yelp.

Because there, cleverly half-hidden behind the hickory tree to up the creep-factor, was a seven-foot-tall plastic Bigfoot wearing a Santa hat.

“What the actual fuck is that?” Rudy demanded.

Mik grinned. “Isn’t he great?”

“Are you trying to scare the children? It’s Christmas, not Halloween.”

Mik’s scowl was instant. “What? No. He’s cute.”

“There’s nothing cute about it, Miki. The thing’s seven feet tall. Cute isn’t even a consideration.”

“But he’s wearing a Santa hat. And look.” Mik walked over and gestured at Bigfoot’s shoulder. “It’s holding a string of lights.”

Rudy took a step back.

“You can come closer. It’s not as creepy from close-up.”

“Fuck no. I don’t want to be around when that thing comes to life.”

Mik couldn’t help it. He laughed until his stomach hurt. “Guess that means you don’t want to come in for a cup of

coffee then.”

“Not with Bigfoot around to give me nightmares.”

“Aw.” Mik batted his lashes. “Keep saying nice things like that and I’ll think you’re flirting with me.”

“At least then we’d be on the same page,” Rudy muttered, carefully maneuvering around the other lawn ornaments to the sidewalk.

Mik snorted at the obvious joke.

“Your toy shop inflatable is lopsided, by the way.”

“What? No, it’s not.” Mik walked past the sidewalk to the very end of the driveway, turned, and . . . “Damn it.”

“I’d stay and help you fix it, but I’ve got my own decorations to put up,” Rudy said, popping his car door open.

“Like what? A wreath and a welcome mat that says *Merry Christmas?*” According to Josh, that was what Rudy had done last year. Mik hadn’t been able to come home for the holidays, so he hadn’t seen it.

“Ye of little faith.” Shaking his head, Rudy got into his car, started the engine, and lowered the window. “If you happen to find yourself in front of my house when you take the long way home from work later, you can see for yourself.”

And with that, he drove away, taking his teasing grin and the last word with him.



RUDY DROVE AWAY from Mik with a last lingering glance in his rearview and couldn’t help but chuckle. Wait until Mik got a load of Rudy’s Christmas decorations. He’d either be wickedly impressed and bow at Rudy’s feet or he’d gnash his teeth and think up ways to murder Rudy in his sleep.

Rudy would be okay with either result. The first meant that perhaps Mik would see him as something other than his

hockey rival. The second meant that at least Mik was thinking about him.

It was fun as hell to mess with Mik. He turned into a little angry hornet when he was annoyed, buzzing around to make himself look tough, all adorably red-cheeked with annoyance, his lips flat, and his light brown eyes shooting sparks that caused a tug deep down in Rudy's stomach. One day, Rudy wanted to see Mik's eyes shoot sparks for an entirely different reason, one that had nothing to do with irritation and everything to do with the sparks Rudy felt along his skin whenever he was in Mik's presence.

Rudy pulled into the driveway of the house he rented on a month-by-month basis. He was due at the pub in half an hour, so he showered and changed quickly, and before starting the short walk downtown, he snapped a photo of the brown shipping box that had been delivered yesterday and sent it to Mik as a little teaser.

RUDY

Bet you can't guess what kind of decorations I've got in here.

Grinning to himself, he started walking, nodding hello at the neighbors who called good morning. He had a few hours free between the lunch and dinner crowds today, so he'd pop back home and put up his decorations. That way Mik would see them when he took the long way home tonight.

Rudolph's, the pub he managed, was located on Christmas Boulevard in Santa's Village—or, in normal people speak, on Main Street in downtown Christmas Falls. And no, he didn't own the pub. The name was purely coincidental, much to the confusion of tourists. As if Rudy would ever name an establishment after himself.

He'd never meant to become manager of a small-town pub. He'd followed his best friend Josh—Mik's older brother—to Christmas Falls two and a half years ago when they'd both retired from the NHL. It had been meant as a quick trip to wind down after a hectic season, yet here he still was. And

when it had become clear that he'd be staying longer than the two weeks he'd envisioned, he'd gotten himself a job as a bartender at Rudolph's, just for something to do.

He'd been promoted to manager eight months ago after the previous manager had quit, something else he hadn't planned for. But then, there wasn't much other than hockey that he'd planned for in his life. Being raised with nomadic parents who went wherever the wind—or a new job—took them meant that plans often got tossed out the window. And Rudy was fine with that. It was what he was used to.

It hadn't been easy, leaving new friends behind, but taking to the open road for his parents' next job opportunity had been some of the best times of his life. Experiencing new ways of life—from fast-paced city life to slower country living, as well as different climates and foods—had always been fun. He hadn't loved having to join a new hockey team whenever his parents landed them someplace new, although constantly joining a new team had helped him deal with the four times he'd been traded in the NHL.

Honestly, some days he was tempted to pack up his belongings and hit the road, maybe meet up with his parents and join them on their next adventure. He'd been in Christmas Falls two and a half years already, his longest stint in any one place. There was a whole world out there to discover and there was an itch in Rudy's veins for something new.

Maybe in the spring, once the weather began to warm, he'd pack up his things, get in his car, and see where the road took him.

Maybe.

Because there was Mik to consider. Josh too, of course. Rudy had never had a friend like Josh, who was patient and kind and who knew him inside and out.

But Mik . . .

Sometime in their decade of hockey rivalry—or perhaps in the past six months since Mik had moved back to town after

retiring himself—Rudy had plunged headfirst into feelings he didn't know what to do with.

He hadn't planned that, either.

But if Mik would never see him as anything other than his rival, was there any point in Rudy sticking around when his feet were itching for something different?

A question to contemplate another day.

Saturday morning breakfast at Rudolph's was doing a brisk business when he walked into the family-friendly pub. The regulars waved and greeted him by name, which was more of a mindfuck than random strangers stopping him on the street for a selfie or an autograph. Although Rudy's parents had always made sure they moved somewhere with a hockey team he could join, they'd never stayed anywhere long enough for the townspeople to know his name.

Rudy nodded hello to his junior manager as she took the orders of a family of four near the back wall and stepped behind the bar, where he stashed his coat underneath the counter and washed his hands.

"Hey, Frank," Rudy said, grabbing a pitcher of water to refill Frank's glass.

"Rudy! Just the man I wanted to see." Frank pushed graying hair off his forehead and wagged his fork in Rudy's direction. Scrambled eggs fell off it and back onto his plate. "I was researching the health benefits of lamb yesterday, and know what I discovered?"

"I couldn't possibly guess."

"It's a fantastic source of iron." Frank slathered ketchup over what was left of his home fries. "And a mere three ounces of lamb meat will provide half of most people's daily B12 requirements. And before you tell me that adults in the United States consume less than one pound of lamb a year—" Frank added with a raised eyebrow when Rudy opened his mouth to interrupt. "—just keep in mind how popular the lamb special you had on the menu last winter was."

It had been popular. They'd sold out of it before 9:00 p.m., but there were costs to consider. The costs per portion per customer had been astronomical, even with the markup on the dish. Rudy might as well fork over a kidney, considering how expensive a cut of lamb was.

Rudy contemplated the man who frequented Rudolph's every Saturday for both breakfast and dinner and who always sat on that same barstool. Last week, Frank had suggested adding barramundi to the menu. The week before that it had been eggs Benedict on steak with micro-greens.

Shaking his head, Rudy checked his inventory of Prosecco. As it inched closer to brunch-hour, customers would start ordering mimosas. "Why were you researching the health benefits of lamb?"

"Wasn't on purpose," Frank said. "I started out researching if you can still pull DNA from bones that have been in the earth for twenty years, and somehow I ended up there."

Rudy raised an eyebrow. "Something we need to know about your extracurricular activities, Frank?"

Frank's booming laugh was loud over the sound of jaunty holiday music playing over the pub's speakers. "Nah. I'm as innocent as a babe. I was doing research for a new book."

"A murder mystery?"

"A rom-com."

Rudy stared at him.

"Kidding. Of course it's a murder mystery." Frank slapped the top of the bar, and Rudy couldn't help but laugh along with him. "Anyway. Think about what I said while you get me a box so I can take my fries home."

"You got it."

In the kitchen, Rudy grabbed a small cardboard box and a dish waiting to be served and went right back out to the dining room. He passed Frank the box, then walked to the other end of the bar. "Here you go, Travis," he said, placing the French toast on the counter.

Travis dragged his gaze off Billie, one of Rudy's servers, with obvious reluctance.

"She's never going to notice I exist."

"Have you tried talking to her?" Rudy asked. "I find that's a good first step in getting someone to notice you."

Travis sighed, the put-upon sigh of the shy mid-twenty-something. "I talk to her all the time."

"You order food. That's not the same thing. Try a conversation. 'Hi. I'm Travis. Do you like cheese?'"

Travis gawped at him. "Did you just quote *She's the Man* at me?"

"I have many hidden depths."

That sent Travis into uncontrollable laughter that had Billie glancing over with a smile, so maybe not all was lost there.

A family on their way out called their goodbyes and Rudy wished them a good day before seating a group of friends near the fireplace. Jem Knight—Christmas Falls' homegrown NFL superstar—tried to coax Rudy to join them, but he was on the clock for several more hours.

If Rudy actually sat down and made a list of all the places he'd lived in his life, the number would surely come out somewhere in the twenties. And of those, Christmas Falls was the friendliest. It had a unique charm and people who waved to him from across the street, even if they'd never exchanged names or basic pleasantries.

Would he miss that when he left?

His phone vibrated in his pocket, displaying an unknown number when he pulled it out. One of his distributors?

Catching his junior manager's eye, he gestured that he was heading to the office to take the call and answered with a brisk, "Rudy Snow."

"Snowie! It's Toshie."

"Hey, man." Rudy huffed a surprised laugh as he closed the office door behind him and sat at his desk. "How's it

going?”

Toshie—known to hockey fans everywhere as retired left-winger Satoshi Matsumoto—was an old teammate who now worked in the media center at the NCAA headquarters in Indianapolis. Rudy had co-hosted a podcast with Toshie about midway into his NHL career. The podcast had been an idea cooked up by the organization, a new way to keep their fans engaged via half-hour episodes released every two weeks during the season, where Rudy and Toshie talked hockey, had special guests in the form of other teammates, coaches, and staff, and took fan questions. They’d only hosted it for one season—the hosts changed every year—but it had been fun as hell.

“Not bad, man. Not bad,” Toshie said. In the background came the sound of phones ringing and conversations, what Rudy imagined every newsroom sounded like. “Listen, I wish I had time to shoot the shit, but I’ve got a meeting in five, so I’ll get right to the point.”

“Shoot,” Rudy said. Wasn’t like he had time to spare either.

“My team and I are going to be launching a new hockey podcast in the fall, in time for the new D1 season. It’ll be a generalized podcast discussing prospects, games, and stats, but in a way that pulls the curtain back and gives fans a behind-the-scenes look into college hockey. Guest stars would range from coaches and athletes to equipment and travel managers, maybe even former players and sports psychologists.”

Toshie paused for a moment while Rudy’s heart kick-started in anticipation.

“It’d be a weekly podcast, about an hour each, and what we’re looking for are three hosts who have good chemistry and who know the game inside and out. I threw your name into the hat, and when my superiors heard the podcast we did together, they agreed that you’re exactly what we’re looking for. As it stands right now, you’re our first-round draft pick for this.”

Rudy was so surprised he couldn't even find a laugh for the joke.

"The job's based in Indianapolis, and there will be some travel involved since we'll want the hosts at some of the games. I know you're still in Christmas Town with Josh Gilmore, but—"

"Christmas Falls," Rudy muttered absently.

"Whatever. Just know that the job requires relocation. If you're interested, my bosses want to interview you as soon as we can make it happen, but between you and me . . ." Toshie's voice lowered. "Don't tell anyone, but the job's basically yours if you want it. But here's the kicker," he went on, louder, without giving Rudy a chance to respond. "If you *are* interested, what that means is we're going to hire the other two hosts once you're fully on board, to ensure you all get along. If you're *not* interested, I need to get hiring, because even though the podcast launches in September, there's a ton of prep work that I want the hosts involved in. So I'd need your answer by February fifteenth."

Hadn't Rudy just been thinking that he was ready for something new? And now this job opportunity fell into his lap?

It couldn't have been more of a sign than if Toshie had shown up on his doorstep with his new contract in hand and all the podcast equipment he'd ever need.

And more than the coincidence of this falling into his lap? The job sounded *fun*. *Really* fun. Excitement pounded at the base of his skull and pulsed through his veins. He could talk about hockey until he was blue in the face. This wouldn't be a job so much as three people shooting the shit into a microphone.

But Indianapolis . . . It wasn't far from Christmas Falls. About five hours or so. Either way, if he moved, it'd be the end of whatever he'd wanted to have with Mik.

And was he ready for that when, if he was being honest with himself, he'd never really tried?

February fifteenth was three months away. A job interview wasn't a guarantee, no matter what Toshie said. Rudy could meet with Toshie's bosses, and if they offered him the position, he'd still have three months to decide.

Three months to launch a charm offensive.

Three months to make Mik his.

And if Mik didn't feel the same . . .

Rudy swallowed hard at the thought. "Okay," he said. "Let's set up that interview."



AN HOUR after Rudy drove away, Mik walked into his family's pub on Christmas Boulevard, hefting a box of Christmas decorations he hadn't used at his own house. He and Josh had already decorated Frosty's so it would look merry and bright for the start of festival season, which had launched a few days ago.

Festival season was *the* season in Christmas Falls. It ran for an entire month, beginning in mid-November, and brought in tourists from far and wide with its Parade of Lights, holiday cooking classes, cocktail hours, pie bake-offs, wine tastings, ice sculpture demos, holiday house tours, numerous holiday-themed socials, and the Arts & Crafts Holiday Fair.

Just to name a few of the activities.

But with a name like Christmas Falls, what else was their small town supposed to be known for if not Christmas?

Frosty's didn't open for lunch until 11:30, so the pub was empty, although the lights were on. Josh was probably in the back office, so Mik rounded the counter and placed his box on the bar.

Now that Mom and Dad had retired, it was up to Mik and Josh to manage the pub that had always been like a second home. His and Josh's growth charts were written on the wall in pencil next to the fireplace, though they'd stopped adding to

them in their late teens. Some of the chairs still had tennis balls on their legs from when he and Josh had attached them in grade school following a school-wide project to add them to classroom chair legs to reduce noise. Dad had bought out every tennis ball from the general store and supervised as Mik and Josh carefully cut holes into them.

And right on that barstool was where Mik had realized with one hundred percent certainty that he was into dudes and only dudes. Mom and Dad had held an afternoon talent show when he was twelve, and Mik had watched from the barstool, nursing a 7-Up, and had fallen hard for a guitar player with broody eyes.

Ah, young love.

Of course, that guitar player hadn't known he existed, but that was beside the point.

“Hey,” Josh said, pulling up his sleeves as he approached from the office. Frosty's was as casual as any pub, and Josh wore jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, same as Mik, though Mik's was wrinkled from being at the bottom of his T-shirt pile.

Strangers often thought Mik and Josh were twins, and on the one hand, Mik could see it. They were the same height, had the same light brown hair, the same light brown eyes, and the same shape to their noses and mouths.

Other than that, Mik didn't see the resemblance. Josh's jaw was sharper, his legs longer. Mik's hair curled around his ears, and his chest wasn't as wide.

Plus, Josh had bags under his eyes the size of Bigfoot's nose. Co-managing a pub, raising a two-year-old bundle of chaos while his ready-to-pop wife was on bed rest due to preeclampsia, and coaching a youth hockey team would do that to a person.

“What'd you bring?” Josh asked, nodding at the box.

“Decorations I wasn't able to use at home.” Mik pulled out a welcome mat that read *Merry Christmas Ya Filthy Animal*. “We can put this out front.”

“Um . . .”

“And I got this.” He removed a box that held a light-up dachshund wearing a Santa hat. “It needs to be assembled.”

“Um . . .”

“Ooh, and the pièce de résistance.”

“Is that . . . Santa?”

“Santa hanging from the rooftop. See?” Mik unfolded the plush suit to reveal that it was mostly flat. “His arms are up and there’s adhesive to stick his gloves to the roof. I figure we can put it on the rooftop, next to the window.”

Twisting his lips, Josh looked from the suit to the tasteful decorations hanging in the dining room—from tinsel and garland to the Christmas tree in the window and the lights along the liquor shelves—and back to the suit.

Mik held it by the shoulders. “You know you want to,” he singsonged.

“Why didn’t you hang it up at your place?”

“It didn’t go with the rest of my decorations.”

Josh’s expression turned flat. “You have Bigfoot in your front yard but Santa is a no-go?”

“Don’t question it. It made sense in my head.”

“Well, unfortunately, Santa doesn’t really go with the décor here either. I’ll take the welcome mat home, though. Meredith will love it.”

Meredith, Josh’s wife, who was also known as Mik’s childhood BFF, had way more class than Mik and Josh combined, but she also had the sense of humor of a twelve-year-old.

A knock on the door preceded its opening. Mik turned, ready with his customer service sorry-we’re-not-open-yet smile, but it was Mom who stepped through the door, Dad right behind her. They both sported suitcases as large as a house, and Mom’s sunglasses hid half her face. With the

shaggy feather boa-like scarf draped around her neck, she looked like an aging movie star on the lam.

“Morning, boys,” Mom said, shoving her sunglasses to the top of her head. Unbuttoning her wool coat, she looked around. “Love the Christmas decorations you’ve put up. Where’d you find this gnome? I don’t remember that from last year.”

“It was custom made by Murphy Clark,” Josh said, naming Christmas Falls’ resident wooden-gnome carver.

As Mom picked it up, Dad yawned hugely and slumped onto a barstool. He wore a winter coat in forest green, a big bulky thing more commonly seen on skiers than retired pub owners, and a knit hat covered his balding head. Mik poured him a cup of coffee from the pot Josh had going.

“I knew you were my favorite,” Dad murmured, toasting him with his mug. “Your mom had me up until three in the morning. Packing. ‘Which sundress should I bring, Joel? This one, this one, or this one?’”

“Let me guess,” Mik said with a grin. “She brought them all.”

Dad grunted. “Half my suitcase is filled with her clothes. How much stuff does she need to lie on the beach for a month? Lots, as it turns out.”

“Look at it this way—if she brings everything with her, that means less clothes shopping while you’re on vacation.”

Dad nearly choked on his coffee. “If that’s what you believe, you don’t know anything about women.”

“I never claimed to,” Mik said. “And probably never will.”

Mom stole Dad’s coffee, took a large gulp, then said, “Which one of you is driving us to the airport?”

“That’d be me. I’m parked on Dasher,” Josh said, naming the adjacent side street. He flipped his car keys at Dad. “Why don’t you guys put your suitcases in the trunk while I grab my coat?”

He disappeared into the backroom, and Mik eyed his parents as they rebuttoned coats and pulled on gloves. “Aren’t you even a little bit sad to be missing festival season?”

They looked at each other. Back at him.

“Nope,” Dad said.

“Not even a little,” Mom added.

“Nothing but sun, sand, and Key West’s beautiful beaches for four whole weeks. We won’t miss you one bit.”

Mik snorted a laugh. “Liars.” He hugged them both, then held the front door open for them to wheel their suitcases through. “Have fun. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Love you.” Mom kissed his cheek on her way out. “See you in a few weeks.”

Josh nodded at him as he trailed after them. “I’ll be back in time to open for lunch.”

“Cool,” Mik said. “Drive safe.”

Josh tended to work the lunch shifts on weekends while Mik worked evenings, giving Josh the opportunity to spend his evenings at home with his wife and kid. Mik didn’t have anyone to go home to, so he was happy to work until the wee hours of the morning.

Mik closed and locked the door, shutting out the Saturday morning chill, and turned to face his pub. As much as this place felt like home and as much as he loved running it with Josh, sometimes he wondered where he would’ve ended up after retiring from hockey if Mom and Dad hadn’t expected him and Josh to run Frosty’s one day. Would he be a police officer? Teaching English abroad? Taking a break from everyday life to travel? Developing an app?

He’d never had much of an opportunity to see the world outside of travel for games—and in no way, shape, or form did those resemble vacations. Nine times out of ten, there hadn’t been any time in the schedule for sightseeing. Outside of the hotel and the arena, it had been like the rest of the world hadn’t existed.

And it wasn't that he wanted to travel, necessarily. He just wanted that *more*, that nameless *something* that made him feel fulfilled. Managing the pub was fun and challenging, and that he got to do it with his big brother was doubly cool. But it didn't leave him feeling like he'd found his purpose.

Josh had hockey coaching, and Mik had . . . a giant, ugly question mark.

Blowing out a breath, he pushed those thoughts aside and got to work. He pulled his phone out to sync it with the speakers and put on his favorite holiday playlist, and—

Oh. A missed text.

From Rudy.

Mik's heart gave a jolt at seeing Rudy's name on his phone screen. From annoyance, obviously. What did Rudy want *now*?

RUDY

Bet you can't guess what kind of decorations I've got in here.

He'd also attached a photo of a large box, clearly something that had been delivered, given the shipping label.

Rudy's Christmas decorations . . . came in a large box? A very large box. The last time Mik had received a delivery in a box that big, it had been his new office chair.

If Mik was to believe Rudy's box was full of decorations, that meant he was putting up way more than a wreath and a doormat.

Flattening his lips, Mik tucked the Santa suit back in his own box and set it aside to bring home later. Santa would make a nice addition to his outdoor décor, after all.

CHAPTER
TWO

On principle, Mik did not take the long way home from Frosty's on Saturday night.

Of course, principle had nothing on curiosity, so the following morning, he took the long way on his walk to Josh's for their weekly breakfast get-together.

He wasn't sure what he expected out of Rudy's decorations—that had been a big box in the photo. Rudy could've had one large decoration or several smaller ones in there. So when he reached Rudy's rental, he had to let out a laugh of surprise.

The house itself was a square blue bungalow with white shutters. Cute, but nothing spectacular to look at.

What *was* spectacular to look at—though Mik would never admit it to Rudy—was his holiday décor: six inflatable penguins playing hockey. Between the two groups of three penguins, Rudy had staked a white tarp to the ground as a mock hockey rink.

Bouncing on his toes, Mik shoved his cold hands in his pockets and grinned, making a mental note to come back in the evening so he could see what it looked like lit up. Ten points to Rudy for the clever decorations, though Mik's yard was still better.

A few minutes later, he let himself into Josh and Meredith's two-story red-brick home with the covered porch—and brand-new *Merry Christmas Ya Filthy Animal* doormat—and was greeted with a screaming toddler. Not bloody murder screams. More of a mischievous “I know I'm doing something

bad but you can't catch me" scream that was all high-pitched giggles an octave away from piercing the eardrums.

"Jesus," he muttered as he shucked his winter gear and left his boots by the door.

Josh appeared in the doorway between the kitchen and the hall, his eyes pinched with the constant worry over his wife's preeclampsia. He held Eagan in a fireman carry over his shoulder, Eagan's little legs kicking wildly against Josh's chest. The kid's giggle-screams had subsided, and now he sang to himself. At two years old, Eagan had Josh's lips, Meredith's nose, Josh and Mik's mom's dark blond hair color—though how Eagan's had ended up curly was a constant source of amusement—and he'd somehow ended up with eyes on the blue side of hazel.

"Hey," Josh said. "Sorry, Eagan's been on a tear since he woke up, so it'll be a Toaster Strudel and drinkable yogurt kind of morning. I did manage to make biscuits, though."

"From scratch?"

"What? Hell, no. What do you take me for? I don't have time for that with a toddler in the house."

"Oh." Mik pouted. "I think I'd rather have the Toaster Strudel."

Josh's lips flattened. "You won't eat biscuits from a mix, but frozen pastries are okay?"

Mik shrugged expansively. "I'm a complicated guy."

"Complicated," Eagan echoed, but because he was two, it sounded more like "Compitted."

"Hey, little dude," Mik said, grabbing one of Eagan's feet.

More giggling as Eagan squirmed away.

"Can I help with anything?" Mik asked, following Josh into the kitchen.

"Nah. The biscuits are about to come out of the oven and the Toaster Strudel is easy. If you can keep an eye on Eagan

for a few minutes, I'll whip up some scrambled eggs real quick."

Josh put Eagan down, and he bolted across the kitchen to his play area near the back door.

"Coffee's ready," Josh said, nodding at the pot on the counter. "Help yourself."

Mik did just that, doctoring his coffee with enough sugar to make his teeth ache. He much preferred a good dirty chai latte from Jolly Java, but sugary black coffee would do in a pinch. "Meredith awake yet?"

"Should be."

"Can I go up?"

Head buried in a cupboard—presumably for a pan in which to make the eggs—Josh gave him an absentminded, "Uh-huh."

Mug held in one hand, Mik grabbed the toddler under one arm, ignoring Eagan's squawk of protest, and headed toward the stairs, passing a bright yellow toy school bus that would be as tall as Eagan if held upright. Inside were several action figures and a stuffed cat with no eyes.

Creepy.

Upstairs, Mik's socked feet sank into the plush carpeting Josh and Meredith had recently replaced. Knocking on the door jamb of the primary bedroom's open door with his foot, Mik stuck his head inside and smiled at his childhood best friend.

"Mama!" Eagan squealed, but when Mik put him down, he aimed for a pile of toddler-friendly toys by the armchair.

"Yo," Meredith said. She sat in bed, propped up against several pillows. Her auburn hair was tied into a knot on the top of her head and she had a plate of grapes balanced on her baby bump.

Was it still called a baby bump at thirty-five weeks?

“Ooh, you brought contraband.” Meredith eyed his mug. “I knew you were my favorite Gilmore brother.”

Mik snorted a laugh and climbed onto the bed, slowly, so he didn't upend Meredith's plate or his coffee. “Uh-huh. I dare you to say that to your husband.”

“I have.” Meredith's grin was all teeth. “More than once. He knows he's lucky you're as gay as they come, otherwise it would've been you and me bumping uglies and making all of this.” She poked her belly.

Mik made a face. “Ugh. Gross. Don't say bumping uglies in relation to you and me.”

She laughed, the sound light and musical despite the stress lines at the corners of her mouth.

Preeclampsia was no joke, but Meredith was doing everything the doctor had told her to. Baby Gilmore Number Two was due right around Christmas, and Mik had every finger and toe crossed that the delivery would go as smoothly as it could.

“Give me that coffee so I can sniff it,” Meredith said.

Mik handed it over. “I thought a little bit of coffee was okay while pregnant. I remember you drinking it sometimes when you were pregnant with Eagan.”

“Yeah, but with the preeclampsia . . .”

“Can it make it worse?”

“Apparently, caffeine exposure during pregnancy hasn't been associated with the risk of preeclampsia, but better to play it safe, right?”

“Of course. That's why the bed rest, right?”

Meredith scoffed and handed him back his mug. “It's not technically bed rest. It's a reduction in activities, especially those that cause stress. I cut back even further on work last week, but I'm not going to lie—it's left me with a lot of downtime to overthink about the preeclampsia, which stresses me out even more.”

She worked as a cover designer for a publishing house specializing in fantasy and science fiction—a job that had always sounded more fun than stressful to Mik. But he knew from past conversations that sometimes things could get ugly, especially when the author and the marketing people disagreed on the direction of a cover.

His heart heavy, Mik slung an arm around her shoulders. “I’m sorry, Mer.”

She laid her head on his shoulder and picked at her grapes.

Meredith might joke about him being her favorite Gilmore, but they both knew where her heart lay. With Mik and Josh only being twelve months apart, they’d shared friends for most of their lives. So even though Meredith was Mik’s age, she and Josh had always been close too. But it hadn’t been until Meredith and Mik began high school that she and Josh had started making eyes at each other. And even then, it had taken years before they’d admitted to having feelings for each other.

It had been a Tuesday. Mik had been home for Christmas for a very brief two and a half days during his rookie season. Meredith had been home from college for the holidays. She’d invited him over for brunch, making an elaborate spread of French toast, frittatas, roasted broccoli, pasta salad, and a savory ground beef, cream sauce, biscuit dish—his first clue that something had been up. Meredith hated cooking.

Halfway through their meal, she’d finally given up the pretense of small talk and said, “So, um . . . would it be okay if I asked your brother out?”

To which Mik had frowned and responded with, “Why are you asking me?”

Josh had shown up then, fresh off a flight home for his own brief two and a half days of Christmas vacation. And he’d come straight to Meredith’s instead of visiting their parents first, which had made Mik grin at them in delight. Meredith had gone the color of a peach.

Later that afternoon, on their walk back from town where Mik and Josh had done some last-minute Christmas shopping,

Josh had cleared his throat, kicked at a snowy patch in the sidewalk, and said, “So, uh . . . don’t be mad but . . . um. I know Mer’s your best friend and all but, uh . . . I sort of have feelings for her.”

Mik had rolled his eyes because *yeah. No shit.* “Why would I be mad?”

Josh had blinked at him. And he and Meredith had been cutely coupled up the following day.

It hadn’t been easy with Josh playing for Pittsburgh and Meredith attending college in Illinois. But they’d made it work, and once Meredith had started working for the publishing house—a job she could do remotely—she’d quickly moved to Pittsburgh.

Here they were now, several years, a mortgage, and a kid and a half later, and Mik wished he could make everything better for his brother and best friend.

As Eagan crashed two trucks together, Mik’s gaze alighted on the television mounted onto the wall across from the bed.

“Are you watching . . . *One Tree Hill?*” He hadn’t even noticed the TV was on.

“It’s on Netflix.”

“Is it as bad as I remember?”

“Worse. But in a good way, if that makes sense? It’s low stress, though, so it’s got that going for it.” Meredith offered him a grape.

“Thanks.” He popped it in his mouth, then choked on it when the front door opened and a familiar voice called out, “Hello? Josh?”

Mik jerked upright. Coughed to clear his throat. “What is *Rudy* doing here?” His heart hammered and his mouth went dry.

Meredith pulled another grape off the vine. “Josh invited him for breakfast.”

“Oh. I see. Josh. Invited him. For breakfast.” Mik knew his mouth was making noises, but none of the sounds escaping meant anything.

“Uh-huh.”

Coffee mug held in a tight grip, Mik climbed off the bed and tiptoed to the bedroom doorway. From there, he had a direct line of sight to the front door, where too-sexy-for-a-winter-hat Rudy Snow was taking off his boots and coat. How dare Mik’s nemesis be so tall and dark-haired and dark-eyed and scruffy-jawed, looking like a million bucks even in worn sweatpants that cinched at the ankle and a T-shirt that was annoyingly snug.

It certainly made his chest look extra broad and his biceps all bulging and inviting and—

Nope. Not thinking about Rudy’s biceps.

“That’s fine,” he muttered, going back into the bedroom. “Josh can invite whoever he likes to breakfast.”

“Uh-huh,” Meredith said again, this time edged in sarcasm. “Why don’t you go down there and make sure he doesn’t eat the last Toaster Strudel?”

Mik gasped.

He was halfway down the stairs when Meredith called, “Take Eagan with you!”

So Mik went back and took Eagan with him.



JOSH LOOKED LIKE HELL. If there was a word for someone who was five levels past stressed, Rudy didn’t know what it was, but that was his best friend.

Just . . . haggard. In the week or so since Meredith had been diagnosed with preeclampsia, Josh had aged a decade, appearing closer to forty-two than thirty-two.

And Rudy had no idea how to help.

Josh was waving him toward the coffee machine when footsteps pounded down the stairs. Mik entered the kitchen a moment later, a cackling Eagan held football-style under one arm. Rudy's heart gave a lurch, but he didn't have time to utter a hello before Mik placed Eagan on the floor and yanked open the freezer door.

"What are you doing?" Rudy asked.

Mik pulled out a box of Toaster Strudel. A second. A third. Frowned at the bundle in his arms before turning that frown on his brother. "You have tons of Toaster Strudel."

"Sure," Josh said. "I keep them stocked for you and Eagan."

"But Meredith said . . ."

"She said what?"

"Um . . ." Mik tossed a quick glance Rudy's way, cheeks flushed, a pouty slant to his lips that made Rudy want to kiss him.

But that was nothing new. He always wanted to kiss Mik Gilmore.

Mik shook his head. "Never mind. So, hey. Do you want to discuss Gran's party while I'm here?"

"Your gran's having a party?" Rudy asked, pouring himself a cup of coffee and topping up Josh's mug.

Josh gestured with an egg-spattered spatula. "Mik and I are throwing her a surprise party for her eightieth the weekend before Christmas. Our parents get back the day before the party, so the timing works."

"Did you get the phone numbers of Gran's friends from Mom?" Mik asked.

"Shit." Josh's shoulders slumped. "I forgot. Sorry. I'll text her later today, then give them all a call. And I'll make sure I send the e-vite tonight as well."

Rudy didn't like the defeated curve of Josh's shoulders. Neither did Mik—he eyed Josh from the table where he was

putting down three place settings. "I'll text Mom," he said firmly. "And take care of everything else too. Invitations, menu, decorations, music."

Josh turned off the burner and moved the pan of eggs onto a trivet. "What's left for me to do, then?"

"Nothing. That's the point. Take back that time for yourself. You need it."

"That doesn't seem fair. We were supposed to plan the party together. Eggs are ready, by the way." Josh nodded at the pan. "And the biscuits are on the tray there. Help yourselves while I fix Eagan a plate. Mik, can you toast a Toaster Strudel for Eagan?"

"What about me?" Rudy asked. "I want a Toaster Strudel."

"No Toaster Strudel for rival pub owners," Mik said, depositing the frozen pastries into a toaster oven.

"First, it's manager. And second, rude."

"Not as rude as that time you called my slap shot lazy."

"Correction." Rudy held up a finger. "I said your slap-shot *form* was lazy. There's a difference."

"Only in your head."

"Prove me otherwise, then."

Mik blinked at him, a flutter of eyelashes that gave him an air of innocence that Rudy didn't buy for a second. "What, right now?"

Rudy dished eggs onto three plates. "Obviously not. I want some of these eggs. So in lieu of proving me wrong, you can tell me how amazing my Christmas decorations are."

Mik's gaze jerked to the left before meeting his again. "I haven't seen them yet."

A likely story.

Once they were all seated, Eagan on his knees on the one chair that had arms, one-track-mind Josh circled around to the

previous topic. “Why don’t you at least let me send out the invitations for the party?”

“Why?” Mik opened a tiny packet of icing with his teeth, poured the icing onto a Toaster Strudel, and transferred the strudel onto Eagan’s plate. “If I’m planning it, it makes more sense for the RSVPs to come to me so I don’t have to keep bugging you for numbers.” Mik doctored two more strudels.

Rudy stole one off his plate.

“Hey! Get fu . . . uh . . . rosted. Get frosted, Rudy.” Mik eyed Eagan and nodded once, as though that was what he’d meant to say all along.

Bubbles of delight exploded in Rudy’s chest, and he grinned at him.

“But I want to do *something*,” Josh insisted over Mik’s growling. “It’s a big project, Mik. Too much, especially with the pub too.”

“I’ll help,” Rudy blurted, jumping on the excuse to spend time with Mik.

Plus, if there was one thing that would get him in Mik Gilmore’s good graces, it was offering to do something for his beloved Gran, the Gilmore clan matriarch.

“Oh, but—”

“Why?” Mik asked, interrupting what would’ve no doubt been a protest from Josh.

Why not? was Rudy’s instinctive response, just to be contrary. But that wouldn’t ease the stress on Josh’s face, and more than that, it would feel disingenuous. If Rudy wanted something real with Mik, he had to start giving Mik parts of his real self, not just the hockey player who thrived on competing with his best friend’s younger brother for shits and giggles.

“Your gran welcomed me into your family from the very first time Josh brought me to Christmas Falls. Remember?” he asked Josh. “Bye week our first or second season.”

Josh nodded.

“And she sent me care packages once a month after that, every season, for ten years. If I can do anything to help plan her party, I will.”

“And that’s awesome,” Josh said, picking up a corner of Eagan’s strudel that had landed on the floor. “Really. But I was going to ask you to cover my youth hockey team. I was going to ask *you*, Mik, but you’ve never expressed an interest in coaching.”

Surprised at the request, Rudy paused, coffee mug halfway to his mouth. “You want me to coach your kids?”

Mik set his fork down and placed a hand on Josh’s wrist. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s the schedule,” Josh admitted. “Practices are on Tuesday mornings. I need to be at the rink by six, but Eagan’s daycare doesn’t open until seven. I don’t want Meredith to have to get him up, dressed, fed, and dropped off on her own, not in her condition right now. I got lucky last week because her sister was able to come by to help, but—”

“Josh.” Rudy jumped in to save Josh from himself. “You don’t have to explain.”

“What if I came by on Tuesday mornings and got Eagan ready and dropped off?” Mik offered. “That way you can still coach.”

“It’s not just practice, though,” Josh said. “There are weekend games and strategizing and reviewing tape and emailing the parents and coordinating travel. It’s a rec league, so there’s no team manager. Just me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Rudy said. “Mik and I will do it.” Volunteering Mik would probably make Mik’s head explode, but the way Rudy saw it, it was another excuse to get them working together.

Mik’s jaw dropped. “We will?” He looked at his brother, no doubt cataloging the obvious fatigue. Nodded once. “We will. And we should probably think about hiring a junior manager like Rudy’s got at Rudolph’s, and maybe giving some

of the servers more responsibility. That way you don't have to work weekends and find alternative arrangements for Eagan."

Josh's entire body deflated. "Thank you both. Seriously." He passed one hand down his face. "I feel like such a failure in life right now. I don't want the kids to feel like I abandoned them and—"

Scowling, Mik flicked him on the forehead.

"Ow! What the hell, Mik?"

"Bad, Uncle Mik," Eagan said, stabbing eggs with his kid-sized fork.

"You're not a failure," Mik said. "Just because you can't do everything all at once, it doesn't make you a failure. You're doing the best you can, and that's all anyone can ask. No one's blaming you for cutting back so you can be there for your family right now. Besides, the best Meredith can do right now is lie there and grow a baby inside her. How much of a failure do you think that makes her feel?"

Josh winced. "Christ. I'm an insensitive ass."

As Eagan repeated a refrain of "ass, ass, ass," under his breath, much to Josh's mixed amusement and horror, a voice came from upstairs. "Excuse me, gentlemen!"

"Yeah, babe," Josh called up.

Eagan perked up at his mom's voice. "Mama!"

"Where's my breakfast?"

Fuck, Josh mouthed. He stood and got a plate from the cupboard, adding eggs and a biscuit and some grapes he got out of the fridge. "Husband of the year right here. Talk about a failure," he muttered. "Coming right up," he added, louder so Meredith could hear.

"Bring me one of Mik's Toaster Strudels."

Scowling, Mik hugged his plate with its one remaining Toaster Strudel.

Josh forked it onto Meredith's plate anyway.

“Hey.” Mik pouted, all surly and cute, his hair flopping into his eyes.

Rudy wanted to kiss that pout off his lips. He shoved half a biscuit in his mouth instead.

Josh disappeared upstairs with Meredith’s breakfast. Mik stood and added more Toaster Strudels to the toaster, grumbling under his breath and narrowing his annoyance-filled brown eyes on Rudy as though he’d been the one to steal his last precious pastry.

Rudy grinned back, a little thrill zinging through him when Mik’s cheeks flushed.

Party planning and coaching together was going to be all sorts of fun.

CHAPTER
THREE

On Tuesday morning, Rudy rose early, made two types of coffee, poured them into two separate Thermoses, and dressed in his winter coat. Mik had offered to drive them to their first hockey practice as youth recreational league coaches, so Rudy locked up and started walking in the direction of Mik's house, the laces of his skates tied together and slung over one shoulder.

Five-thirty in Christmas Falls wasn't just silent as fuck—it was a ghost town. Inflatable Christmas lawn ornaments lay in pools of indistinct color, porch lights had been turned off, streetlights lit up random tracts of sidewalk, and the only sound was his footsteps, crunching on the occasional dead leaf or patch of hard-packed snow.

Rudy hadn't coached since he'd volunteered at youth summer camps run by his organization when he'd been in the NHL. Seeing a kid's face light up when they aced a drill or hit the back of the net with the puck was always a kick, but although coaching was fun, it hadn't been something Rudy had ever considered for himself post-NHL.

Not that he'd considered pub management, either, or hosting a college hockey podcast, but that was the beauty of not having a plan. He could go wherever life took him without stressing about where he was supposed to be.

His interview with Toshie's bosses at the NCAA was scheduled for next Monday. In the back of his mind, Rudy thought he should've been nervous about it, given the only job he'd ever interviewed for in his life had been the bartending

gig at Rudolph's more than two years ago. But he wasn't. He was likable, friendly, and adaptable thanks to moving around so much as a kid. He'd been an ace at making new friends before he was ten, although he'd stopped trying to actively make new friends before he hit his teen years. The older he got, the harder it became to leave people behind.

One of the houses he passed had icicle lights hanging along its roof, and Rudy mentally added them to the dream house in his head. The one he'd begun fantasizing about sometime before he hit adolescence.

The house itself was indistinct. Featureless. Much of the interior was as well. His dream house was focused less on the tangible and more on the feeling. A rustic coffee table in the living room, surrounded by large couches to accommodate friends and family for an after-dinner drink and dessert as they exchanged stories and life updates. A television over the fireplace where he and his future partner would watch their favorite movies. A guest bedroom done up in shades of green to mimic the outdoors and make his parents feel at home when they visited. A cozy comforter and tons of fluffy pillows on the bed in the primary bedroom, where he and his partner would laze around on a wintery morning. A cozy sectional that was as comfortable as it was inviting, a place for loved ones to sit with a beer as they celebrated a birthday or perhaps a holiday.

He'd thought that Christmas Falls might be the place where he made that dream house a reality, but he'd never had four permanent walls in his life. He didn't know how to stay in one place and it made his neck itchy to think about. Even as he considered if things with Mik went where he hoped they would, he worried that his restless legs would eventually take him out of town.

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and since the only people he could conceivably think of who would call him at this hour were Mik or Josh, he tucked the second Thermos into the crook of his elbow and dug his phone out of his coat pocket.

But it was his mom's photo on the screen.

Concern edging into his chest, he swiped to answer. “Hey, Mom. Everything okay?”

“Oh, you’re awake.”

“Uh, yes?” Rudy swung a left onto another side street. “Why’d you call me if you didn’t think I would be? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I know it’s early, but I have cell service for the first time in days. I was going to leave you a message to say hello. So. Hi.”

“Oh.” Blowing out a relieved laugh, Rudy picked up the pace. His fingers were getting cold. “Hi. Where are you guys?”

“We’re glamping in the Catskills.”

“Glamping? Since when do you glamp? You’ve always been pitch-a-tent-in-the-woods kind of people.”

“Ah well. With your dad’s back, he’s finding it harder and harder to sleep in a sleeping bag on the ground these days, even if it’s on an air mattress. So we thought we’d try glamping.”

“I thought you were going to buy an RV.”

“We did. We pick it up in a week! After that, we’re thinking of parking it near the ocean somewhere warm for the winter.” Rudy didn’t get a chance to comment before Mom said, “Your dad’s back from collecting pine cones. Gotta go, sweetie. Love you.”

Pine cones? Rudy didn’t ask. Just told her he loved her back and hung up.

“Who do you love?” a voice asked a moment before the body attached to that voice caught up to him. “Got a new man in your life?”

Rudy blinked at Mik and Josh’s gran. She wore insulated pants, a fleece top, boots, light mittens, and a knit headband that covered her ears. “Hi, Mrs. Gilmore.”

She swatted his arm. “How many times have I told you to call me Lilian?”

“Not enough, apparently. Do you always power walk this early?”

“I do. I’ve always been an early riser, something I didn’t pass on to my son or grandsons.”

Physically, Lilian Gilmore was nothing like Mik and Josh. She was petite and fine-boned, though still spry at seventy-nine. Her gray pixie cut suited her, the stripe of red in her sweep of bangs even more so. The color tended to change depending on the holidays. It’d been pink for Valentine’s Day, a pastel purple for Easter, and blue for the Fourth of July.

Mrs. Gilmore waggled her thin eyebrows. “So? New man?”

“No,” Rudy said with a laugh as they approached Mik’s house. “I was talking to my mom.”

“And how are your parents doing? Enjoying retirement?”

“They seem to be. They’re heading somewhere warm for the winter. Hey, maybe they’ll run into your son and daughter-in-law in Key West.”

She hummed. “Is your father still making those sculptures out of old chicken wire?”

Rudy cocked his head and thought of the pine cones. “I think he’s moved on to something else.”

“Hm. And what are you doing out so early?” She eyed his skates. “Not going skating at Sugar Plum Park, are you? I think the lights go off in the park sometime after midnight.”

“No, I’m—”

“Hey, Gran.” Mik stood on his porch, the porch light behind him giving him a halo effect. Fuck, he was cute first thing in the morning. All bed-headed, bundled into a winter coat and scarf, his cheeks pink from the morning chill. Something about the look made Rudy want to tumble him into bed and ravish him until he couldn’t see straight.

Mik grabbed his skates from where they rested at his feet and came down the porch steps. “A little early for you to be out, isn’t it?”

“No, dear,” his gran said dryly. “But I believe it’s a little early for *you* to be out. Where are you off to at this time of the day?”

“We’re helping Josh coach his hockey team.”

“You two?” Her gaze swung from Mik to Rudy. “Together? Since when have you been able to get along long enough to get anything done?”

Mik made a sarcastic “heh-heh” sound. “Okay, bye, Gran. See you later.”

Making a little “mm-hmm” noise in the back of her throat, she offered her cheek for a kiss, which Mik obliged, offered the other to Rudy, which he also obliged after a beat of confused hesitation, then continued on her walk.

“Here.” Rudy handed Mik one of his Thermoses.

Mik took it, brow furrowing. “Coffee?”

“Only fair since you’re driving.”

Mik half groaned, half laughed. “Don’t be nice to me. I don’t know what to do with that.” He unlocked his car, tossed his skates into the back, and climbed into the driver’s seat.

Surprised at the early morning revelation, Rudy grinned and got in the car.



“NOT GONNA LIE,” Mik muttered as he aimed his car toward the community center, Rudy’s wide shoulders taking up most of the space in his SUV, “one thing I don’t miss about the NHL is five a.m. wake-up calls.”

“When Josh and I played for Pittsburgh, we used to room together for away games, and I swear, some days I could’ve used a crane to get him out of bed. Your gran packed a mini

blowhorn into one of my care packages, and let me tell you, that certainly did the trick.”

“I bet Josh loved that.” Mik pictured Rudy blowing the horn over Josh’s head. Pictured Josh bolting up at the sound, his flight-or-fight response kicking in as he flailed and fell out of bed with a curse. “Speaking of Gran, I had an idea for a theme for the party.”

“Isn’t birthday the theme?”

Mik scoffed. “No way. That’s way too boring. And literal.” That had been Josh’s idea too, but . . . just no. It lacked personality and flair, of which Gran had both. “How about *The Nightmare Before Christmas*?”

Rudy went silent for a moment. Sipped his coffee. Stared out the windshield.

Grip tightening on the steering wheel, Mik clenched his teeth. Great. Rudy was going to tell him that his idea was juvenile and they should stick to a classic birthday theme and —

“What about Whoville?”

If the question had held an ounce of sarcasm or mockery, a single lick of *Good one, Mik. How about Whoville instead? It’s just as dumb*, Mik would’ve pulled over and kicked Rudy out of the car.

But the question had sounded genuine. Mik’s fingers relaxed around the wheel.

“That’s not a bad idea,” he admitted. “Gran doesn’t have any Grinch-related ornaments on her tree, though. But she does have a few *The Nightmare Before Christmas* ones.”

“She’s got her tree up already? It’s not even Thanksgiving yet.”

“November first. Gran’s no slacker.” Mik grabbed his Thermos out of the center console and toasted his gran with it. “She takes out the Christmas decorations as soon as Halloween is done and over with.”

He took a sip of his coffee, then gasped at the taste, swallowing hard so he didn't choke himself. "What the . . . Is this a dirty chai latte?"

"Yeah." Rudy frowned. "Why? Is it bad? Did I use too many spices?"

"No, I . . ." Mik's skin tingled with awareness, with joy, with something unnamable that nudged a piece of his heart in Rudy's direction. He took another sip, the flavors of cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and espresso rolling over his tongue. "I was expecting black coffee." Mostly because that was Josh's morning beverage of choice.

"You don't like black coffee," Rudy said, perfectly reasonable. "You put enough sugar in it to power a motorboat if you're forced to drink it. Dirty chai lattes are your thing."

"How do you *know* that?"

"I've known you for more than a decade, Miki. So? How is it? Any adjustments for next time? Does it need more cinnamon? More cloves? *Less* cloves? Something else?"

"Wait, you made this?"

"Where else would I get a dirty chai latte at this time of day? I found a recipe online. It's not hard to make."

True, but there were a lot of steps, and Mik didn't have time for that sort of thing.

Okay, he had the time, he just couldn't be bothered.

But Rudy *had* bothered. And if he was asking about more or less spices, he'd made the chai spice blend himself, sourcing the ingredients from . . . God, who knew? Mik had never seen cardamom or star anise pods at the general store.

Letting out an aggrieved sigh, Mik plunked the Thermos back into the cupholder. "Stupid overpriced buffoon. What did I tell you about being nice to me?"

Rudy chuckled. "Hey, I'm a nice guy."

"You once called me far-fetched on Twitter."

"I said your theory was far-fetched."

“Platypuses are an alien species!”

Rudy groaned. “Here we go again.”

“You can’t tell me that *those* creatures came from *this* Earth. Some humanoids, some zillion light years away, decided platypuses were too weird for their own planet and they dropped them on ours. It’s the sole living taxonomic representative of its family and genus, and that *cannot* be a coincidence.”

Rudy held up one finger. “Key word being *living*. You’re conveniently ignoring the fact that several related species appear in the fossil record.”

“Pfft. Lies. That’s what they want you to believe.”

“Aaand that’s why I called your theory far-fetched. Besides, if platypuses are an alien species, what’s Bigfoot?”

Mik flattened his lips. “Misunderstood.”

That sent Rudy into hysterics, his laughter filling the car and making Mik’s head go a little hazy. He side-eyed Rudy as he pulled into the community center’s parking lot, his stomach giving a jump at Rudy’s wide smile and shaking shoulders. Rudy was sexy as fuck when he laughed. Hell, he was always sexy, but there was something about Mik being the one to have made him laugh that sent pleasure streaking up his limbs.

Once he’d parked, they grabbed their skates and went inside. The community center smelled like every community center Mik had ever frequented: sweat, rubber, ice, and chlorine from the indoor pool. The ice rink was down a short hallway behind the information desk, and that was where they found Josh, speaking with parents and guardians who’d assembled in the first few rows of seats.

Josh spotted them and jogged over. “I’ve already spoken with the parents,” he said, getting right down to business. “They understand why I need to step back from coaching temporarily, and they’re excited to have you both on board. The center’s hockey director is here today. That’s him up there.”

Mik followed Josh's gaze to a man in his fifties sitting in the top row of the stands.

"Even though he's also on board with you both taking over, he didn't get a chance to formally interview you, so he's here to observe today. And thank you both for agreeing to the background checks. I know you've both worked with youth before, but Hank needs to cover his bases."

"Of course," Mik said, but Josh spoke over him.

"I'll introduce you to Hank later, but for now, why don't we get practice started? I'll stick around and introduce you to the players to ensure a smooth transition."

"Cool." Mik bounced on his toes. Some of the players were already warming up on the ice, kick-starting Mik's adrenaline. Coaching had always been Josh's thing, so he'd never truly considered it for himself, but he couldn't deny he was excited to get out there. "What are we starting with? Slap shots?"

"No one needs to see your lazy slap-shot form, Miki."

He rounded on Rudy. "Excuse you, I—"

"Nope." Josh interrupted, making a slicing motion across his neck. "None of that. None of whatever this is." He motioned between them. "You *will* set all that aside and present a united front to these kids. Understood?"

Whoa. Josh had always been more of a friend to Mik than an older brother, so the paternal tone from him, aimed at Mik—and Rudy—was rare. Mik squared his shoulders and nodded. "Understood, Coach."

"Understood," Rudy echoed. He offered Mik a hand. "United front?"

"United front." Mik shook Rudy's hand, a spark shooting up his arm at the contact. Rudy's palm was warm and slightly calloused, his grip firm and confident.

Would it be firm and confident on another part of his anatomy too?

Nope. Not going there.

“Great.” Josh shot them a pleased smile. “Let’s get started.”



BEFORE PRACTICE BEGAN, Mik stood next to Josh, Rudy on Josh’s other side, while Josh gave his kids the bad news.

“Truth time,” Josh said, meeting their eyes. “You all know that my wife is pregnant.”

“Yeah,” said one kid. “Meredith’s awesome.”

“She brought us treats once,” someone else said.

“She is pretty great.” Josh’s smile was sappy, but it quickly dropped off his face. “But she’s having complications with her pregnancy that make it difficult for her to care for our son on her own. And that means I need to be at home for my family.”

Cue multiple expressions of panic, fear, and loss.

“You’re leaving us?”

The quiet question nearly broke Mik’s heart. He couldn’t imagine how Josh felt.

“I wouldn’t if I didn’t have to,” Josh said, giving them as much as he could without coddling them. “Especially not at the end of the season like this.”

For reasons Mik didn’t understand, rec league youth hockey only went from September to December.

“But I found you two replacement coaches that I think you’ll like even better than me. This is my brother, Mik, and my best friend, Rudy.” He speared his players with a look. “Coaches Gilmore and Snow to you.”

“Whoa!” One boy gaped at Mik. “Coach Gilmore’s brother.”

Mik’s shoulders tensed, an automatic reaction to being called Josh’s brother instead of addressed by his own name, but he forced them to relax. These were kids. They didn’t mean anything by it.

“We get *two* NHL players as coaches,” whispered another kid.

“Yeah, my parents definitely didn’t pay enough in registration fees.”

Swallowing an inappropriate laugh, Mik offered his hand for fist bumps, which seemed to win him brownie points. “It’s good to meet you all. Coach Snow and I are going to do our best to fill Josh’s shoes. So what do you say to getting practice started and you can show us what you can do?”

“They’re showing off for you,” Josh told Mik and Rudy halfway through the hour. “Strutting around like peacocks, trying to get you to notice them.”

Honestly, it was pretty fucking cute.

Mik and Rudy did more shadowing and following of Josh’s directions than actual coaching. It gave them an introduction into team dynamics, individual strengths and weaknesses, and skill levels. It wasn’t until the last fifteen minutes of practice that Josh divided the players into three groups and Mik and Rudy got to run the drill of their choosing.

By the end of the hour, Mik had a good idea of who the star players were, who needed a little extra coaching, and what kind of drills would help them improve the most.

And he couldn’t stop smiling. God, being on the ice was the best feeling in the world.

Hank, the hockey director, turned out to be a nice guy when Josh introduced them after practice, and he gave Mik and Rudy his phone number in case they ever needed anything.

While Josh followed the kids into the locker room after practice for a final goodbye and to make sure they were okay with the transition and Rudy put the equipment away, Mik skated around the rink, milking every last second of skate time he could. The ice would be resurfaced in a few minutes for the drop-in shinny hockey for ages fifty-plus, but in the meantime, he did figure eights between the blue lines.

He was so intent on absorbing every second of ice time that he didn't notice Rudy had disappeared until he returned with two adult-sized hockey sticks and a puck.

“A little one-on-one? Bet you can't score on me.”

Every molecule in Mik's body lit up. He grabbed a stick out of Rudy's hands. “Oh, you're *so* on.”

Playing against Rudy was playing against someone who could anticipate all of his moves. Frustrating as fuck, but also exhilarating. Challenging.

Rudy wasn't an overpriced buffoon on skates for nothing. As a D-man, he had good instincts, and he matched Mik's speed, never giving him much room to move. The result was that Rudy was constantly *on* him, just *there*, in his face, on his back, driving Mik crazy with his scent and his proximity and his ginormous fucking shoulders.

There was a fire in Rudy's eyes that blazed an answering fire in Mik's belly. Sweat dotted Rudy's forehead, exertion adding color to his cheeks. His muscles strained against his long-sleeved T-shirt, biceps bunching and coiling with every move, and his powerful thighs ate up the ice.

“Goddamn it,” Mik growled when Rudy sent him into the corner again. Mik's entire body was flushed—and not from the exercise. It was a good thing he was wearing loose sweatpants because things were happening in his pants that were even more distracting than Rudy's body looming over him as he kept up his defense.

“Your dekes are as lazy as your slap-shot form,” Rudy said with a grin.

“Oh, you did *not* just go there.”

“Prove me wrong.” Rudy backed away, leaving the net open. “Let's see your slap shot.”

Mik jabbed his stick in his direction. “You'll be eating your words in a minute.”

“There's something else I'd rather be eating,” Rudy murmured.

“What?”

“I said that’s highly unlikely.”

Mik squinted at him. He knew what he’d heard.

Rudy jerked his head in the net’s direction. “Go on.”

Mik brought the puck closer, bent his knees, and shot. The crack of his stick hitting the puck resonated throughout the rink. The puck hit the back of the net.

“See? Right there,” Rudy said before Mik could crow in victory. He grabbed Mik’s elbow and shook it like it was a limp noodle. “Your elbow’s bent. It needs to be straight. Start to move through the follow-through with your elbow locked, *then* start to bend that elbow. It’ll make your slap shots so much more powerful.”

“Okay, Coach Snow.” Mik rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t deny that Rudy’s fingers on him, even through his sweater, sent heat zinging through his body. “I don’t play anymore, so it doesn’t matter anyway. I’m not one of your players to coach.”

“No, you’re not,” Rudy said, a touch of huskiness to his voice. His gaze dropped to Mik’s lips. “That’s probably a good thing.”

Mik sucked in a breath, getting a lungful of Rudy’s crisp scent. Standing so close to Rudy, Mik caught the flecks of gold in his dark eyes. The scruff on Rudy’s jaw tempted Mik to kiss it, just to see how the stubble felt against his lips.

God, what was happening? Mik had always thought Rudy was hot, but he’d never felt this pull toward him. The only person he had to blame was Rudy himself.

Who offered to plan Gran’s party with him.

Who knew Mik’s drink order.

Who made Mik a dirty chai latte from scratch.

Mik wasn’t crushing on his brother’s best friend, was he?

Oh no.

Rudy's gaze drifted back up to his, serious and intent. Mik's heart picked up speed as Rudy opened his mouth—

The whir of the Zamboni interrupted whatever he was going to say. Interrupted the moment.

It was like coming out of a haze. Or a bubble, where the only people in existence had been the two of them. Mik took his first deep breath in what felt like hours. He grabbed the puck. "Come on."

Josh was waiting for them as they got off the ice. He looked at Mik, then at Rudy, a glint in his eyes. And was he trying to hide a smirk? "I caught a ride in with Hank. I need you to drive me home."

That . . . was probably a good thing.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Holiday Cocktail Hour at Frosty's was a vivid reminder of why Mik's parents had chosen to flee town for festival season.

It was an hour of frantic energy and nonstop movement.

When they'd been planning out their festival season events, Mik had argued for five Holiday Cocktail Hours: one for each week of festival season. Josh had vetoed that plan.

"Two max," he'd said. "You weren't around for it last year, but cocktail hour is madness. Even *you* won't want to do five of them."

Now, as Mik assessed the guests that had crowded into Frosty's, he had to admit there was some truth to Josh's words.

He and Josh had never managed cocktail hour on their own before. For the past two Christmases, Josh had run it with their parents, but now that Mom and Dad had officially retired—and fled—it was up to Mik and Josh to run the event as smoothly as their parents ever had.

They'd made it look easy.

Josh was in the kitchen, coordinating the flow of appetizers while Mik slung drinks, poured the pricey imported beers the pub was known for, and ensured the music was loud enough to hear, but not loud enough to interfere with conversation. As Burl Ives' "Have a Holly Jolly Christmas" transitioned to Wham!'s "Last Christmas," Mik breathed a sigh of relief when a large group exited the pub.

Good. Things were finally starting to wind down. The hour ticked closer to seven-thirty—the end of the event and the start of normal pub service—and Mik was looking forward to getting back to business as usual.

He announced the last call for the raffle, unsurprised when latecomers hurried in that direction. Who didn't want free stuff? Mik had been eyeing a couple of the prizes himself, especially the voucher for a meet and greet with Brant Lombardi, one of the actors starring in an upcoming gay holiday romance that would be filmed in town next month. The production company, HoliGay Presents, was a local startup that often used Christmas Falls as a backdrop for their movies.

“A raffle, huh?” Rudy appeared out of thin air and leaned against the bar, sending Mik's stomach somersaulting. He'd successfully managed not to think about Rudy's muscles or how close they'd been to his person since yesterday morning's hockey practice, and now, here Rudy was, throwing all of Mik's confusion in his face.

Rudy was thoughtful and annoying and hot and kind to Mik's gran and good with the hockey players.

And did Mik mention annoying?

And hot?

Fuck.

“Figured it'd get the customers in,” Mik said, grabbing a Norwegian beer from the fridge, opening it, and setting it on a tray for his server.

They were giving out free samples of their featured beer of the month during cocktail hour, courtesy of their distributor, and they had holiday-themed drinks on special—cranberry mimosas, peppermintinis, cranberry-orange whiskey sours, and mulled wine. Mik's personal favorite? The sugar-cookie martini, a blend of Baileys, milk, vanilla vodka, and Amaretto as sugary-sweet as the nice kids on Santa's List. Frosty's chef had prepared foods that were easy to grab and eat without a fork, which seemed to be a hit with the crowd. Mini quiches,

sliders, crostini topped with Brie and homemade jam, mini tuna wraps, and cranberry goat cheese balls. Mostly, people came to mingle and try their hand at winning free stuff while enjoying alcohol at a discount.

“What are you doing here?” he asked Rudy. “Scoping out the competition?”

Rudy made a “hm” sound and grabbed a cranberry goat cheese ball from a tray on a nearby table. “Just came to support my best friend and his brother.”

“And scope out the competition.”

Rudy’s lips quirked. “Maybe a little. The raffle’s a nice touch.”

“Let me guess. You’re going to have a silent auction with the proceeds going to the local food bank?”

“No.” Rudy popped the cheese ball in his mouth. “But that’s a good idea. Keep it in your back pocket for next year. Have you eaten?”

“When would I have done that?” Mik grumbled.

One of his servers approached with an order for drinks, and he got to work. His stomach rumbled, making itself known now that Rudy had mentioned food.

Rudy remained in Mik’s peripheral while he worked, keeping himself apart from the crowd, offering a simple wave or nod or smile when someone called out to him. He didn’t try to mingle or insert himself into a conversation, and Mik couldn’t figure out if he simply didn’t want to or was uncomfortable doing so. He was well-known to the locals, especially those who managed, worked at, or frequented one of the Christmas Boulevard businesses, many of whom were in attendance.

He looked almost lonely standing apart from everyone, as though looking in from the outside and wishing for things he couldn’t have.

Once he’d filled his server’s order, Mik assessed the evening’s specials and chose one he thought Rudy might

enjoy. He slid it in front of Rudy a couple of minutes later.

Rudy stared at it, one eyebrow raised. “What’s this?”

“Cranberry-orange whiskey sour. On the house.”

The other eyebrow went up.

“In the spirit of our united front and all that,” Mik quickly tacked on.

Rudy’s gaze softened, turning Mik’s feelings squishy. “I didn’t realize that extended out of the hockey rink.”

Whatever Mik was going to say was interrupted by a loud, “Rudy! I didn’t think I’d see you here tonight.”

Rudy turned with a smile. “Frank. Are you cheating on me?”

“Free beer,” Frank said, raising his sampler glass of the month’s feature. “And Marina makes the best homemade jam.” He held up a plate piled with several crostini. “Didn’t expect to see you here, though. Weren’t you the one who called this place pretentious?”

Rudy reared back.

So did Mik. What the fuck? *Pretentious*? Grinding his teeth together, Mik stalked away to ring in Rudy’s whiskey sour. Fuck him. He could damn well pay for his drink.

Pretentious. Please.

“What?” Rudy’s voice was practically a growl. “I never said this place was pretentious.”

“No?” Frank shrugged. “Must’ve been one of your employees then.”

“Which one?”

Mik didn’t hear the rest; the song switched over to Mariah’s “All I Want for Christmas Is You”—ugh. Why was this song even on Josh’s playlist?—and one of his servers put in an order for three sugar-cookie martinis, one peppermintini, and one mulled wine. Silently seething, Mik made his pretentious drinks. He briefly tuned back in when Frank

suggested Rudy add osso buco to Rudolph's menu, tuning right back out again when he couldn't find the additional bottle of vodka he'd stashed behind the bar before the event.

It didn't improve his mood any when he found it where he hadn't left it. Thank you, whichever server had thought reorganizing without telling him was a good idea. Huffing out a breath, he got back to work.

But he could feel Rudy's eyes on him. Even as he tried to ignore it, that gaze sent awareness zipping through him, making him fumble and almost drop a glass. He was tempted to whirl on Rudy with a snarky "What?" like a surly teenager but refrained. Rudy would probably just smirk at him, laughter in his expression, and make Mik feel exactly like that surly teenager without ever saying one thing.

Once Frank had moved on, Mik stalked back over to Rudy and said, "That'll be five bucks for the whiskey sour. Plus tip. And make it a good one."

"What?" Rudy frowned into what was left of his drink. "You said it was on the house."

"That was before you called this house pretentious."

"Except that I didn't. I wouldn't. My best friend manages this place. Why the hell would I trash-talk it like that? Frosty's is great. Not at all like Rudolph's, but that's a good thing."

He was so earnest, so sincere, not a hint of mockery at all that Mik almost believed him.

Oh, fuck it, he did believe him. "Fine," he mumbled. "I still want a tip, though."

"Here's a tip. That raffle item at the end of the table is going to be the most popular."

"The voucher for a free tree from Milton Falls Christmas Tree Farm?"

"No, the . . ." With a confused furrow between his brows that Mik wanted to smooth away with his thumb, Rudy headed to the raffle table. He was back in less than a minute. "The one

on the other end. The date with one Mikhail Gilmore, number twelve for Washington.”

Mik blinked. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You didn’t know?”

Since there seemed to be a break in drink orders, Mik abandoned his post behind the bar and made for the raffle table. The raffle items were spaced about a foot apart on a long table that ran underneath the window next to the door. Entry slips and pens were piled at regular intervals, and behind each raffle item was a clear glass jar for the entry slips.

All the way at the end, just like Rudy had said, was a homemade printed voucher that read *A date with a former NHL player! Spend the day with Mikhail Gilmore, #12 for Washington.* The bowl behind it was three-quarters full.

“What the—” Mik picked up the voucher and stared at it. He and Josh had joked about doing something like this. At least, Mik had *thought* it was a joke. The only bright side was that there was also a voucher to spend the day with NHL player Josh Gilmore, number thirteen for Pittsburgh.

“I don’t want to spend the day with some random person,” Mik said.

“Don’t you know everyone in this town?”

“Not everyone. Plus, festival season brings in the tourists and folks from neighboring towns. I haven’t recognized everyone who attended today. What if I get stuck with someone who wants to . . . to . . . I don’t know. Get our backs waxed or something?”

Rudy’s lips quirked. “Does your back need to be waxed?”

“That’s not the point.” Setting the voucher back down, Mik growled under his breath and scowled into the jar of entries. “I feel like I’m being sold like a horse at an auction.”

“Miki. Baby.”

Something in Mik’s chest leaped at Rudy’s quietly amused voice saying “baby” like an indulgent partner.

“You’re not being sold. It’s for fun. For whoever wins—and yeah, chances are they’ll be an out-of-towner, seeing as most people here already know you—you’ll probably be making a dream of theirs come true by spending a day with them. And consider this.” Rudy stepped closer to Mik and dipped his mouth to Mik’s ear. “Maybe you’ll pull my name out of the jar and I’ll finally be able to take you on a date.”

What the what?

He was joking. *Obviously*, he was joking.

Was he joking? After what had happened after practice, Mik didn’t know anything anymore.

Quelling a shiver at Rudy’s proximity, he scoffed. “You could only be so lucky.”

“I would, Miki.” Rudy’s voice turned soft and coaxing, hinting at something underneath that Mik didn’t know how to define. “I really would. Thanks for the whiskey.” He set his empty glass on a nearby table, where it immediately got snatched up by a passing server. “I’ll see you around. Have a good night.”

And he was gone, leaving Mik staring after him, confused and . . . kind of hopeful?

Had Rudy been flirting with him?

Had Mik flirted back?

Wait. Wait, wait, wait. Had the past however-many years of NHL rivalry actually been flirting in disguise?

Holy. Shit.



RUDY HAD DEVOLVED EITHER into a stalker or . . .

No, there was no *or*. He was definitely a stalker.

Standing outside of Frosty’s under the awning of the darkened store next door, waiting for Mik to finish work just so he could see him once more before the night ended?

What else could that be called at midnight if not stalking?

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Rudy paced back and forth under the awning to stay warm. It was a cold night, and not for the first time since he'd landed here, Rudy made a mental note to buy a winter hat.

Getting himself one had never seemed all that important, considering Christmas Falls was a brief stop on the map for him. That brief stop had turned into two and a half years, however, and he wasn't going anywhere for the next three months, so he might as well invest in one. Plus, he'd need one for winters in Indianapolis, wouldn't he?

If he ended up there, that was.

Things with Mik were . . . Fuck, he didn't know what they were. They'd shared a moment after practice, and after what Rudy had said to him just a few hours ago—*Maybe you'll pull my name out of the jar and I'll finally be able to take you on a date*—there couldn't be any doubt what he wanted. Unless Mik thought he was joking, which, given their history, was a distinct possibility.

Sighing, he paced to stay warm.

Christmas Boulevard was lit up by holiday lights from one end of the street to the other, even though all of the shops and restaurants were closed for the night. Fairy lights were strung around lampposts and draped on the bare branches of trees, and they adorned every business, some solid white, others multicolored, and still others that winked on and off in random patterns, making for a sort of hodgepodge of Christmas décor. There were also potted planters in front of some businesses, wreaths on most doors, and some shops had decorated their front windows in frost or with stick-on holiday decals.

The awning currently sheltering him belonged to Nutcrackers, which sold . . . well, Rudy wasn't sure. Trinkets and collectibles, from what he'd been told, but he'd never had occasion to step inside. He did like the life-sized nutcracker that stood sentinel by the door, though. He was quite regal.

Rudy mentally added it to the nebulous porch of his dream house.

Blowing out a breath that fogged in front of his face, he bounced in place. What was taking Mik so long to close up?

As if thinking about him had conjured him, the lights inside Frosty's flicked off, the door opened with barely a creak of the hinges, and Mik stepped out. The white Christmas lights hanging around Frosty's window washed out his cheekbones, gave him the appearance of a man about to collapse from exhaustion.

Rudy wanted nothing more than to hug him close and assure him that everything would be okay. That he'd be refreshed and ready to go after a good night's sleep.

Rudy stepped out from under the awning as Mik finished locking up and muttered a quiet, "Hey."

The sound Mik made was a cross between a dying cat and a teenager being murdered. He jerked backward, tripped on his own feet, and landed on his ass.

"Shit." Rudy lurched forward. "Sorry, Miki. I didn't mean to scare you."

"What the fucking fuck?" Mik grumbled. He sat up with a groan. "You're not sorry. You're laughing."

"I can be amused and sorry at the same time." Rudy offered a hand.

Mik batted it away and rose on his own. "Why are you skulking around in the dark like a creepy ax murderer?"

"Stalker."

"What?"

"Never mind. Are you okay?"

"Fine."

He didn't look fine. He looked like a pissed-off baby animal. Adorably pouty, with no real heat behind it.

Mik pulled a slouchy beanie out of his coat pocket and tugged it over his head. “What are you doing? Heading home?”

“Thought I’d take a walk first,” Rudy said. “And since you’re heading home, I’ll just walk in your direction.” Mik was more likely to believe that than the fact Rudy had purposefully waited for him.

“Uh-huh.”

Or maybe not.

“You’re taking a leisurely stroll through downtown at—” Mik pulled out his phone. “—12:07? Ugh. How is it after midnight?”

“Busy night?” Rudy asked. He started walking, gratified when Mik fell into step beside him. They made a left on Dasher toward Mik’s place.

“Yeah, and Josh left early to get Eagan to bed. I thought it’d be a little quieter after cocktail hour, but lots of people stuck around for dinner. It was a fucking zoo. And I’m starving.”

“You still haven’t eaten?”

“Never got the chance. Marina made me a plate to go, but I forgot it.”

Rudy’s steps slowed. “Let’s go back for it.”

“Meh. I can’t be bothered. I’ll just have a bowl of cereal or something.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes, their arms brushing occasionally, their footsteps crunching on late-falling leaves from the trees bordering the sidewalk. Christmas Falls naturally took Christmas seriously, and almost every house was lit up to the nines with holiday décor.

“Who won your raffles?” Rudy asked as they turned onto another side street.

“Are you kidding?” Mik scoffed. “When would we have had time to pull names? Josh stored all the entry jars in the

office. We'll deal with them tomorrow, where I'm sure you won't win because there's no way you entered your name into the hat to spend a day with me."

"Guess you'll have to read all the entries to find out for sure." Rudy bumped Mik's shoulder. "How was Josh today? I didn't get to see him when I came by."

A dog barked in the distance, almost drowning out Mik's sigh. "He seemed a little less stressed. This is going to sound like a joke, and I swear it's not, but . . . I think he's grown more gray hair ever since Meredith was diagnosed. He doesn't talk about it much, but I know Mer's condition scares the shit out of him."

"When do you plan on hiring for a junior manager?" Rudy asked.

"Josh and I talked about it this morning, and we're going to promote one of our servers, so I'll be hiring for a new server soon. That should give Josh a little bit of breathing room."

"And what about you?"

Mik turned a frown on him. "What about me?"

"How are you doing? Going from the NHL to managing a bar. It's quite the career change." Rudy would know. He'd done the same. But for him, Rudolph's was just a job. A stepping stone to something else.

For Mik, Frosty's was his legacy.

Hunching his shoulders, Mik glanced away. "It's fine. I'm fine. Oh, look. Here's home. Bye, Rudy."

Rudy stood at the end of the driveway of Mik's cute little white-sided bungalow with the gray-blue shutters, his gaze trailing after Mik. What had he said wrong? He was about to ask when he caught sight of something under the hickory tree in the yard. "Fuck!" He jerked back. "I forgot about Bigfoot." He looked away from the monstrosity as Mik snickered. "I like your hanging Santa, though."

Mik followed his gaze and grinned. "I didn't think it went with the rest of my decorations, but it does."

“Why wouldn’t it? It adds to the Island of Misfit Toys vibe.”

“It’s majestic and I won’t hear a word otherwise,” Mik said, clomping up his porch steps.

“I love how you really believe that.”

“Oh, get frosted, Rudy.”

“No, I mean it.” Rudy walked halfway up the driveway. “You look at the world differently. You see things like this—” He swept his arm out toward the mishmash of yard decorations. “—that don’t necessarily belong together, and you see something pretty. Something worth having. Not a lot of people see the world like that.”

Mik’s breath left him in a quiet rush, audible in the silent night aglow with stars and fairy lights.

Their gazes caught from several feet away, the air thickening between them. Tempted to stalk across the driveway and up the porch steps, Rudy forced himself to remain where he was. Christ, Mik looked like a confused elf, standing there watching him as though Rudy had told him that his father was Santa Claus. Rudy wanted to kiss that expression off his face and turn it into one of pleasure instead.

Mik’s mouth opened. Closed. Rudy backed away, down the driveway. He had a feeling he’d said enough for one night. “Good night, Miki.”

“Why do you call me that?” Mik asked softly. “No one else does.”

“Maybe that’s why,” Rudy admitted. “Maybe it’s so I can have a part of you no one else has.”

Mik stared at him. Stared some more, the silence lengthening between them in what was perhaps the first time Mik hadn’t had a rebuttal.

Swallowing an inappropriate laugh, Rudy repeated, “Good night, Miki.”

“Night, Rudy,” Mik said and went inside.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Mik had taken the long way home from Frosty's after work last night and found not one, not two, but *three* new decorations at Rudy's house.

If he was trying to out-decorate Mik, Rudy had another think coming.

Staying with the hockey theme, Rudy had somehow found a five-foot-tall nutcracker dressed as a hockey player in Washington red, white, and blue. He'd placed it by his front door. Then there was the knee-high Snoopy and the even smaller Woodstock wearing Santa hats and holding tiny hockey sticks. And finally, Rudy had a gnome wearing a Gandalf-like hat with the Pittsburgh NHL logo.

Mik dug out one of his last remaining decorations, took the ladder out of the garage, and climbed onto his roof. He should've had someone holding the ladder for him, or at the very least, someone around to call 911 if he fell, but his house was only one story. It wasn't high.

And it was barely sleeting. Only, like, a little. Not enough for Mik to even need to pull up his hood. Five minutes and he'd be back inside, no one the wiser.

Except his decoration proved challenging. It was a wire reindeer, meant to be easily bendable. Mik wanted it to look like it was about to leap off the roof, but "easily bendable" must mean something different to the designers than it did to him.

Was Rudy easily bendable?

Gah! No. He didn't need to be thinking lusty thoughts while on a rooftop in the rain. At least it was normal rain now, but it was cold as fuck. His fingers were numb. His nose and ears too.

Why had he thought this was a good idea?

If Josh drove by here on his way to daycare with Eagan, Mik would be in *so much* trouble.

Worth it, if he could get the damn reindeer to cooperate.

He finally managed it just as the sky opened up. Good thing he'd memorized the instructions for securing it to the roof, because the paper wouldn't have lasted long in this weather.

Once he had his reindeer secure, he tugged at the fastenings to ensure they would hold and—

A flash of black caught his eye.

On the sidewalk, standing under a black umbrella, was Rudy.

Scowling. Heavily.

Recalling Rudy's *Maybe it's so I can have a part of you no one else has* comment, Mik's stomach tumbled over itself. "Hey," he called over the rain. "What are you doing here?" Rudy's boots were splattered with mud. Had he been hiking again?

Rudy's scowl deepened. "What. The *fuck*. Are you doing?"

Ooh, he was pissed. Why that sent a shiver down Mik's spine was better left unpacked. "Putting Rudolph up?"

"On the rooftop? In the rain? *By yourself?*"

Mik looked around as though a second person might materialize. "Yes?"

"Miki." Rudy's voice was soft, but it nevertheless carried over the rain and up to Mik. "Get down from there. *Right. Now.*"

“Okay.” Mik rolled his eyes. “I mean, I’m done. I was coming down anyway.”

“I’m going to murder you.”

“What did I tell you about being nice to me?”

Rudy’s growl was glorious.

Mik climbed down while Rudy held the ladder steady, somehow managing to remain dry under his umbrella at the same time, which was quite a feat. At the bottom, Mik turned and grinned at him. “Hi.”

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Rudy’s eyebrows were bunched together and he appeared one second away from his head popping off in fury.

“Uh . . .”

“You could’ve fallen. And died.”

“But I didn’t.”

“Miki—”

“And it’s not that high. I don’t think I would’ve died. Maybe just broken something,” Mik said, as though this was a perfectly reasonable outcome.

Rudy huffed out a breath through his nose. “And who would’ve called for help? You? What if you were unconscious? Do you even have your phone on you?”

Mik patted his pockets. Frowned. “I think I left it in the kitchen.”

“Jesus Christ, Miki,” Rudy exploded, stepping closer, enclosing them both under the bubble of the umbrella. “You can’t do stupid shit like this.”

“I—”

“You could’ve gotten seriously hurt. And yes, you *could* have died! What if you fell wrong and broke your neck? Then what? What would that do to Josh? To Meredith? Your parents or your gran? Me, for fuck’s sake!”

The breath caught in Mik's throat. The rain pattered against the umbrella, *plop-plop-plop*, the only sound that registered aside from Rudy's heavy breathing.

Rudy's concern, his anger, his *fury*—they wrapped around Mik, a warm blanket of feelings he didn't know what to do with. Rudy was mad, but he was mad because he was scared.

For Mik.

Mik had scared the absolute shit out of him.

And here Mik was making jokes.

The weather was terrible, but Rudy's concern for him, written right there on his face, it was like the sun coming out after a hurricane. Beautiful and welcome and warm.

Mik swallowed to wet his dry throat. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Fuck." Rudy's shoulders slumped. He leaned their foreheads together, his dry against Mik's wet. "Don't *do* that."

Mik grabbed two fistfuls of his jacket, pulling him nearer. "I'm sorry."

They stayed like that, breathing the same air for seconds that turned into a minute. More. Rudy's breaths slowed. His free hand came up to rest on Mik's lower back, nestling their pelvises together.

Mik felt protected in a way he never had before. It was as though, by holding him close, Rudy could keep him safe with his aura alone.

Mik had never needed to feel safe before. He had his family; he knew he was well-loved.

But perhaps, there were other kinds of "safe" he hadn't known about until now.

The kind that involved giving your heart and the whole of yourself to someone else.

Mik had had relationships before, most of them short-lived. But he'd never truly given himself over to another person.

It was a bit of a mindfuck to realize that Rudy Snow was the person he could feel comfortable doing that with.

Rudy was so close, smelling like rain and earth. His nose brushed Mik's. His lips were right there, barely an inch away. If Mik pressed forward that final inch and tilted his head just so, his lips could be on Rudy's.

The wind picked up, shuddering between them. Mik shivered.

Rudy stepped away, taking any illusion of warmth with him. "You must be freezing. Let's get you inside."



RUDY'S HEART still galloped as though he'd played a sixty-minute hockey game all by himself without intermissions as he and Mik entered the house.

God. He couldn't believe Mik had been on the roof all alone in the rain. Rudy had nearly sworn the windows off his car when he'd spotted him. And he couldn't even call out to Mik. Because what if that startled Mik and he unbalanced, falling off anyway?

All Rudy could do was stand there and watch, so at least *someone* would be there if the worst happened.

Now he was making himself angry all over again.

Mik was soaked to the skin and shivering, and he began stripping right there in the foyer, water dripping onto the rug. His coat and sweater fell to the floor with a splat, leaving him in jeans and a T-shirt. He started on the jeans next.

"Where do you keep your towels?" Rudy asked. He couldn't even get turned on by Mik getting naked in front of him, not with how badly Mik was shivering and the goose bumps streaking his skin.

"In my bathroom."

Rudy left his boots by the door, then crossed the open-plan living room and kitchen. The doorway off the kitchen led to a

hallway that brought him to Mik's bedroom.

The last time Rudy had been here had been for Mik's housewarming a few months ago, and not much had changed since then. The house still gave Rudy homey vibes with its dark hardwood flooring, moss-green walls, and accent rugs. It was a cute three-bath, three-bedroom house, and Mik's bedroom was done in dark blues and whites. The bed was unmade—no surprise there—a hoodie was draped over the armchair, and an overflowing laundry basket sat next to the walk-in closet. He also had French doors that led onto his back porch, currently closed and covered with gauzy curtains.

In the bathroom, Rudy grabbed towels and brought them out to Mik.

Mik stood where Rudy had left him, shirtless, one hand braced on the side table by the door while the other tugged his jeans off one foot. "Thanks," he said, grabbing for a towel.

Rudy left the other two on the kitchen table that was tucked against the wall of the living room.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" Mik asked. His smile was teasing. "Taking the long way home from your hike again?"

"Yes," Rudy freely admitted. "Didn't do much hiking, though. It started to rain earlier than my weather app said it would, so I turned around." He gave Mik a pointed look. *Very just like you should've gotten off the roof when it started to rain.*

Mik rolled his eyes, clearly able to read his mind. "Yeah, yeah. Won't happen again."

Naked but for his underwear, displaying hard abs, a defined chest devoid of any hair, and powerful arms and thighs covered with little brown hairs, Mik dried his hair with the towel, then draped the towel around himself.

Okay, maybe Rudy was a *little* turned on.

Shaking his head, he said, "Actually, I came by to see if you want to come to Peoria with me today."

“What’s in Peoria?”

“This.” Rudy brought up the website he’d bookmarked on his phone and turned it toward Mik.

Mik’s eyes went huge. “Wicked.”

Rudy had found *The Nightmare Before Christmas* party pack that had banners, balloons, cake and cupcake toppers, streamers, hanging decorations, and those honeycomb centerpiece things.

“They’ve also got Jack Skellington hanging lanterns and pathway lights and an inflatable arch, kind of like your toy shop out front, but Halloween Town themed,” Rudy said.

“In Peoria?”

“At a store called Party Garage. They’ve got quirky and unique things outside of the standard party stuff. It’s where I found my decorations.”

“They have hockey-themed stuff there?”

“Ha!” Rudy pumped a fist. “Knew you’d seen them.”

“I mean, I *maybe* caught a glimpse of them. Out of the corner of my eye. From the street corner when I was going to Josh’s.”

“Uh-huh.” Rudy bit back a grin and waggled his phone. “So? Want to come?”

“Why don’t you just have it delivered?”

“They don’t have online ordering.”

Mik frowned. “But I thought I saw an add-to-cart but—”

Rudy blanked his phone. “Are you coming or not?”

Eagerness shone in Mik’s eyes, but he said, “I have to work.”

“What time? I know Frosty’s isn’t open for lunch today.”

“I need to be there at three.”

“Same.” Rudy’s junior manager had the lunch shift at Rudolph’s today. “An hour to Peoria, an hour at the store, an

hour back.” He checked the time. Just after nine. “We could be back by lunch if we leave now.”

Mik bit his lip. Bounced in place. “Let me get dressed.” And disappeared into the bedroom.

Letting his grin loose, Rudy paced to a corner shelf unit on the other side of the living room. It held framed photos of Mik’s family, as well as about two dozen Bigfoot figures. They weren’t as creepy as the life-sized thing out front, but they were barely the size of Rudy’s thumb, so that wasn’t saying much. There was also a wood-carved knee-high Bigfoot on the floor with its arms held palm up to make its own shelf, and on them was a stack of children’s holiday books. Maybe Eagan’s, possibly Mik’s from when he was a kid given how well-loved they appeared.

“Someone had that custom-made for me,” Mik said as he came back into the room, nodding at the Bigfoot on the floor. He’d dressed in jeans and a sweater and thick socks with pandas on them. “We did Secret Santa every year and one of my teammates got that for me. I never learned who it was.”

“How’d you know it was custom-made then?”

“It came with a note from the wood-carver saying they hoped I enjoyed my one-of-a-kind item. And when I looked them up on Instagram, they had a photo of it with the hashtag custom-made.”

“Someone must’ve liked you a lot. That probably wasn’t cheap.”

“I think it was Dewie.” Mik grabbed a couple of water bottles from the fridge and rejoined Rudy in the living room. “He looked real pleased when I opened it and hugged it.”

Hugged it. Rudy snorted a laugh. “Of course you did. What is your deal with Bigfoot, anyway?”

“He’s cute.” Picking up one of the figurines, Mik pretended to walk it along an invisible platform. “And look.” He picked up a different one. “This one’s got white fur. He’s, like, Swiss Alps Bigfoot. And that one’s carrying a Christmas tree.”

“Yeah, but why? Were you obsessed with Bigfoot as a kid or something?”

“Ha! No.” Putting the figurine back, Mik cracked open one of the water bottles. “It was kind of an inside joke with my team. I had the biggest feet of everyone on the team, so they got to calling me Bigfoot and gifting me all sorts of Bigfoot souvenirs. Now I’ve got ten years’ worth of Bigfoot knickknacks, including your bestie out front.”

Rudy looked down at Mik’s panda feet. “How big are they?”

“Size fourteen. Which, if you believe the internet, is more normal for men who are six foot five and up.” And Mik was just shy of six feet.

“Well.” Smirking, Rudy’s gaze tracked up Mik’s legs to his crotch. “You know what they say about men with big feet.”

Mik choked on his water.



“SHIT,” Rudy muttered, coming to a stop inside Party Garage’s automatic doors. “I forgot that it’s Black Friday.”

It was a zoo.

Party Garage was a massive warehouse-like store with rows upon rows of themed party supplies bisected by a center aisle. Every row was labeled, making it easy to find what one was looking for, but from the variety of themes in customers’ carts, they cared more about the deals than the themes.

Next to him, Mik gasped and dug his fingers into Rudy’s arm. “What if they’re sold out of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* stuff?” He took off down the center aisle.

“Shit,” Rudy muttered again. He grabbed a shopping cart and followed after him, dodging other carts, customers, and kids.

He’d been so proud of himself for tricking Mik into coming with him, but now all he wanted was to get the hell out

of there. Mik must've had the same thought, because when Rudy finally caught up to him in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* aisle, he clutched two of everything movie-related and dumped it into Rudy's cart, even Jack and Sally inflatables that they probably wouldn't use.

"Let's get the heck out of here," Mik said.

Rudy couldn't agree more.

The checkout line was the longest part, but they managed to get to the register inside of twenty minutes. Next to the register was a sign advertising free shipping with every online order over \$150.

Rudy casually moved in front of it.

Thanks to a bit of good luck, he managed to purchase a little something he'd picked up on his search for Mik, stealthily paying for it while Mik bagged his things. He tucked it into one of Mik's bags when he wasn't looking.

Back at the car, they got everything in the trunk, then stared at each other.

Mik blew out a breath. "I need a beer after that."

"It's just after eleven. Want to grab an early lunch?"

"I could eat."

They chose a place at random in the Warehouse District, a gastropub with an extensive craft beer and bourbon menu. The bi-level restaurant had a very cool atmosphere, all dark wood with purple accent lights and a ten-foot-high liquor wall.

Mik ordered the pasta in a jar to go with his beer. Rudy got the butternut squash risotto and a soft drink since he was driving.

"Is it just me," Mik said once the server left them alone, "or did that feel like a hockey game where the customers were the opposing team's players?"

Rudy chuckled. "That's an accurate description." He regarded Mik for a moment. "Actually, speaking of hockey . . . do you miss it?"

Mik pursed his lips, drawing Rudy's gaze to them.

"I don't miss the training," Mik said. "In fact, I can't think of anything I miss less than the training, except maybe days-long road trips."

"Hear, hear."

"I do miss hockey, though," Mik went on. He leaned forward on the table. "But more than that, I miss the people. My teammates."

Was he . . . lonely? It hurt Rudy's heart to think that he might be. Mik was in his hometown, surrounded by his family and people who knew him, but having people in one's life didn't erase loneliness.

Rudy sandwiched one of Mik's feet between his under the table. "What was it like for you? Being out on your team?"

Mik shrugged. "I never had any problems. But it wasn't like I was the first out gay boy in the league. Thank you, Ashton Yager." He tipped an imaginary hat to the man who, years ago, had been the first player to come out as bisexual in the league. Hell, to come out as anything other than straight. There'd been several since then, which was a positive change the league needed.

"How about you?" Mik asked.

"I wasn't out," Rudy told him. "Not really. Josh knew, of course, as well as a couple of other guys when I played for Pittsburgh, but when I got traded, I just didn't bother coming out. I don't date much, never have, so it was never something I felt the need to bring up."

"That must've been hard." Mik touched the back of Rudy's hand, sending prickles up Rudy's arm. "Not having anyone who knew who you truly are."

"It's not like I wasn't used to it."

"Right. Josh said you moved around a lot as a kid."

"And as an adult. I got traded four times in the NHL."

"What was that like? Moving around so much?"

“It was all I knew. Thank you,” Rudy said to the server when she brought their drinks. “I spent most of my life going from one place to the next. My parents were nomads—still are—and I never spent more than twelve or fifteen months in any one place. Even when I was in the NHL, I think my longest stint was two and a half years with a team. About as long as I’ve been in Christmas Falls.”

Mik’s finger continued its sweep across the back of Rudy’s hand. “Was that hard on you? All the moves?”

“Yes and no,” Rudy said. It felt like he and Mik were in their own private world, and the way Mik was looking at him made him want to give him all of his secrets and fears. “Yes, because I was always leaving people and places behind. But I had my parents, and we were our own little unit. Discovering and taking on the world together. Or at least the United States portion of it. I got to see and do things that not everyone gets to. And it was fun. What seven-year-old can say they’ve been to the Grand Canyon and Mount Rushmore in the same year? I even saw a footprint in the mud once in a forest in the Pacific Northwest that my dad swore to hell and back belonged to Bigfoot.”

Mik slapped a hand over his mouth, but his smile was obvious. “That’s why you’re afraid of Bigfoot!”

“*Afraid* is a strong word. I prefer *healthy respect for things that could eat me.*”

Mik snickered.

“I know Bigfoot doesn’t exist,” Rudy told him. “But when your dad tells Bigfoot horror stories around the campfire before bed and then marches around making growling noises in the morning to spook his kid . . . that doesn’t leave you, even when you grow up and know better. He says he was trying to be funny, but it gave me nightmares for weeks.”

“Can we—” Mik made a circular motion with one finger. “—circle back to the Bigfoot-doesn’t-exist thing? He does too exist.”

“Does not.”

“People still report Bigfoot sightings.”

Rudy hunched his shoulders. “Stop it. No they don’t.”

“There’s a Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization.”

“What? No way. How do you know that?”

Mik shrugged. “I like to research Bigfoot when I’m bored. He’s cool. And mysterious.”

“Like me, you mean,” Rudy said, grinning at him from behind his glass.

“Bigfoot’s sexier, though.”

Rudy snorted Pepsi onto the table.



MIK DIDN’T WANT to work tonight.

Hell, he didn’t want to leave Peoria. Wanted to stay here with Rudy in their own little slice-of-life outing and talk.

And . . . sightsee?

On the drive out of the city, Rudy stopped at everything that piqued his interest. First up? A statue of comedian John Pryor, which was as random as statues got. It was just sitting on a street corner outside a paint store.

It wasn’t until Mik looked it up when they got back in the car that he learned that the location across the street had been used to shoot several scenes of Pryor’s semi-autobiographical film.

So maybe not so random.

Next was the Caterpillar Visitor’s Center, which they thought was some kind of butterfly conservatory until they pulled into the parking lot.

“It’s *Caterpillar*,” Rudy said with the air of a lightbulb going off. “The brand. As in construction vehicles. Not as fun as butterflies, but take my picture in front of it anyway.”

Mik did so, then Rudy proceeded to send the photo to the group chat he had with his parents. Apparently they were close, which Mik had suspected, given how Rudy had spoken about them earlier.

Before they got back in the car, Rudy showed Mik the replies.

DAD

Ooh. Trucks!

MOM

eye roll emoji Boys and their toys.

RUDY

I would've preferred the butterflies.

Then he yanked Mik closer, and for a wild second, Mik thought he was being pulled in for a kiss. But Rudy took a selfie of them with the museum as a backdrop and sent that to his parents too.

Most people took selfies and posted them on social media.

Rudy sent them to his parents.

It was cute as fuck.

They took pictures at the Contemporary Art Center, a yarn store called The Fiber Universe, and Lady Liberty: Monument to the First Female Fighter Pilots. Mik was about to suggest that they park somewhere and take a stroll along the Illinois River, but a glance at the time showed that if they didn't leave the city now, they wouldn't have time to change before work.

Mik was tempted to call in sick, but Josh would see right through him. He'd never been able to lie to his brother worth a damn. Plus, it wasn't fair to leave Josh alone on a Friday night. They were training their new junior manager tonight too, so they both had to be on hand.

They'd reached the town limits of Christmas Falls when Mik turned halfway in his seat to face Rudy. "I feel like I got a small glimpse of what it must've been like for you growing up with your parents. Are they like that too? Stopping at random attractions they see on the side of the road?"

"Yeah," Rudy said with a laugh, rubbing his jaw. "Now that you mention it, they do. That's how we ended up in Gananoque when I was nine."

"Gana-whosit?"

"Gananoque. Small town in Ontario on the St. Lawrence River."

"I didn't realize you ended up in Canada on your travels."

"Just the one time." Rudy navigated toward downtown. "The summer after third grade. My parents had the bright idea to see Montreal, but we never made it. We kept seeing signs for the Thousand Islands along the highway—it's an archipelago of almost two thousand islands on the river between Ontario and New York State. My parents were curious, so we detoured." He shook his head, a smile playing on his lips. "Turns out that area is a great hub for outdoor activities. We spent most of the summer there."

That smile did things to Mik. Seeing Rudy happy was like being zapped into awareness. It was a sexy look on him, and Mik ached to reach out to run his thumb over his lips.

"Where'd you end up after?" he asked to distract himself.

"Somewhere in New York State. Watertown, maybe? We were in that area for a couple of years, one in Watertown and one in Albany, but I don't remember which came first."

To an extent, Mik could see the appeal of going wherever the wind took you. No schedules to keep, no rules to follow, nowhere to be except wherever the open road led. He'd gotten a tiny—a *minuscule*—peek into that lifestyle today, following Rudy around as he stopped whenever something caught his eye. If they hadn't both had to work, Mik had a feeling Rudy would've kept going until fatigue forced him to stop for the night.

He could see the allure.

On the other hand, Mik's roots were so deep in Christmas Falls that he couldn't fathom not being here. After a decade in Washington, he'd come to love the city and appreciate its finer quirks. But in the back of his mind, he'd known that he'd be coming home one day. So Washington had never truly felt like home, no matter that he could navigate his way around the capital without a map now and knew the best spots to eat or shops that the tourists didn't know about.

What would it feel like to be rootless? To have no home base?

Mik couldn't imagine it, but that was how Rudy had lived his entire life.

"You've been here for two and a half years," he said now.

"Mm-hmm."

"Is that weird for you?"

"Truthfully?" Rudy raised an eyebrow in his direction. "Yeah."

How much longer are you planning on staying? was on the tip of Mik's tongue.

But he was afraid of the answer.

Rudy was still renting. Had never house hunted for something more permanent, to Mik's knowledge.

Did that mean he had one foot out the door?

Another question Mik didn't want an answer to.

Rudy pulled into Mik's driveway and parked. "I'll help you with the bags."

The bags were cumbersome and heavy, overpacked with too many decorations. They probably wouldn't use half of it, but Mik had no desire to stick around and strategize about what they would or wouldn't need. Party Garage had been as bad as a Black Friday at Target. Who knew people were suckers for party supplies?

Mik expected Rudy to make his excuses and head home to change for his shift. Instead, he began digging through the bags, like he planned on unpacking them right now.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll sort everything tomor—”

Except what he pulled out wasn’t something Mik had paid for.

“I got something for you,” Rudy said, pulling a very bulky velvety red something or other out of his bag.

“What *is* that?”

“This—” Rudy unfolded his velvety red thing. “—is a Santa suit.”

“Um, okay?” Mik touched the fabric. “Are you playing Santa?”

“No.”

“Am *I* playing Santa?”

“No. It’s for Bigfoot. To make him less Halloweeny. See here?” Rudy flipped the suit over. “Velcro back. That way you don’t have to wrestle its legs into it. Just sort of drape it over him and secure it in the back. If you’re going to have a Bigfoot decoration, at least make it look Christmassy. I mean, be honest—does Eagan like it?”

“He gives it a wide berth when Josh brings him over,” he confessed.

“See? So what do you say?” Rudy held up the suit. “Shall we dress up Bigfoot?”

Mik bit his lip, but inside he was bouncing with excitement. His Bigfoot got a *costume*? “Let’s do it.”

It had stopped raining, but their boots still squished in the grass as they dressed Bigfoot, despite both of them being due at their respective pubs within the next twenty minutes. Mik took the top half and Rudy took the bottom, because “its eyes are the pits of Hell.”

That sent Mik into uncontrollable laughter.

The whole velcro, drape-it-over-him concept was, in theory, a good one, but getting Bigfoot into the suit proved more difficult than planned, which seemed to be the theme of Mik's decorations this year. Plus, the pants were too short even though the suit was an XL.

But in the end?

"He's *glorious*," Mik whispered like Gollum salivating over the one ring to rule them all. "This is the best thing ever."

Next to him, Rudy grunted, staring at Bigfoot's feet. "He isn't any less creepy wearing a Santa costume. Maybe we should take it off."

"Nope. It's perfect. Adds to the majesticness of my yard."

"I don't think that's a word."

Ignoring the dig, Mik stepped in front of Rudy and trailed one hand down his arm until their fingers tangled together. Mik usually left his outdoor Christmas lights on during the day to add to Christmas Falls' festive atmosphere, and the multicolored lights winked on and off, dotting Rudy's face with blue, red, green, purple, and orange spots. Mik wanted to chase them with his lips.

"You bought my Bigfoot a costume," he said softly. He would've melted at the gesture if he wasn't so cold.

"I did." Rudy's other hand circled Mik's wrist, his touch so soft that it sent goose bumps down Mik's spine.

"And you tricked me into coming with you today."

Something flickered behind Rudy's eyes. "What makes you say that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe the big *free shipping with any order over \$150* sign by the register?"

"Saw that, did you?"

"Mm-hmm. You like me," Mik said against Rudy's lips, his voice dropping an octave.

"You're just figuring that out?" Rudy grasped Mik's chin in two fingers. "You make my head spin."

Mik was prepared to make a quip—but then Rudy angled Mik’s head exactly so, and in the next second, his lips slanted over Mik’s with a thready groan.

Talk about making heads spin. Rudy taking control was hot as fuck.

He tasted like sin. Smelled like it too, owing to whatever soap or shampoo lingered on his skin. But underneath it was a hint of earthy outdoors and cold nights that made Mik want to kiss Rudy under the stars.

Groaning, Mik tugged him closer and slipped his tongue in Rudy’s mouth, every inch of his skin hypersensitized and begging for touch.

How long had he secretly fantasized about this? How long had he lied to himself and pretended he *hadn’t* fantasized about this? And now here he was, with an armful of Rudy Snow, who inserted a leg between Mik’s thighs with a grunt that resonated throughout Mik’s body.

If Mik’s eyes had been open, they would’ve rolled into the back of his head.

Rudy slid his hands up the back of Mik’s T-shirt and trailed his fingers up Mik’s back and along his sides. Mik shuddered, almost violently. Cupping the globes of Rudy’s ass, Mik levered himself up onto his toes, dragging their clothes-covered pelvises together.

A loud throat clearing had them breaking apart. Mik dropped hard onto his heels, dizzy with lust and everything naughty.

Rudy appeared equally as lost in sensation, eyes half-lidded and cheeks flushed.

But on the sidewalk, surrounded by half a dozen giggling preschoolers, was Mik’s gran.

“Um.” Mik waved. “Hello.”

She might’ve been pushing eighty, but she volunteered at the daycare a couple of streets over and often brought the kids for a walk in this direction. Behind the preschoolers was one

of the daycare workers, lips pinched tight to hide a grin. Mik thought her name was Beth or Brenda or Beatrice.

Rudy cleared his throat. "Hello," he said weakly.

Gran's gaze was stern but there was a sparkle in her eyes and a knowing tilt to her lips. "Boys," she said with a nod. "Come along, children."

They scampered away with Gran and Beth/Brenda/Beatrice, still giggling.

Mik and Rudy latched eyes and did the same.

CHAPTER
SIX

On Monday afternoon, Rudy sat at his kitchen table and logged onto the video call for his interview. Toshie's bosses had offered to fly him to Indianapolis, but that seemed like a waste of resources and time, so Rudy had opted for a virtual interview instead.

Plus, he could sit here in his underwear, and a shirt and tie from the waist up.

There were three interviewers: Toshie's direct supervisor—Fatima Singh—one of the producers in the media center, and the director of creative content.

Once they got past the nice-to-meet-you, how-are-you pleasantries, Rudy braced himself for any one of the standard interview questions in existence.

Instead, "Who's your favorite college hockey team?" asked the producer, Tim Jeong.

And that was the way it went for an hour. "What's the best defensive play you've ever seen?" "What's your opinion on this year's NHL prospects?" "Who's in your fantasy hockey league?"

None of the why-should-we-hire-you, tell-us-about-a-challenge-in-your-previous-job nonsense he'd been expecting.

If he had to guess, they wanted to make sure he could talk hockey—smartly. If he couldn't, they no doubt would've ended the interview early, but as the clock ticked over into hour two, Rudy began to wonder if he'd be here all day.

It wasn't until Fatima asked who he'd love to cohost the podcast with that he got stumped.

He truly hadn't thought about it. He'd figured the NCAA would find the perfect cohosts, so he hadn't given it another thought.

"Man." He sat back and ran a hand over his jaw. "There are so many angles to consider. Not just players and former players, but also analysts, equipment managers, bloggers, and sportscasters. It depends on what you want everyone to bring to the table."

"But who's on your wish list?" Fatima pressed.

Rudy said the first name that popped into his head. "Mik Gilmore."

He'd surprised them, three sets of eyes widening comically.

"Aren't you rivals?" Fatima asked.

"Maybe frenemies is a better word?" asked Tim Jeong.

The creative director, Leslie Harris, clutched his chest. "Don't tell me the rivalry was for the fans!"

Rudy gave them a sheepish shrug. "It was fifty percent for the fans."

That kiss the other day certainly hadn't been for the fans.

The interview ended with a promise from Fatima that they'd get back to him within two weeks with their decision, and they signed off.

Blowing out a breath, Rudy pulled at his tie.

That had gone well. Too well? Considering where things sat with Mik, did he still want the job?

He didn't *not* want it. His relationship with Mik—if it could even be called that—was so new that it was impossible to guess where it would lead. What if it went nowhere and he'd passed up a great opportunity for nothing?

But *would* it be nothing? Could he regret Mik, even if things never went anywhere beyond some kissing? Or if it did go beyond that but burned out in the end?

Ugh.

The good news was that he had two weeks until he heard back from the NCAA, and then a couple of months after that until they needed a decision. So for now, he set the unknowns aside and texted Mik.

RUDY

What are you doing today? Want to come on a hike with me? I want to do one of the trails that leads to the waterfall.

The area around Christmas Falls was also known for its waterfall, a fact people tended to forget given its obsession with Christmas.

In his bedroom, he'd replaced the shirt and tie with a long-sleeved Henley and was pulling on a pair of jeans when his phone rang.

Grinning, he swiped to answer the video call. "Hey, Mom."

"Hi, sweetie." Her smile was bright and her graying hair was tied into a messy bun on top of her head. "Look, look." She flipped the phone and panned over a massive RV.

Rudy whistled, a pang of envy hitting him right in the chest. "Nice."

"Want to see inside?"

"Hell yes."

He sat on the bed while Mom took him on a tour of the interior. The forty-foot motorhome was all dark wood, shiny flooring, and leather seating with slide-out sections that opened up the living space. The kitchen had a microwave, a stove, and a full-sized fridge, and Rudy would've sworn it was bigger than the one in his house. At the back of the RV was the bedroom, equipped with a queen-sized bed, tons of storage, a

glass-enclosed shower, and a walk-in closet with a washer and dryer.

Man, his parents had splurged on the motorhome. It was *nice*. That pang of envy burrowed deeper, the desire to hit the road making cold sweat break out on the back of his neck.

Maybe he'd get his own RV next summer—something a little smaller than Mom and Dad's—and travel throughout North America for a while. His NHL career had paid well, and he could afford to take time off and reconnect with the open road. Find all the little hidden gems of the world, discover areas that only the locals knew about, and ditch his map, following the highway wherever it chose to take him.

If Mik could swing it, would he want to come with him?

“What do you think?” Mom said, coming back on screen. “I think this is the nicest thing we've ever owned.”

“I really liked that teardrop trailer we had. All three of us huddled in one bed while a storm raged outside.”

“You remember that? You must've been . . . oh, five maybe? Six?”

“I remember,” Rudy confirmed. “Traveling with you guys were some of the best times of my life.”

“You mean we didn't traumatize you forever and make you think you couldn't form long-term relationships or set down roots?”

“Uh . . .” Rudy blinked. “No?”

“Hm. Well, your dad and I are going to start heading south soon in search of warmer weather. Slowly, mind you. There are a few things we want to see along the way. Do you know that in all our travels, we've never seen the world's largest ball of paint in Indiana?”

“Why would you want to?” Rudy muttered. Sure, he wanted to explore, but he drew the line at random balls of crap.

“And maybe we'll stop by Christmas Falls on our way south,” Mom added, ignoring his question.

“Yeah?” The pang of envy dissolved into anticipation and a fierce longing to hug his parents. “I’d love that.”

“Oh, your dad’s back with his pine cones. We’re at an RV campground in Vermont and he went out first thing to collect some.” Mom rolled her eyes. “As if the other campers would get there first and steal all the best ones.”

“Vermont?” Rudy frowned. “I thought you were heading south.”

“We will be. Eventually. But we thought Vermont would be pretty in the winter, and it is. Cold, though. Not sure we’ll come back outside of leaf-peeper season. Anyway. Gotta go. Love you!”

“Love you too. Say hi to Dad.”

“Will do. Bye, sweetie.”

Rudy hung up and found a missed text from Mik.

MIKI

Can't. I'm at the pub getting a few things done so I don't have to do them tomorrow, and then I'm having dinner with Gran. Raincheck?

Mik was at Frosty’s? On a Monday? Frosty’s and Rudolph’s were both closed on Mondays.

Twenty minutes later, he walked into Frosty’s.

Walked in. While the place was supposedly closed.

And it *was* a ghost town aside from the music being piped through the speakers. Not loudly, but loud enough for Mik not to hear him come in.

Mik stood at the bar with his back to the door, hips shimmying along to Leona Lewis’s “One More Sleep.” He wore a maroon T-shirt that hugged his chest and his hair curled slightly at the base of his neck.

Rudy hadn’t been able to stop thinking about him. About their kiss. About their road trip to Peoria. For the first time, it

had felt like they'd connected without all the chirping and one-upmanship.

Not that trash-talking and competition weren't the hallmarks of a hockey player—and not that he and Mik weren't old pros at it, especially with each other—but sitting down with Mik at the restaurant and having an actual conversation had been like breathing fresh air for the first time after hours spent in a men's locker room.

It was almost as good as the kissing.

And the kissing had been *good*.

Rudy wanted more of that. Could he coerce Mik into the office for a quick make-out session?

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he strolled up to the counter. "You should lock the door to keep out the riffraff."

Mik visibly startled, then grinned at him over his shoulder. "Riffraff like you?"

"Exactly like me." Rudy sat on a barstool. "What are you working on that's preventing you from going hiking with me?"

"This," Mik said, placing several items on the counter between them. Cranberry juice, pineapple juice, grapefruit juice, fizzy water, and tequila. He pushed a glass filled with pale pink liquid toward Rudy. "I call it Holly Jolly Punch. Try it. Let me know what you think."

Rudy took a large gulp. Swished it around his mouth like fine wine. Swallowed. "A little too much grapefruit juice."

Mik groaned. "Fuck. I was afraid of that. The last one had too much cranberry juice. The one before that, too much tequila."

"Can you ever have too much tequila?"

"You've obviously never gotten drunk off too many tequila sours."

Rudy raised an eyebrow. "I take it you have?"

"The night of my first NHL goal. The guys took me out for drinks after to celebrate and I got falling-down drunk. It

wasn't pretty."

"And your drink of choice was . . . tequila sours?"

"Hey, don't knock it." Mik shook the cranberry juice at him. "They taste like a tropical oasis."

"I'll have to take your word for it." Rudy eyed the six glasses on the counter behind Mik, all holding liquid in various shades of pink. "Why are you making holiday punch on a Monday afternoon?"

"I want to add a few more specialty cocktails for our next cocktail hour. If only I can get the ratios right. They covered creating your own drinks in bartending school, so I don't know why I can't get a stupid punch right."

Rudy swirled the contents of his glass and stared at Mik. "You went to bartending school?"

"Mm," Mik said, distracted. He measured out cranberry juice into a new glass, looking adorable as fuck with his tongue between his teeth. "In DC at the end of the season, before I moved back here. Didn't you?"

"No. I'm self-taught."

"I've never been good at teaching myself. It's why I was taking all sorts of classes up until last month. Then things got busy with festival season."

"Classes?" Rudy cocked his head. "What classes?"

"Knitting classes, horseback riding, badminton—I did that with Gran in July. She's surprisingly agile for an eighty-year-old. Also did a Cooking Around the World class that taught how to make dishes from other countries."

"And you took these out of curiosity?"

Mik shrugged and added tequila to his glass. "More for something to do."

Rudy looked around. "Because managing the pub isn't enough?"

"Not really." Mik blended the contents together with a stir stick. "I mean, I love working here. I love that I get to work

with my big brother and that I get to have a part in keeping my family's legacy going. But we're not open for lunch on weekdays, so it leaves me with a lot of free time. Plus . . ."

Mik stirred and stirred some more. He stared into the drink as a mini whirlpool formed, though Rudy suspected he was seeing something else.

"Plus what?" Rudy prompted.

"Just . . ." Mik stopped stirring and slid the glass toward Rudy. "This can't be all there is, right? It's fun, but it doesn't light me up with a sense of purpose. Like, Josh has coaching—or he will again once the baby is born and Meredith's preeclampsia goes away. What do I have?"

"Have you considered that maybe your thing isn't related to cooking or knitting or badminton or horses?" Rudy asked gently. "Maybe your thing is also related to hockey. It was part of your life for almost three decades."

Mik jerked one shoulder. "Yeah, but coaching is Josh's thing."

"I didn't say anything about coaching. There are lots of ways to get involved in hockey without coaching."

"Hm. Maybe." Mik slid the glass closer. "Try it."

Seeing the change in topic for what it was, Rudy took a sip of the newest iteration of Holly Jolly Punch. "Oh, that's good. I think you nailed it. Here, try it."

Mik took a dainty sip, probably because he thought Rudy was playing him—which was fair, given their history—then a larger one, his eyes going wide. "Damn, that *is* good." He looked from the drink to the bottles and back to the drink. To Rudy. Bit his lip. "Do you remember what I did?"

Rudy laughed so hard he almost fell off his stool.



THE FOLLOWING DAY, Mik was once again back at Frosty's. They didn't open until 4:30, but he and Josh were conducting

interviews for a new server.

In an effort to lighten Josh's load as soon as possible, they'd promoted one of their servers to junior manager. Juan was a Christmas Falls native who'd returned to town after four years at Chicago State. He worked a customer support job he loathed in the mornings, mostly listening to callers complain about product defects and issuing replacements, and he and his girlfriend were saving up to buy their own house so they could get out of his parents' basement apartment. Bringing him on as junior manager meant more hours a week and a bump in salary for Juan, and a reliable extra hand for Mik and Josh.

But that meant they were down a server.

"Thanks for coming in," Josh said to their latest interviewee, extending a hand as he rose. "We'll be in touch within the week." He walked the candidate to the door.

They'd opted to conduct the interviews at a table in the dining room instead of in the office. The dining room was otherwise empty and it had more space, whereas the office got cramped with two people in it, never mind three.

Josh opened the door to let their candidate out. Conversations from passersby outside drifted in, everyone talking about the new graffiti that had popped up on a building behind Dancing Sugar Plums—the word *Christmas* stacked like a tree with presents underneath. Mik thought it was festive, although Griff—Christmas Falls' festival organizer—was complaining about a vandal in town.

The door closed behind the candidate, shutting out the conversations and chilly late November weather. Josh returned and sat across from him. "Definitely not that guy."

"Who comes to an interview smelling like pot?"

Reaching over to grab a file folder from an adjacent table, Josh said, "Do you want to keep looking or was there anyone we interviewed today that you liked?" He flipped the folder open and extracted the résumés of the candidates they'd interviewed.

“I liked Donna,” Mik said, pulling her résumé closer. “Level-headed, smart, well-spoken, friendly. I got a good vibe from her.” Donna was a single mom who’d been a teacher for twenty years. Now that she was an empty nester, she’d retired from teaching and was looking for something totally different to fill her time. She had zero experience serving, but that could be taught. Mik was more concerned with hiring someone who would fit in with their existing staff, who would show up on time for their shifts, and who would treat the customers like gold.

“Donna it is, then.” Josh clinked his water glass against Mik’s. “Cheers to a successful afternoon.”

“I’ll email her later for her references.” Mik sat back and kicked his legs out, eyeing his brother. “You look better. Less stressed.” The bags under Josh’s eyes weren’t as pronounced and his shoulders weren’t up by his ears.

“Not coaching helps, even though I still feel like an ass for bailing on the kids.”

“They understand.”

“Maybe. But I still hate it. Anyway.” Josh rolled his shoulders. “Have you gotten in touch with all the raffle prize winners?”

They’d chosen the winners on Sunday morning, during their usual weekly brunch at Josh and Meredith’s. Rudy hadn’t been there that time, and Mik was trying—and failing—to convince himself that he didn’t care. Though he had gone through all the entries in the jar for the *Spend the day with Mikhail Gilmore* certificate and found Rudy’s entry.

Mik was trying and failing to convince himself that he didn’t care about that either.

“Yeah,” he said. “Except the person who won a day with you.”

“I emailed her already,” Josh said. “She’s got a busy few weeks, but we’ll get together after the new year. You?”

“Mine has a seven-year-old who’s obsessed with hockey. He asked to bring her along.”

“Of course you said yes.”

“Obviously.” Mik rolled his eyes. “We’ll go skating once her school breaks for the holidays.”

Josh pumped his eyebrows. “You can tell Rudy that you’re not getting your back waxed after all.”

“He told you about that, did he?”

“The places your mind goes, Mik . . . Speaking of, what’s with that photo of the skeleton cookies you sent? You didn’t add any text for context.”

“Those are Jack Skellington cookies for dessert for Gran’s party. Rudy and I have been planning the menu. We even went to Peoria to get decorations.” At Josh’s furrowed brow, Mik sat up straighter. “Oh shit! I didn’t tell you the theme. Ready for it?” He paused for dramatic effect. “*The Nightmare Before Christmas*.”

He expected some kind of enthusiastic reaction. Maybe a *Wow, what a great idea!* What he got instead was an expressionless, “You and Rudy. Went to Peoria.”

“Yeah. Isn’t that what I just said?”

“And you both came back in one piece?”

Mik huffed a laugh. “Ha ha. Yes. He even treated me to lunch. And bought Bigfoot a Santa suit.”

“I saw that when I drove by the other day,” Josh said, his gaze intent. “That was from Rudy?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And he bought you lunch.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Was this a date?”

“Nooooo.” Mik played with one corner of Donna’s résumé, his pulse leaping at the word *date*. “Just party shopping.”

“And that’s all it was?”

“Well . . .” Mik cleared his throat. Shifted in his chair. Bit back a smile. “There was also the kiss in my front yard.”

“Uh-huh” was Josh’s reaction to that, voice filled with amusement.

Mik side-eyed him. “You’re not mad?”

Josh’s expression turned perplexed. “About . . . you and Rudy?”

“I thought it might be weird for you. Since he’s your best friend.”

“I married yours,” Josh said with a laugh. “I don’t have a leg to stand on here.”

“Huh. I suppose that’s true.”

Josh leaned forward, elbows on the table, smile sly. “If Peoria wasn’t a date . . . *are* you going on a date at some point?”

Mik jerked a shoulder, butterflies erupting in his belly. “I don’t know. He hasn’t asked. Neither have I.”

“Why not? What are you waiting for?”

“I don’t know.” Groaning, Mik passed one hand down his face. “I . . . I like him. And I’m confused about liking him. And I’m worried that changing things between us won’t turn out for the best.”

Frankly, he wasn’t sure how to interact with Rudy when they weren’t teasing each other. He’d managed to act like a normal human in Peoria, but what if that had been a fluke?

Rudy had admitted that he liked him and that . . . well, it was scary. Feelings changed things. What if they started something and it turned out that the only thing they had in common was a love of poking fun at the other?

Worse, what if Rudy realized Josh’s little brother wasn’t all that interesting?

“I get it,” Josh said, jerking Mik out of his spiral of thoughts. “Changing your relationship with someone is no picnic. I was nervous as hell when Mer and I started dating.”

“Yes, I remember the potato pie that you dropped on the floor at Christmas dinner when you tripped on nothing, all because she smiled at you.”

“We said we were never going to talk about that again.”

Mik snorted a laugh.

“So?” Josh kicked his foot under the table.

“So what?”

“Are you going to ask him out, or what?”

“When would we even *go* out? We both work nights.” Monday would be their best bet given both their pubs were closed.

Josh bumped their shoulders. “Juan and I have you covered here. And Rudolph’s has a junior manager too.”

Right.

Squaring his shoulders, Mik pulled out his phone. “You still haven’t told me what you think of Gran’s party theme,” he said as he typed out a text.

“I think she’ll get an even bigger kick out of it than you.”

“Damn right.”

CHAPTER
SEVEN

They opted for Friday evening. Rudy swapped shifts with his junior manager, working lunch instead of dinner and closing. At Frosty's, Josh covered for Mik, and Meredith's parents took Eagan for the night so she wouldn't have to feed him and put him to bed by herself.

Mik had a lot of thank-you gift baskets to dole out, all so he and Rudy could have a proper date.

They'd agreed to meet at the Christmas Falls Museum of Festivals because Mik had a plan.

He couldn't shake the thought that Rudy had one foot out of town. But Mik didn't want Rudy to leave—and he was sure Josh didn't want Rudy to leave—so Mik planned on taking Rudy to some of tonight's festival season activities to show him everything Christmas Falls had to offer. If Rudy fell in love with the town, maybe he'd want to stay.

Mik dressed in layers, since they'd be going in and out, and checked himself out in the mirror in his bathroom. Six months ago, when he'd moved home, he never would've guessed that he'd be standing here making sure every hair was in place for a date with Rudy Snow.

That he was nervous about.

He felt a little faint, though that could've been because nerves had sent his appetite scurrying away and he'd barely eaten all day.

It was stupid. He'd *kissed* the man. There was nothing to be nervous about.

A knock at the door brought him out of his room, and he wrenched the door open to find himself face-to-face with a light-up Charlie-in-the-Box Christmas decoration. Rudy poked his head out from behind it. “Hi.”

“Hey.” There was the lightheadedness again. “I thought I was meeting you at the museum?”

“You were. But I wanted to give you this and I figured you wouldn’t want to cart it around all night.” Rudy thrust the box at him. “In lieu of first-date flowers. It’s for your Island of Misfit Toys,” he added, as though that wasn’t obvious.

Bouncing on his toes, Mik took the box, but his eyes stayed on Rudy.

Rudy was missing a hat—again—because apparently, he was too cool for one, but the rest of him was bundled up in a scarf, a winter coat in a shade of green that reminded Mik of a winter forest, gloves, and sturdy boots.

Mik leaned forward and kissed him, a quick press of lips on lips, the box between them. “Thank you. But I should’ve been the one to get you something since I was the one who asked you out.”

“Semantics. You ready to go?”

Since Mik lived so close to downtown—aka Santa’s Village—it was a quick walk to the Christmas Falls Museum of Festivals at the corner of Comet Street and Candy Cane Lane. Mik hadn’t told Rudy what the plan was for tonight, simply told him to dress warmly, and Rudy played a game of twenty questions on their way to the museum.

“Okay, so we’ve established that it’s both indoors and outdoors, it’s a place where we’ll see other people, but it’s *not* Rudolph’s or Frosty’s,” Rudy said, ticking the items off on his fingers. “It’s not out of town, seeing as we’re walking there, it *is* in Santa’s Village but not on the main drag, and it may or may not involve caroling. Are we going Christmas shopping?”

“No. Well, maybe.” The sun was setting and the streetlights shone off an inch of fresh snow on the street as

they crossed Christmas Boulevard. “You *could* Christmas shop.”

“Could your answers be *any* vaguer?”

“They could,” Mik said, bumping Rudy’s shoulder with his. “And who knows? Maybe I steered you wrong with the ones I did give.”

Rudy scowled as Mik made a left onto Candy Cane Lane. “I’m going to murder you.”

“Well, don’t be too hasty.” Mik held open the door to the museum. “We’re here, after all.”

“And we’re at the museum because . . .”

“We’re going to the Arts & Crafts Holiday Fair. Assuming you haven’t been yet.” Mik winced, all his plans going up in smoke. “Sorry, I should’ve asked.”

“I haven’t been ever.”

“Not at all?” Mik asked, stepping inside behind Rudy and tugging his gloves off. He followed the sound of singing to Festival Hall, which was where the fair was being held. “Like, ever? But this is your third Christmas in Christmas Falls.”

“Other than cocktail hour at our pubs, I’ve never attended any of the festival season events.”

“How come?”

“Why hello, you two.”

Mik’s head snapped to the right at the familiar voice, and there was Gran, approaching them before they’d stepped two feet into the hall.

“Hey, Gran. Christmas shopping?” Mik nodded at her many bags. She looked like she’d been here a while, and instead of her usual pumps, she wore running shoes like she’d planned on power walking her way through the fair until she found a gift for everyone on her list.

“Indeed,” Gran said, pulling a knit headband out of her pocket. She put it on over her ears, covering the red stripe in her bangs that had faded to a muted pink. “But I’m done for

now. I'm meeting the ladies for an early dinner at Frosty's." She leaned closer to Mik and lowered her voice. "If you're looking for something to get me for Christmas, Bonnie's got a wreath over there that has my name on it. It's made of tulle and has a pair of legs sticking out of it, as though an elf fell into Santa's bag of toys." She gave him a pointed look.

"On it, Gran."

"Wonderful." She left with a wave over her shoulder.

The fair was a holiday craft market that featured artisans and makers from Christmas Falls and the surrounding areas. Tables were set up in rows, selling everything from wreaths and garlands to soaps and body scrubs to wooden toys and puzzles and everything in between. In a corner of the hall, carolers dressed in red felt robes with furred hoods sang "Good King Wenceslas." In another corner was a gift-wrapping station; next to it was a box accepting donations to the toy bank.

Once they'd left their coats at the coat check, Mik took in the room and tangled his fingers with Rudy's. This—this market, the festival, this town, all of it—it was quintessentially home, and it sent a burst of pride and longing and rightness into his chest.

"Where do you want to start?" Rudy asked.

"Might as well start on this end." The makers weren't grouped by theme or product type, so there was a candlemaker next to a jewelry maker next to someone selling paint-your-own bird feeders next to Murphy Clark's carved wooden gnomes. "You know, I haven't been to this fair since the last time I was home for Christmas, and that was five or six years ago. Before that was in my rookie season. Most years, the team's schedule didn't allow for a trip home at the holidays, so I'd come in the first couple weeks of January for a delayed Christmas dinner and present exchange."

"Yeah, that's right. I came with Josh a couple of times, remember?"

Those two times had been the only ones where Mik and Josh had been able to make their schedules work so they could come home at the same time.

Rudy stopped to admire a handmade ceramic water pitcher with poinsettia leaves etched on two sides. “What did you miss the most about Christmas Falls when you were gone?”

“Other than my parents and my gran? Probably this.” Mik nodded at the room. “This sense of community and togetherness and people supporting each other.”

Rudy side-eyed him as they left the ceramics and moved on to the next table. “You’re a sap, Miki Gilmore.”

“And you’re dead inside if all this—” Mik waved a hand. “—doesn’t fill you with Christmas spirit.”

“I’ll show you Christmas spirit when we get back to your place later,” Rudy muttered, banked heat in his eyes.

Mik shivered and uttered a gruff, “I’ll hold you to that.”

He bought the wreath for Gran and had Bonnie hold on to it so he could pick it up tomorrow. That way he wouldn’t have to lug it around tonight. The wreath was truly a hideous thing. The tulle was red and green, and the elf’s legs, sticking right out of the center of the tulle, were crocheted in green and white stripes with red elf shoes for feet, complete with a bell on the toes.

“Now I understand where you got your penchant for quirky decorations,” Rudy said.

“Hey, Bigfoot followed me from Washington. That has nothing to do with Gran.”

“Uh-huh.”

At the next table, Mik picked up a knit hat in dark blue, then put it back.

“You didn’t like that one?” Rudy asked.

“It’s fine. The colors are nice. But a lined hat would be better, otherwise the cold and wind sneak through the material.”

“You know that because of your knitting classes?”

Mik snorted. “No. I know that because I’ve owned unlined knit hats before.”

“You ever plan on taking classes again?” Rudy’s smile turned teasing. “Or were you terrible at it and now you never want to see another knitting needle again?”

“Screw you.” Mik laughed and shoved Rudy away. “I’m pretty good. Ask Meredith and Josh. I knit a blanket for the new baby, and when Eagan got jealous, I knit a second one for him. You’ve probably seen it. It’s the blue one in Eagan’s room.”

“So you *are* going to take more classes.”

“Nah.” Mik picked up a soy wax candle in a clear glass jar. The scent was labeled as balsam. “It was kind of . . .” Lowering his voice so he didn’t offend anyone, he whispered, “Boring. Like, you just sit there and knit. Yes, I could watch a movie or listen to a podcast while knitting, but I don’t really do that anyway. Knitting is relaxing, I guess, but it’s not much fun. What do you think of this?” He held the candle up to Rudy. “Think my mom will like it?”

Rudy gave it a sniff. “I don’t know. Does she like candles?”

“Not really.” Sighing, Mik put it back. “Why are moms so hard to shop for?”

“Speaking of moms, how are your parents enjoying Florida?”

“I don’t think they want to come back. Mom sent this in the family group chat yesterday.” Mik brought the photo up on his phone and showed it to Rudy.

It was a selfie of Mom and Dad, Mom wearing her ginormous sunglasses, Dad wearing a sunhat, cigar in his mouth. He gazed out into the distance, looking like he was awaiting the ship bringing his love home to him.

“Oh, hey!” Giving Rudy the phone, Mik headed to a nearby table with more knit goods. “Now we’re talking.” He

picked up a simple knit hat in emerald green with a folded cuff. “This one’s lined. Better for you.” And he stretched it over Rudy’s head and ears.

Rudy, for his part, just stared at him.

“Want a mirror?” the lady behind the table asked. “So you can see what it looks like?” She passed Mik a handheld mirror.

“Thanks.” Mik held it up for Rudy to check himself out.

“It’s nice,” Rudy said, adjusting the hat slightly. “Cozy.”

“We’ll take it,” Mik told the lady who was possibly the artist. To Rudy, he added, “In lieu of first-date flowers.”

Rudy’s smile went softer than Mik had ever seen it.



THEIR NEXT STOP was The White Elephant, one block over. It was a more upscale pub compared to Frosty’s and Rudolph’s, and the hostess sat them at a four-top where, to Mik’s surprise, Rudy chose the seat to his left rather than the one across the table from him.

Under the table, their knees touched, and for reasons Mik couldn’t name, it made the setting feel more intimate despite the crowd of diners.

Mik scanned the QR code on the table to view the menu while Rudy looked around. “I’ve never been here before. It’s a nice place.”

Mik stared at him. “Seriously, *what* have you been doing with yourself for two and a half years if you haven’t explored Santa’s Village or attended any festival season events?”

Rudy shrugged. “Exploring the surrounding area, mostly.”

“By yourself.”

“I did ask you to go hiking with me a few days ago, if you’ll recall. And you bowed out to perfect Christmas punch.”

“But don’t you want to explore Christmas Falls too? Get to know the people in the community you live in?”

Rudy suddenly found the QR code massively interesting. “I do that anyway, as manager of Rudolph’s.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Hi, guys.” A server appeared, dark hair pulled into a braid that hung over her shoulder and wearing a name tag that read *Indrani, she/her*. She poured them each a glass of water from a sweating pitcher. “I’m Indrani, and I’ll be your server tonight. Can I start you off with drinks?”

Once they’d ordered, she said, “Are you participating in trivia tonight?”

“We are,” Mik replied.

Rudy’s eyebrows rose. “Are we?”

“Mm-hmm. It’s tonight’s festival season event. It’s why I had to make a reservation to get a table and why the restaurant is so packed.”

“I’ll leave you with an entry form, then.” Indrani left a sheet of paper on the table, divided into four sections, and numbered one through ten in each section. She also left a single pencil. “I’ll be back in a few minutes with your drinks.”

“Hang on—” Rudy said at the same time as Mik said, “Wait a sec.”

Indrani paused.

“We’re going to need another entry form,” Rudy said.

“Oh.” Indrani frowned. “But you only need one per team.”

“Yeah, we’re not entering as a team,” Mik told her.

“O . . . kay,” Indrani said, clearly confused. But she left another entry form and pencil behind. “Can I register your team names for the leaderboard?”

They went with the ultra-original team names of Mik and Rudy.

Trivia began at eight, and Mik had timed the reservation so that they'd be finished with dinner and enjoying dessert when it started. At 7:59, Mik rose and transferred to the seat across from Rudy.

At Rudy's raised eyebrow, he said, "So you don't copy off me."

"I've never cheated at anything in my life."

Mik moved the salt and pepper shaker between them, as well as the little clear table display that advertised the nightly drink specials. "May the better man win."

Rudy smirked. "I will."

"Don't get overconfident, Rudy. It's not a good look."

"I'll tell you what's a good look." Leaning forward, Rudy lowered his voice. "It's the scenario I'm imagining in my head where you're down on your knees giving me a congratulatory blow job."

Mik's pulse skyrocketed. His body burned. "I think you've got that scenario backward. Hope you like the view from down there."

"I doubt I'll complain."

The music abruptly turned off, silencing Kelly Clarkson's "Underneath the Tree," and someone said, "Good evening, everyone," into a microphone. A good thing, seeing as Mik had been a second away from launching himself across the table to tackle Rudy to the floor.

Rudy knew it too, the bastard, sitting back with a suggestive grin that made Mik shift in his chair and curse the hardness in his pants.

"Welcome to Holiday Trivia at The White Elephant! I'm Shelly, your MC for the night, and before we get started, I have one rule." Shelly lowered her glasses to the tip of her nose and sent the diners an arch look. "No cell phones. My servers will be keeping an eye on you, and if we see anyone looking for the answer online, your entire team will be automatically disqualified. Now, the prizes."

She ran through the prizes, which Mik didn't care much about. He was here to kick Rudy's butt.

"There are four categories and ten questions per category," Shelly went on. "Tonight's categories are, in order: Christmas carols, holiday traditions, Christmas entertainment, and the North Pole. We'll collect your forms at the end of each category and tally up the results for our leaderboard." Next to Shelly was a large whiteboard with the team names written in alphabetical order. "Our first category is Christmas carols, and question one is . . ."

Wagging his eyebrows, Rudy bookended one of Mik's feet underneath the table.

"What Irving Berlin song is the biggest-selling Christmas single of all time?"

Mik scribbled his answer. Rudy pursed his lips.

"Question two: What is the second line of 'Once In Royal David's City'?"

Mik scribbled his answer. Rudy grimaced.

"Question three: What kind of vehicle will Santa's little bobsled walk in 'Little Saint Nick'?"

Mik scribbled his answer. Rudy sighed.

This continued until question ten. "In 'The Twelve Days of Christmas,' what did my true love bring to me on the first day?"

"Finally," Rudy grumbled. "Something I actually know. Like, what the fuck is 'Once In Royal David's City'?"

Mik snort-laughed.

At the end of the first round, Team Mik was in first place with nine points—he'd missed a true or false answer about "Away in a Manger"—and Team Rudy was last with one point. Mik sat taller in his chair. One didn't grow up in Christmas Falls and not know everything there was to know about Christmas carols.

“Don’t get overconfident, Miki,” Rudy said. “It’s not a good look.”

Mik laughed harder than was probably warranted.

They got five points each in the second category, holiday traditions. Then Rudy crushed Christmas entertainment with nine points to Mik’s seven, putting Mik ahead by six points.

Rudy groaned. “It was the goddamn Christmas carols.”

At the end of the fourth category—the North Pole, which seemed to be a catchall category of random questions that didn’t fit in the previous three—Mik bit his lip and reread his answers. Most were guesswork, but with questions like “According to a survey of mall Santas, what is their favorite Christmas song?” and “What is the average number of lights on an American Christmas tree?” and “How much did it cost to send a Christmas card within the same city in Victorian England?” all he could do was guess.

Rudy didn’t appear any more confident when he handed his sheet in. “Do you know which U.S. president banned Christmas trees from the White House?”

Mik shook his head. “Not a clue.”

It was Teddy Roosevelt, it turned out.

With zero points to teams Mik and Rudy in round four, it placed Mik at a total of twenty-one and Rudy at fifteen.

Neither of them was anywhere near the top. The grand prize went to a team with a total of thirty-nine points out of forty.

“Ugh.” Rudy made a face. “That’s just sad.”

“We need to brush up on our holiday trivia.”

“Maybe next time,” Rudy murmured, ghosting his fingers along Mik’s wrist, “we pool our resources.”

Mik’s skin burned where Rudy touched it. His vision narrowed, seeing only Rudy—the rakish smile, the sinfully dark eyes, and the stubbled jaw that would feel like sex

incarnate on Mik's skin. "Speaking of pooling our resources." He pushed his chair back. "Want to get out of here?"

Rudy's eyes heated. "You read my mind."

Rather than wait for the check, they paid at the bar to speed things up. Mik was grateful Rudy didn't argue about him paying because he wasn't in the mood to debate the topic. With that done, they bundled into their outerwear and headed out into the cold night. It was snowing lazily, flakes coating everything in a layer of postcard-perfect white, making downtown look like a photograph with its street signs wrapped in garland and topped with illuminated red bows, and all the storefronts decked out for the holidays.

"It's pretty," Rudy said, falling into step beside Mik.

"You know, I did have a third act to our date."

"That so?" Rudy spun to walk backward, facing him. With the beard and the eyes and the new hat that came right down to his eyebrows, he looked imposing as fuck. Like that overpriced buffoon on skates Mik had once accused him of being. The kind of guy Mik wouldn't want barreling down on him on the ice.

The kind of guy Mik *would* want barreling down on him in a completely different way.

"Uh-huh. I thought we could take a sleigh ride from Sugar Plum Park and do the Holiday House Light Tour."

"Are we still doing that?"

"Nope. Turns out, that starts tomorrow."

Rudy's grin shone white under a streetlamp. "Good. Last one to your house makes breakfast tomorrow." And he took off running.

"Wha— Hey!" Mik took off after him. "I thought you said you don't cheat."

"This is worth the bad karma," Rudy yelled over his shoulder, drawing the attention of a group exiting Frosty's.

“You already owe me a blow job for beating you at trivia.” Mik’s arms and legs pumped. “Do you want to owe me breakfast too?”

Rudy dashed across Christmas Boulevard and up Dasher. “A little overconfident, don’t you think? Seeing as you’re behind me.”

Maybe. But Rudy wasn’t just an overpriced buffoon. He was a *big* overpriced buffoon. Mik was and always had been faster.

This was like being back on the ice, adrenaline sharpening his senses and fueling his desire to win. But instead of an NHL arena, the streets of Christmas Falls were their playground.

Mik laughed into the night.

His opportunity came when Rudy slowed at an intersection to check for oncoming vehicles. Mik barely slowed, zipping by Rudy and plowing through the intersection without a thought for his own safety.

But this was Christmas Falls. Away from downtown, the streets were dead silent. He would’ve heard a car coming.

Rudy made a squawking noise behind him.

God. Mik was grinning so wide that his teeth hurt from the cold.

He made it to his driveway and up his porch steps a few seconds ahead of Rudy.

“That’s twice today you’ve beat me,” Rudy said with a mock scowl, breathing hard. “Way to chip at my ego.”

“Please. Your ego’s big enough for the both of us.”

His lips an inch away from Mik’s, Rudy whispered, “Let me inside and I’ll show you how big my ego is.”

“That,” Mik said, pulling Rudy forward with a fist in the front of his coat, “was very bad.”

“I’ll show you what else is very bad.”

“Oh my god, stop.”

“My big ego is very good at being very bad.”

“I’ve created a monster.”

“Let me in and I’ll show you the monster in my—”

“Nope.” Laughing, Mik slapped a hand over Rudy’s mouth. “Don’t even go there.” He unlocked the door, pushed it open, and waved Rudy inside. “Get in before you say anything worse. I think you’re traumatizing even Bigfoot. And I swear to god, if you make a joke out of *that* . . .”

“Bigfoot’s not worthy of a joke,” Rudy said, leaving his outerwear on a coat hook and his boots on the mat.

Mik pouted. “I think I’m insulted on his behalf.”

“You know who’s going to be insulted, Miki?” Rudy asked as he headed toward the back of the house, presumably to Mik’s bedroom. “Me if you don’t meet me in the bedroom in five seconds.” He clapped twice. “Chop, chop.”

Chuckling under his breath, Mik leaned against the wall and tugged off his boots. The man was ridiculous.

He was maybe fifteen seconds behind Rudy, but when he walked into the bedroom, Rudy was already lying on the bed, stroking himself.

Mik swallowed to wet his dry throat. Jesus Christ, the man was a work of art. All cut abs and strong biceps and hairy thighs, giving Mik that grin that made his every thought come to a screeching halt.

Rudy was sexy as fuck when he was clothed.

But this . . . A Rudy who was all splayed out and waiting for him with a naughty smirk that made Mik’s head spin?

Yes, please.

Rudy’s smirk widened. “You just gonna stand there and watch?”

“I’m kind of tempted to, yeah.” Despite his words, Mik undressed quickly, then unearthed the lube from the nightstand. He took out the box of condoms too and turned it in Rudy’s direction. “Do we need them?”

“I was negative at my last checkup and I haven’t been with anyone since.”

“Same.” Mik chucked the box back in and shut the drawer. Tossing the lube onto the bed, he stretched himself out on top of Rudy’s big body, groaning at the sensation of skin against skin. Desire hotter than anything he’d ever known pooled in his lower back, in his balls. Cupping Rudy’s jaw, he said, “What do you want? What do you like?”

Gaze hooded, Rudy ran both hands down Mik’s back, cupped his ass, and spread his cheeks apart, exposing him to the cool air. “What I want is to give you that blow job I owe you. What I like depends on what I’m in the mood for.”

Mik sucked in a sharp breath. “And what are you in the mood for?”

One finger circled his hole, sending fire up his spine, and he shuddered, collapsing onto Rudy with a shaky exhale. “Yes, fuck, get me ready.”

Blow jobs could wait.

Rudy inserted one, then two, then three lubed fingers knuckle deep while Mik writhed on top of him and made sounds he’d never heard himself make before. They’d barely started and already sweat coated his entire body. He rutted against Rudy, easing the pressure slightly, and when he couldn’t take it anymore, he sat up with a burst of energy.

The expression on Rudy’s face almost careened him into an orgasm right then and there. He looked fucked out already, his eyes glazed, his chest heaving with every breath. Mik bent forward and kissed him, and the scrape of Rudy’s scruffy jaw against his was almost more pleasure than he could take.

But then, a moment later, Mik lifted himself up, angling Rudy’s erection toward his hole, and he quickly corrected himself. *This*, this first stretch around Rudy’s dick . . . This was almost more pleasure than he could take.

Once Rudy was fully seated inside him, Mik grinned down at him and played with the mat of fur between his pecs. “Give it to me.”

Rudy seemed to take that as permission to go to town because, in the next second, he rolled them, reversing their positions. Hiking one of Mik's legs up, he sank back into him, eliciting a drawn-out groan from both of them. His thrusts weren't gentle or sweet, and Mik wanted to cry with how good it was.

He'd had good sex before. Hell, he'd had great sex before. He'd even had great sex with people he cared about and who cared about him.

But he'd never had sex with someone who made him see past the now and look to the future. Never had sex with someone who looked at him as if he *was* the future. Never had sex with someone who made him feel like everything he'd never known he wanted was within reach.

Lust and contentment and pleasure and . . . not love, but a shit-ton of like swirled within him. He met Rudy's gaze. Jesus, Rudy was a hot fucking mess. Sweaty and breathing as hard as Mik ever had after a hockey game, his chest flushed and nipples hard. His lips curved into a smile that said, *Gonna come for me, Miki?*

So of course Mik did, shooting onto his stomach with barely a tug of his erection. Rudy followed right behind him, swearing a blue streak through his own orgasm that made Mik chuckle wheezily as he caught his breath.

Rudy fell on top of him, bracing himself on an arm. Their lips met and Rudy kissed him and kissed him and *kissed him* until Mik was a puddle of goo.

"Give me two minutes to catch my breath," Rudy said, rubbing his nose against Mik's. "And then I'll give you that blow job I owe you."

Mik would've sworn he saw stars.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Mik woke up to an empty bed the next morning, but before he had time to panic about that, he heard the sound of the water running in the sink in the bathroom. Rolling onto his back, he stretched, yawning hugely and feeling decadently used.

He'd never had shower sex before, mostly because the whole concept screamed *accident waiting to happen*. But his en suite bath had a glass-enclosed shower with a bench, which Rudy had taken full advantage of last night while Mik got down on his knees for a reciprocal blow job that had taken Rudy to another world.

Not to brag or anything.

After Mik had sucked him off, then cleaned him off, they'd quickly soaped up and rinsed before snuggling in Mik's bed to watch a movie. *Klaus* on Netflix because it had looked cute.

Yeah, that was right. They'd watched an animated Christmas movie together, sharing a bowl of microwave popcorn that Mik had found in the back of his pantry. And when Mik had teared up at the end of the movie, Rudy hadn't laughed at him for it. Just kissed his temple, turned off the television, and curled up behind him until he'd fallen asleep.

He and Rudy were more compatible than Mik had ever dreamed possible—in more ways than one.

The water shut off in the bathroom, and Mik grinned at the ceiling, anticipation blooming in his belly. What would Rudy look like first thing in the morning? All scruffy and bedheady?

Well, he was kind of always scruffy and bedheady, now that Mik was thinking about it.

The bathroom door opened, and there was Rudy, as scruffy and bedheady as Mik had expected, wearing nothing but his boxer briefs and a smile. Droplets of water clung to his cheeks and jaw. Mik's heart leaped into his throat.

“Hey.” Rudy's voice was a deep rumble that shook Mik's bones. “You're awake. And since you're awake, want to tell me where your extra toothbrushes are?”

Mik waved a hand. “In the cupboard underneath the sink.”

“Cool.”

Rudy disappeared into the bathroom again.

Mik worked his mouth. Grimaced at the taste. Gag. He could definitely use a cleaning too. This was like morning breath on steroids and—

Oh no.

The thing in the cupboard under the sink.

He opened his mouth, to say what, he'd never know, because there came the sound of the squeaky cupboard hinges.

Then silence.

Mik slapped a hand to his mouth to stifle a laugh and hoped Rudy hadn't noticed the thing. A moment passed. Another. The squeaky hinges again, then—

Rudy appeared in the doorway, straight-faced and serious. “Miki.”

Mik shot him his biggest smile. “Rudy.”

“I have a very important question for you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What is this?” From behind his back, Rudy pulled out a Swiffer duster.

“It's for emergencies!”

“A likely story.”

“It’s true.”

Rudy brandished the Swiffer in his direction like it was a wand. “And what, pray tell, constitutes a dusting emergency?”

“It’s for, like, when my gran calls to say she’s dropping by for a visit. Gotta do a quick dusting before she gets here and I never have time to take out the Windex. She’s two blocks away.”

“You don’t dust for your mom?”

Mik snorted. “Please. She raised two boys. She knows how we are. Gran, though . . .” He grimaced. “And you.”

Rudy raised his eyebrows. “What about me?”

“You didn’t have to go and film a commercial.”

“That wasn’t my idea.”

Mik scoffed. “A likely story.”

Chuckling, Rudy tossed the Swiffer onto the bathroom counter and stalked toward the bed. “My agent agreed to it without asking me after you went on your Swiffer rant, assuming I’d be okay with it.” He climbed onto the bed and fell onto his stomach. “I could’ve backed out, but it would’ve looked bad for him. And me. I wouldn’t have done it if given the choice upfront.”

Mik muttered the most sarcastic “Uh-huh” he could.

“Seriously. Bantering with you on social media was one thing. But doing a commercial after you’d gone on and on and *on*—”

“It was *three* posts.”

“—about how Swiffers don’t do anything but move the dust around? It felt like I was mocking you, and that wasn’t what I wanted. Bantering with you is fun. But the commercial? That’s always felt wrong. I regretted not backing out of it almost right away.”

Something in Mik’s chest softened and his feelings went all squishy. Rolling onto his stomach, he wrapped his arms

around his pillow and squashed it into a ball under his head. “I didn’t know that.”

Rudy shrugged.

“I never felt like you were mocking me,” Mik said.

“No? Good.”

Silence descended between them, comfortable and soft, hazy with the morning light filtering in through the curtains. Rudy’s eyes were so dark. Not quite black, but a deep, warm brown that reflected the light. He had sleep creases on one cheek and one shoulder, and his lips were red and pouty against scruff that was as dark as his eyes.

Christ, Mik couldn’t believe that he got to have this man. Maybe not forever, because who knew what the future held? But he got to have him for now and for as long as this . . . whatever this was . . . lasted.

Reading between the lines, Mik had a feeling this wasn’t a fling for Rudy, and he had two pieces of evidence to base that on.

First? Rudy admitted to liking him after their trip to Peoria.

Second? Rudy was Josh’s best friend. Josh was Mik’s brother. If things between Mik and Rudy went tits up, it could lead to problems between Josh and Rudy as well. Rudy wouldn’t fuck up his friendship with Josh for a fling.

Ergo, this was serious. Or it could be, given time and nurturing.

Christ. That was both terrifying and electrifying. Mik’s mind flew ahead to dinner dates and picking out a Christmas tree together at Milton Falls Christmas Tree Farm and sharing a milkshake at The Snowflake Shack and . . .

Could they do some kind of joint pub event? Not for festival season, but perhaps in the summer?

Snuggling into the pillow, Mik grinned. From rivals to co-party planners to co-coaches to friends to lovers to joint events. Mik had no idea what that event could be, but he was already looking forward to it.

“What are you smiling at?” Rudy asked, eyes sparkling.

Mik rubbed his cheek against his pillow and decided to keep thoughts of a future with Rudy to himself. “I just realized I don’t know what time it is.”

“It was just after eight when I got up.”

They both had a full day at their pubs today, but they had a couple of hours before they had to think about that.

“Did you ever find the extra toothbrushes?”

“Nope.” Rudy smacked his lips together. “Tastes like something died in my mouth.”

“I’ve still got popcorn kernels in my teeth.”

Rudy’s chest shook with laughter, making the bed shake. Mik squirmed closer and kissed his shoulder. “I want lazy morning sex, though.” Sitting up, he gently slapped Rudy’s ass as he climbed over him and off the bed. “So come on. I’ll find you that toothbrush. Get up.”

“Oh, trust me, I was up as soon as you said lazy morning sex.” The growl in Rudy’s voice almost sent Mik back into the bed.

But the kernels.

Mik tugged at the band of Rudy’s underwear. “Come on. I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Of that, I have no doubt.”

“And then you can make me breakfast since I won the race yesterday.”

“You cheated.”

“I’m sorry, *who* took off without warning? It’s not my fault I’m faster.”

In the bathroom, Mik meant to make it quick, but the popcorn kernels were everywhere. At least he had a sexy, mostly naked man using the sink next to his to ogle as he brushed. Couldn’t complain about the view.

Rudy spat. Rinsed. Braced his hands on either side of the sink and eyed Mik through the mirror. “What are you grinning at now?”

Mik did his own spit and rinse and waved the toothbrush at Rudy. “I like the view.”

Rudy’s eyes darkened. “That so?” Straightening, he slipped his thumbs into the waistband of his underwear.

Mik whimpered.

“Might you like it better from the bed?” Rudy murmured, walking backward toward said bed.

Mik liked it from anywhere, but he understood what Rudy was saying.

Lips curving upward, Rudy tugged the band of his boxer briefs down an inch, revealing the engorged head of his dick.

Mik swallowed hard and took a step forward. Realized he was still holding his toothbrush. “But I still need to floss.”

“*I really* couldn’t care less about the popcorn kernels, Miki.”

In that case . . .

Mik flung the toothbrush onto the counter.



THAT EVENING, Rudy popped into Tidings & Joy—a fancy name for what essentially amounted to a general store—fifteen minutes before the start of Rudolph’s Holiday Cocktail Hour. Rudolph’s owner, Bobbie Yarwood, owned a handful of restaurants in the area, but only one in Christmas Falls. And because she lived two hours away in St. Louis, she only dropped by Rudolph’s once or twice a month.

She was currently holding down the fort while Rudy rushed into Tidings & Joy for cranberries. He couldn’t serve his special five-dollar signature cocktail during cocktail hour without them. What he and Bobbie had affectionately termed

the poinsettia was a simple mix of orange liqueur, cranberry juice, and champagne, garnished with a sprig of rosemary and whole cranberries.

Assuming he could find cranberries. He hadn't noticed they hadn't been included in his twice-weekly fruit-and-vegetable order until he'd gone searching for them a few minutes ago. Whichever one of his employees had accepted this week's delivery hadn't compared the order against what was delivered, which made Rudy wonder what else could be missing.

He didn't have time to think about that right now, though.

"Hey, Rudy." Craig, the store's owner, waved at him from behind a display of furry-hooded winter coats. "Anything I can help you with?"

"Do you have any cranberries?"

Craig jerked a thumb toward the back. "Jars on a shelf near the—"

"Not cranberry sauce," Rudy interrupted, checking the time on his watch. "Actual cranberries."

"Hm." Craig rubbed his gray beard. "I had plenty for Thanksgiving, and I usually stock them up until Christmas. Let's see here."

Rudy followed him to the stands of fruits and vegetables at the back, and there, sandwiched between Brussels sprouts and mangoes, were bags of fresh whole cranberries.

But only four of them.

"I'll take them all," Rudy said, piling the bags in one arm. He suspected he'd need two or three times more, but if this was all he had to work with, he'd be stingy with the garnish. Not ideal, but it was this or nothing.

"I have frozen ones as well," Craig said. He stood in front of the frozen goods section and gestured at the top row, where bags and bags and *bags* of cranberries sat, waiting to be used in his poinsettias.

“I’ll take all of those too.” He’d sit on them to thaw them if he had to. Like a chicken keeping her eggs warm.

Craig’s eyebrows rose so high they nearly disappeared into his hairline. “*All* of them?”

“Can I return what I don’t use?”

Craig just stared at him.

“That’s a no then,” Rudy murmured.

“Who returns groceries?”

“It’s fine. I’m sure my chef will think of something to make with them.”

As Rudy paid with seven minutes to spare until the start of cocktail hour, the door opened, letting in a burst of cold air.

“Well, hello, Rudy dear.”

“Hi, Mrs. Gilmore,” he said as Craig bagged his cranberries. “I like the new hair.”

“Does it look like a candy cane?” Mrs. Gilmore swept her dark red bangs aside. “Because that’s what I was going for.”

“Definitely. You look very hip.”

“Hip,” she repeated, drawing her shoulders back. “I like that.”

Her pixie cut was done in what Rudy thought might be called ombre. It started dark red at the top and gradually lightened until it was almost white at the base of her neck.

“Better than what my grandson said,” she continued with a frown. “He said it looked like someone dropped paint on my head.”

Rudy rolled his lips inward so he didn’t laugh. “Let me guess. Mik.”

“I swear, that boy . . .”

Oh, Miki.

Mrs. Gilmore caught sight of his purchase and made a *hm* sound. “What’s all this? Supplies for the surprise party I’m not

supposed to know about?”

Pulse spiking, Rudy forced himself not to react. “What surprise party?”

“The one for my eightieth birthday.”

“Someone’s planning you a party?” Rudy forced a note of *this is the first I’m hearing about this* into his voice. “That sounds fun. Is it your friend . . . uh, sorry. I forget her name. The one from the daycare.”

Mrs. Gilmore narrowed her gaze. “That’s Sue, and no, she’s not—”

“Here you go, Rudy,” Craig interrupted, handing over several bags with a wink. He’d already RSVP’d *yes* to the party, and Rudy knew Mik had written that it was a surprise party about seven times in the email invitation, just in case people skimmed and missed it the first six times. “I’ll see you soon for cocktail hour. Lilian! What can I help you with today?”

Sending Craig a quick grin as thanks for the distraction, Rudy made his escape.



MIK PROBABLY SHOULDN’T LEAVE Frosty’s during a Saturday night dinner rush, but with cocktail hour happening at Rudolph’s, Frosty’s dinner rush was technically less of a rush and more of a crawl, which made it the perfect opportunity for their new junior manager, Juan, to flex his managerial muscles without supervision. And besides, Mik’s employees had his phone number. He was a call or text away if there were any emergencies. Plus, he’d only be down the street and could zip back if there was a problem.

Okay, he’d heard a rumor that Rudolph’s had free cinnamon buns tonight for cocktail hour and he wanted one.

And he also wanted to see Rudy, which was maybe his number one motivation for visiting his biggest competitor’s establishment.

Though the cinnamon buns were a close second.

Cocktail hour at Rudolph's was as busy as it had been at Frosty's the week before. Customers in all manner of formal- and not-so-formalwear milled around, sipping from champagne and martini glasses and munching on the appetizers. Servers walked around with platters of food, and on the far wall, a table had been set up with buffet-style goodies. Mik nabbed a cinnamon bun before they disappeared and helped himself to a bowl of prosciutto and brûléed fig salad with shaved Asiago cheese.

Whereas Mik and Josh had enticed people into Frosty's for cocktail hour with a raffle, Rudolph's had brought people in with games. Jenga at one table, Christmas trivia at another, holiday-themed Heads Up by the Christmas tree. There was also a memory game as well as an indoor scavenger hunt, which appeared to send people looking for items found in the pub. There didn't seem to be any prizes for the games; it was just a fun way to get customers to interact and maybe meet new people.

It was . . . fun. More fun than a raffle? Definitely. Two weeks ago, that would've sent Mik's pulse skyrocketing and his teeth to grinding, but now it just . . . was.

Rudy was behind the bar, tall and scruffy with that bedhead hair slicked into something a little less tumbled for tonight's event. He wore dark jeans and a red sweater with a band of snowflakes across the chest. Underneath the sweater was a black-and-white plaid shirt. The collar poked over the top of the sweater, and it was unbuttoned at the wrists, the sleeves rolled back over the arms of the sweater.

The whole look was very hipster Christmas, and Mik was totally here for it.

Also totally here for undressing him out of it later.

Rudy was busy at the moment, slinging cocktails and filling orders, so Mik grabbed a scavenger hunt sheet and searched for clues as he ate his salad.

1. Christmas in Connecticut *poster*.

Not hard to find, given it hung next to the fireplace. Rudy had decorated the walls with classic holiday movie posters, and it gave the whole place a vintage vibe.

2. *A white button.*

Vague, but Mik eventually found one on a customer's shirt.

3. *Something purple.*

That one was a little harder, but he found a sparkly nutcracker on the mantelpiece with purple on its hat.

4. *A server with a tip.*

Huh. That one stumped him. Wasn't it the customers who were supposed to give the servers tips? Stealthily, he snuck up on a group completing the scavenger hunt together and peeked at their sheet. They had almost everything answered except for that one and a clue near the bottom that read 8. *A headless bear.*

A what now?

He snuck up on a duo and peeked at their sheet too, but they appeared equally stumped.

Finally, he crept up to Billie. Rudy's server was stacking empty salad bowls onto a tray, so he added his own to it, then held up his sheet. "Don't suppose you have a tip for me?"

She smiled and cocked her head toward the bar. "The tip is that there are free cookies at the bar."

Mik had a cinnamon bun already, but he definitely needed a cookie too. "Thanks."

Grabbing onto the excuse to head in Rudy's direction, Mik circled around a table where the town's festival organizer, Griff, was playing Uno with a hot blue-eyed guy, and grinned as he approached the bar. Rudy was wiping his hands on a bar towel as he spoke with a youngish white guy in his mid-twenties, but he broke off to smile at Mik when Mik leaned against the counter.

"Hey," Rudy said with a smile that lit Mik up. "Saw you come in. How's it going with the scavenger hunt?"

“Well, I received a—” Mik pointed at the number four on his scavenger hunt sheet. “—*tip* from a *server* that there are free cookies at the bar.”

Rudy grunted, reached underneath the counter, and emerged with a bear-shaped gingerbread cookie that he added to Mik’s plate. “They’re from Ginger’s Breads.”

“Joel does make the best gingerbread, but . . .” Mik poked the cookie. “I can’t eat this.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a cute bear. I don’t want the murder-guilt.”

Amusement brought a sparkle to Rudy’s eyes. “Eat its head first. It’s more humane that way.”

Mik gasped so long and loud he almost choked on air. If he’d been wearing pearls, he would’ve clutched them.

Rudy doubled over laughing.

“You murderer!”

That just made Rudy laugh harder. In fact, he laughed so loudly that he turned heads, earning himself appreciative glances that made Mik want to scream from the rooftops that he was taken.

“Here,” Rudy said, still chuckling. He thrust a bag of frozen cranberries at Mik. “Warm these between your hands for me, would you?”

“Um, why?” Mik asked, even as he did as asked. The bag was cold on his skin and he grimaced.

“I need them thawed a little.”

“Just stick them in the microwave on defrost.”

“I don’t have time to run back and forth to the kitchen, and everyone else is busy.”

Mik was about to tell him to thaw them under running water, but Billie appeared, toting a plastic container that she passed to Rudy. “Extra cookies, since you seem to be running

low out here. There are more in the kitchen. And Bobbie says more apps are coming out shortly.”

Rudy nodded. “Thanks.”

“Hey, Travis,” Billie said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

The youngish guy Rudy had been talking to blushed and gave an awkward two-fingered wave. “Hi, Billie.”

She opened her mouth. Closed it again. Gave Travis a smile that was both disappointed and interested, if such a thing were possible, and grabbed a tray of drinks Rudy had just finished assembling. Some of them held a fruit punch-colored drink with cranberries floating in them, which explained the bag currently turning Mik’s hands numb.

Travis watched Billie go, shoulders slumping.

Rudy raised an eyebrow at him. “I did tell you to talk to her.”

Travis pouted into his drink. “I don’t know what to say. And don’t tell me I should ask about cheese.”

“What does cheese have to do with anything?” Mik muttered.

They both ignored him.

“You could ask her to the next festival season event, whatever that is,” Rudy suggested.

There were currently several events running at once: the outdoor ice-skating rink was open to the public, the Arts & Crafts Holiday Fair was open for one more day, and the Holiday House Light Tour was ongoing until mid-month. But the next social event was . . .

“The Holiday Wine Tasting,” Mik said. “Monday at The White Elephant.”

“I guess.” Travis squirmed on his barstool. “I just don’t know if she’s into me.”

She was definitely interested. God, men were oblivious.

And yes, Mik counted himself in that category given he hadn't glommed onto the fact that Rudy had been flirting with him for ten years.

"Ask her out," Rudy suggested, grabbing an order scribbled onto a small notepad sheet one of his servers handed him. "If she says no, you'll have your answer."

"Or you could tell her you're into her and ask her if she's into you." Mik put the bag of cranberries down and wiped his hands on his thighs to warm them. "That's what I did with this one." He jerked his head at Rudy. "Well, sort of. I asked him if he liked me and then I kissed him, and the rest is history. I mean, week-old history, but still. Except maybe don't go straight to kissing with Billie. She seems like a nice girl."

Rudy crossed his arms over his chest. "Are you saying I'm not nice?"

Cocking his head, Mik blinked innocently. "Did someone tell you that you are? If so, they were mistaken."

Travis snorted a laugh.

Rudy shook his head, but his expression was fond as he grabbed Mik's bag of cranberries and nodded at his plate. "Eat your cookie, Miki."

Since he did want to eat it, murder-guilt and all, Mik ate its head, groaning as the tastes of cinnamon, ginger, and cloves exploded on his tongue. He was about to bite into its arm when a thought occurred to him. "Hey! Number eight. A headless bear."

"Took you long enough."

Mik gave Rudy the finger and ate the rest of his cookie.



"YOUR GRAN DEFINITELY KNOWS ABOUT the party" was Rudy's opening salvo as he stepped out of Rudolph's onto Christmas Boulevard hours later and locked the door behind him.

Mik's shoulders slumped. "Aw, man." And they'd tried so hard to keep it a secret too. Mik had taken the email invitation template that Josh had put together and chucked it out the window. He'd rewritten it and made it his own, complete with gifs and emojis, and he'd written that it was a surprise party no less than seven times.

In bold.

And highlighted.

"Who blabbed?"

"No idea." Pocketing his keys, Rudy dropped a quick kiss to Mik's pouting lips. "I tried to play it off like I didn't know what she was talking about, but I'm not sure she bought it. Even asked if her friend Sue was the one organizing it."

"Who's Sue?"

"The daycare lady."

Mik frowned. "Her name's not Beth/Brenda/Beatrice?"

"What?"

"Never mind. Hi."

"Hi."

Another kiss, this one toe-curlingly slow. Mik hung on to Rudy for dear life and let Rudy plunder his mouth as though they hadn't seen each other in years instead of only a few hours. Rudy felt so good pressed against him, strong and solid and warm, and Mik's stomach flipped with both desire and lo

Like. Very intense like.

The world was quiet around them as Christmas Falls usually was past one o'clock in the morning after the pubs closed. It was just them, a silent street with closed-up shops that nonetheless sparkled with Christmas decorations, and a starry sky that felt so close it was as though Mik was being hugged in a blanket of silvery comfort.

A gust of wind vibrated down the street, cold and bitter. Mik shivered and broke the kiss, and when Rudy chased his

mouth for another one, Mik chuckled into it, his chest tingling with pleasure.

Finally, Rudy let him go and slung an arm around his shoulders, directing them across Comet Street at an easy pace. “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

“I’m walking you home,” Mik said. “Or rather, you’re walking me home, then staying the night. How was the rest of your shift?” Mik asked him.

Rudy sighed, his breath fogging the air ahead of them. “Busy. You?”

“Also busy. It was slow at first, but it picked up after your cocktail hour.” Mik yawned hugely. “Fuck, I’m tired. What do you say we sleep in tomorrow, have a lazy breakfast, and go pick out a tree at—oh, hey.” He stopped in front of a house and stared at the lights strung along the peaked roof. “I remember when I was a kid, there was a period where icicle lights were all the rage. You don’t see them as often anymore.”

“We lived in North Dakota when I was nine or ten, in this town right up against the Canadian border,” Rudy said. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he wandered over to the short path lined with candy cane lights that led up to a side door. “And I begged my parents for icicle lights, thinking that if the kids in my new school saw them, they’d be more likely to be my friends. It was a very insular town, not very friendly to newcomers, and the kids in my school didn’t know what to do with me—this guy who was taller than everyone else and who brought his hockey gear to school because he didn’t have time to drop it off at home after morning practice.”

Mik’s chest squeezed. He tugged one of Rudy’s hands out of his pockets and took it in his. “Did the icicle lights work?”

Rudy scoffed. “No. I think that was the first time the magic of Christmas dimmed for me. When you’re little, Christmas is all lights and miracles and presents, a time when anything can happen. But the only present I wanted was for someone to be my friend. Actually . . .” Rudy tugged on his hand and got them walking again. “That might’ve been around the same time I actively stopped trying to make friends every time we

moved. I stuck with my parents instead, knowing I'd be the new kid in town soon enough anyway."

Even as Mik's heart clenched, he fell a little in love with Rudy, with this man who was baring his soul so beautifully and with the kid he'd once been, lonely and sad.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, taking their time and admiring decorations when warranted and giggling at others. Like a hip-high light-up Santa on someone's porch that had a string of lights going from its crotch area to pool on the bottom step.

"That's *so* inappropriate," Mik said.

"At least it's more seasonally appropriate than your Bigfoot."

Mik opened his mouth to respond when Rudy said, "And don't say he's majestic."

Grumbling, Mik kicked a rock in his path.

As they passed beneath a streetlamp, the light shined on Rudy's face, illuminating the small smile. For some reason, that smile made Mik's heart stutter, and he leaned in to kiss the corner. "How did you and Josh become friends?"

Rudy let out a laugh. "He sort of adopted me. We met at a hockey clinic in Pittsburgh when we were sixteen. There was a networking social thing at a restaurant the evening before it started, and I was hovering near the buffet table. Josh came right up to me and started monologuing about how the pork buns were delicious but the pasta options were sad and did I want to run across the street with him to The MilkShake Factory for a shake?" He shook his head, his smile widening to a grin. "So there we are, two teenagers decked out in our finest business casual—basically clean jeans, a button-down, and our dads' blazers—drinking milkshakes and eating chocolate-covered popcorn. And your brother steals my phone and puts his number in it, texts himself so he has mine, and says 'Don't lose that.' He didn't leave my side much for the rest of the clinic, and afterward, when we went our separate ways, he kept in touch. Gotta admit, he was way better than

me at that, but when we both ended up playing for Pittsburgh, we just . . . fell back into things as though we'd seen each other the day before.”

Mik smiled at the image Rudy painted and laid his head on his shoulder.

“I have no idea why he came up to me that day at the social,” Rudy continued quietly. “Josh is . . . Josh. He could've been friends with anyone. But he picked me.”

Once, Mik had thought that the reason Rudy had followed Josh to Christmas Falls was so that he wouldn't be lonely anymore. But could it also be because Josh had picked him, adopted him, when no one else had?

Mik's nose burned, thinking of the lonely boy who must still live somewhere inside Rudy.

They reached Mik's house. It had snowed this week and Bigfoot's costume was looking a little . . . wilted.

“It just occurred to me that Bigfoot's Santa suit is going to get very wet over the next month.”

“Oh, yeah.” Rudy snorted a laugh. “It's going to be gross by the end of the season. Toss it. I'll get you a new one next year.” He froze for a beat, one foot hovering over the bottom porch step, and something Mik couldn't name passed behind his eyes. Fear? Sadness? Longing? It was gone in an instant and Mik didn't have time to ask about it before Rudy said, “What are your thoughts on a hot bath before bed?”

Mik moaned in delicious anticipation as they spilled into the house, and his lips were on Rudy's before the door closed behind them.

CHAPTER
NINE

On Monday afternoon, when Rudolph's and Frosty's were closed, Rudy accompanied Mik on a Christmas shopping trip to Santa's Village. It had snowed overnight; not enough to shovel or send out the snowplows, but enough to add a light layer of snow to the streets.

Inside Santa's Workshop, Christmas Falls' toy store, Rudy had gotten distracted by a wall of Thomas the Tank Engine sets and lost track of Mik, who'd disappeared into the bowels of the store in search of the perfect gift for his nephew.

Rudy picked up a box at random off the shelf. Thomas and Friends Trains and Cranes Super Tower. A memory niggled at the back of his mind: himself, aged five or six, playing with one of these sets. He'd never owned anything Thomas-related—not that he could remember anyway—but there was someone else in the memory with him. Another young boy. Someone from school? A kid from the neighborhood? Had he gone on a playdate with someone who owned a train set?

The memory vanished as quickly as it had arrived, and he put the box back on the shelf. Whoever that other kid had been, Rudy couldn't even remember his name.

A display of puzzles caught his eye, one in particular of a cozy indoor cottage scene at Christmas. A lit fire in a stone hearth, garlands over the window and mantelpiece, a lit Christmas tree with presents at its base, a red armchair, and a dog sleeping on a red-and-white rug.

It didn't look anything at all like the imaginary dream house he'd built in his head over the years, but it had the same homey and welcoming vibe he envisioned for his own living room.

And a dog. He'd love a dog. But a dog spoke of permanence, and . . .

He cut his gaze toward Mik.

With the NCAA job hanging over his head, nothing felt permanent.

But then, nothing in his life ever had, so that was nothing new.

He reached for the puzzle and—

“What do you think of this for Eagan?” Mik said, appearing at his elbow, holding a stuffed cat that was twice Eagan's height.

“Won't he pick the eyes off it?”

Mik stared the cat in the face. “True. Sorry, kitty.” He went back to the other side of the store and put it next to other too-big-to-be-real stuffed animals.

“Why does he do that?” Rudy asked.

“Fuck if I know. Kids are weird?”

“Goes without saying. Also, should you be swearing in a toy store?”

Mik made a show of looking around at the other adults and the one baby that wouldn't be uttering its first word for many more months. “I think I'm safe.” He wandered to the area of the store dedicated to kids under three. Rudy followed behind him slowly, checking out the displays as he went.

They'd already hit up Nutcrackers for Mik's parents, as well as Season's Readings for Meredith. Rudy hadn't had anyone to Christmas shop for in a long time. He and Josh had never exchanged gifts, and he hadn't been in the same place as his parents for the holidays in more than a decade. As an honorary uncle, he'd gotten a little something for Eagan last

year, of course, though the pack of diapers had been more for Josh and Meredith than for their son.

Yet here he was, buying a joint gift for Eagan with Mik. It made everything seem . . .

Permanent.

There was that word again.

There was an itch between his shoulder blades that crawled into his hairline to dig into his neck. He felt compelled to move, but he feared that if he started walking, his feet would take him right out of Christmas Falls.

He hadn't felt this restless since Toshie had first called him about the podcast job. Rudy had never considered himself a genius, but it didn't take one to figure out that he felt restless now because he had everything he'd ever wanted but hadn't been allowed to keep: a partner, friends, and a community. He should've felt settled. Instead, the fear of once again leaving everything and everyone behind crept like ghostly fingers under his ribs.

"Hey, Nicholas?"

The sound of Mik's voice jolted him out of his musings, and he wiped his damp palms on his thighs. The bags with Mik's earlier purchases hung off his arms, the handles digging into his wrists.

Nicholas, the white-haired owner of Santa's Workshop who had a Hawaiian shirt for every day of the month, gave them a jovial smile and rounded the counter toward them. "Mik. Rudy. What can I help you find?"

"What are two-year-olds into these days?" Mik asked. "Rudy and I need a Christmas gift for Eagan."

Rudy's shoulder twitched involuntarily at that easy *Rudy and I*.

"*Cocomelon*, for the most part," Nicholas said. "And if they have an older sibling, probably *Paw Patrol* and *Bluey*. You know, when you and your brother were a few years older

than Eagan, you were into Legos. Eagan's probably still too young for that, though."

Mik's smile turned forced. "That was Josh. I was more into Ninja Turtles."

"Were you?" Nicholas's brow scrunched. "Hm. Well, my memory isn't what it used to be. Anyhow, the *Cocomelon* collection is over here."

A few minutes later, they left the store with a plushie of a *Cocomelon* kid named JJ, a *Cocomelon* learning phone, a *Cocomelon* sing-and-learn laptop, a *Cocomelon* playhouse, a *Cocomelon* learning watch, and a couple of *Cocomelon* board books.

"Are you sure you don't want to go back for the bus?" Rudy asked. He paused on the sidewalk to redistribute the weight of his bags.

"Eagan has it already," Mik said, completely missing Rudy's sarcasm.

The sun had begun to set while they'd been inside Santa's Workshop, casting the sky in burnt orange and pale blue. At Tidings & Joy across the street, Craig waved at them through the front window. Rudy waved back as Mik rambled about wrapping paper versus gift bags.

"Wrapping paper is funner, but it's so much easier to dump these in a gift bag or two, don't you think?"

"Two?" Rudy looked between their bags. "I think you mean four."

"Eh." Mik waved a hand, his eyes bright. "Not if they're big bags. Oh hey, there's your friend from the bar."

His friend? Frowning, Rudy followed Mik's gaze. A couple blocks ahead, Travis and Billie walked out of Mistletoe Movies. They each had a takeout mug from Jolly Java, and if the smiles they wore were anything to go by, Travis had finally stepped up and asked her out. Or hell, maybe Billie had done the asking. Rudy shouldn't assume.

“Aw.” A sappy grin on his lips, Mik leaned into Rudy. “They’re cute. And speaking of cute, how about frozen pizza for dinner?”

Rudy shook his head and replayed Mik’s words. He would’ve sworn he’d heard wrong if he’d been talking to anyone other than Mik. “Enlighten me. What does one have to do with the other?”

“Huh?” Mik led their jaywalk across the street. “Oh, the pizza box has a cute cartoon pizza on it.”

It did indeed, Rudy noted when they got back to Mik’s place. While Mik preheated the oven, Rudy hid Eagan’s presents on the shelf in the closet of Mik’s second bedroom where Eagan wouldn’t find them.

Unlike the primary bedroom, the second bedroom was at the front of the house, overlooking a small garden and Bigfoot’s fugly face. The bedroom had a walk-in closet and an en suite bath, and it was decorated in forest green and cream with dark brown accents. The effect was very middle-of-a-forest—soothing and nurturing. In fact, it was eerily similar to how Rudy had decorated the second bedroom of the dream house in his head, the one he’d earmarked for his parents for when they visited.

He stepped out of the bedroom, and although he could hear Mik moving around in the kitchen, Rudy’s attention caught on the coffee table in the living room.

The *rustic* coffee table in the living room, where there was also a television over the fireplace and a chocolate brown sectional with fat cushions.

Just like in his imaginary dream house.

How had he never noticed before?

Added to that were his shoes next to Mik’s by the front door, his winter coat hanging next to Mik’s in the hall closet, the door to which Mik couldn’t be bothered to ever close, and his hoodie draped over the couch. His coffee mug from this morning was probably still in the sink. In the primary bedroom, he knew without looking that the basket of dirty

laundry was overflowing with both of their clothes, and one of the sinks in the bathroom had somehow become his.

It was only just occurring to Rudy now that he hadn't really left since their date, and that had been three days ago.

His breathing sped up. The back of his neck itched again, insistent and annoying, telling him that he couldn't have this. That he shouldn't want this because it'd be taken away at any second, and he'd be left yearning for what was and what could've been. It was like being a kid all over again, knowing that every friendship had an expiration date.

He was putting his shoes on before he'd really thought about it.

Mik scrambled into the living room from the kitchen, his brow furrowed in that way that formed a divot between his eyes. He held a pizza stone, as though he'd pulled it out of the cabinet, then rushed in to see what Rudy was up to in the foyer.

"Where are you off to?" he asked.

"I, uh . . ." The itch receded. His pulse slowed. The insistent *go-go-go* stabbing the back of his mind quieted to a whisper.

He shook his head, reorienting himself.

What the fuck had just happened?

He'd thought . . . what? To flee from everything he'd ever wanted before it could be snatched away from him?

That was dumb. Why not hold on to it with both hands until he couldn't have it anymore?

"I, uh . . ." He cleared his throat. "I was going to head home. Water my plants."

"Um, okay?" The confusion on Mik's face would've been comical had Rudy's head been in the game. "Right now?"

"They're on a schedule. But, uh . . ." Rudy toed off his shoes. How fortuitous was it that Mik had come into the room as Rudy had been about to do something stupid? Just the sight

of him settled his heart, tilted his world right side up again. He still felt a little restless with the need to go, to explore, but it was tempered by Mik's presence. "I can do it tomorrow," he said. "I'll stop by my place before I go to work."

Slowly, Mik's fingers loosened from the pizza stone, color flowing back into his knuckles. "Are you sure?"

Rudy read between the lines: *Are you okay?*

"Yeah." Rolling his shoulders back, he pressed a quick kiss to Mik's slack mouth. "They can wait a day. I'd rather stay here with you."

Where it was homey and safe and where Mik's essence infused every part of this home that was straight out of Rudy's dreams.

CHAPTER
TEN

The next morning, showered and dressed in track pants and a hoodie, Rudy leaned against Mik's bathroom doorjamb and watched Mik sleep, calling himself an idiot ten times over.

In the bright light of day—or rather, the dark predawn of a North American winter—last night's momentary panic was barely a blip of anxiety.

For a few minutes there, though, he'd felt boxed in. Like walls were closing in all around him, one at a time until there was no way out. And then there Mik had been, with his hat hair and his cheeks still red from the cold and the flannel shirt that was two sizes too big because “they're cozier that way,” according to him.

On the one hand, Rudy's restlessness hovered beneath the surface. On the other, he wanted nothing more than to stay curled up with Mik in his cute house and *live*, Bigfoot and all.

The two desires warred with each other, flaying him right down the middle.

His phone brightened on the nightstand. He snatched it up and tapped the text notification from Toshie, who was no doubt awake at this hour because . . . well, who the fuck knew?

TOSHIE

Hey, man. You didn't hear this from me, but you're my boss's top candidate for the role. Official verdict coming in the next few days. Stay tuned!

Rudy set the phone down gently and blew out a breath.

Problem was, he wasn't sure about the job anymore. He had Mik to consider now. Except . . . could he stay in Christmas Falls because of a guy? Their relationship was so new. It made no sense to change his plans for someone he'd just started dating. What if he stayed and their relationship fizzled and burned?

What if he left but missed out on something great?

There was no easy answer.

And it wasn't like Mik was just some guy. He was Mik. His Miki.

Thank god Toshie wouldn't need an answer right away. There were still two and a half months until the February fifteenth deadline. And, as Rudy knew better than most, anything could happen in two and a half months.

His phone brightened again. Another text. This one from his mom. Everyone was up at the ass crack of dawn today, it seemed.

Mom had sent a photo of a skinny waterfall tumbling silver-streaked over a series of rough-hewn rocks. The waterfall was lined with leafless trees that must've been lush and bright in the summer but were currently dull and drooping slightly with the weight of a light snowfall.

MOM

Dingmans Falls!! Isn't it pretty? We were there yesterday.

Rudy googled it. The second tallest waterfall in Pennsylvania. His parents must finally be making their way south, then.

Another photo arrived, this one a selfie of his parents, wearing matching rainbow beanies with orange pompoms and matching grins, standing in front of the waterfall. A pang hit Rudy in the chest, and for a moment, he was there with them, feeling the spray of the waterfall on his face, hearing the sound of the water clamoring into the pool beneath. The ground was damp under his boots and the air smelled loamy and clean. His parents stood on either side of him, Mom framing the perfect shot and Dad scouring the ground for natural materials for his artwork.

The ache to be there with them and experiencing something new was heady, and he grabbed onto the nightstand to steady himself. Mik rolled over in the bed with a snuffle-snore and hugged Rudy's pillow to his chest, making Rudy smile. Mik's alarm would be going off any minute, so Rudy let him sleep a little longer and went into the kitchen to make him a dirty chai latte.



MIK WASN'T sure what had happened with Rudy last night, but whatever it was, Rudy seemed to be over it. Mik never wanted to see that expression on Rudy's face again. Hell, he didn't even know what to call it aside from *caged bird*. His stomach had lurched at the sight, and he'd had to stop himself from flinging himself at Rudy and begging him to stay.

Mik wasn't wrong, was he? Rudy did have one foot out of town.

But why?

Rudy *had* stayed though, no begging required. And as they held hands and chatted quietly in the car on the way to hockey practice, Rudy appeared to be back to his usual self.

Once Rudy had parked, Mik followed him to the front door, taking his drink with him.

He couldn't believe Rudy had made him a dirty chai latte again. It was the tiniest of gestures that told Mik that Rudy had

been thinking about him. It shouldn't mean so much, but it did. Made his stomach go all squirmy with happiness.

Two of the players—Araya and Jersey—were on the ice already while others trickled in slowly from the locker room. This was his and Rudy's third week coaching, and now that they had two practices behind them, Mik felt a little more sure of himself in the role of coach, which had always been Josh's thing.

The team hadn't had any games since they'd begun coaching, though. The rec league played against other rec leagues in the area, and there weren't many, so Josh's team played one to two games per month. Their next one was this Friday, and Mik and Rudy had spent some time after Christmas shopping the day before putting together a plan for practice that would get the kids ready for Friday.

Once they had their skates on, Rudy handed him a hockey stick that he produced from . . . somewhere. Seriously, where had he stashed it? "Why don't you get started? I'm going to grab extra pucks. Maybe take them through a game of sharks and minnows?"

Sharks and minnows—also known as pom-pom-pullaway in hockey—was played without sticks, so Mik left his propped against the boards and got the kids organized. Once they'd lined up at the goal line, Mik selected four kids at random to be the sharks, and they settled between the blue lines.

"We all know the goal, right?" Mik asked the kids standing at the goal line. "Try to get across to the other side without one of the sharks touching you. If you do get touched, you join the sharks. Whoever makes it to the other end of the ice wins the round."

"What do we get if we win?" one of them asked.

Planting both hands on his hips, Mik thought about that. What kind of prize would get these kids motivated? Mik thought back to his own youth hockey days and said, "You get to sit out the drill of your choice. Everybody ready?"

"What about you, Coach Mik?"

Coach Mik. That certainly had a nice ring to it, didn't it?
"What about me?"

"Aren't you going to participate?"

Mik almost declined. In his experience, most coaches didn't participate in drills. But this was more of a warmup than a drill, so Mik joined the players at the goal line with an extra pep to his step and had to hold himself back from rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

He didn't have a whistle, which was *truly* a shame, so he went with one-two-three-go, which was just as effective, but not as fun. Everyone on the goal line burst into movement. Mik gave them a few seconds' head start—mostly because it'd be more of a challenge for him if there were more than four sharks between the blue lines—then took off after them.

He grinned so wide that the cold made his teeth ache. The thrill of competition fired in his blood, but he beat it back. This wasn't about him.

That didn't mean he didn't show off. Just a little.

Not that he had anyone to show off for, and—

Oh. Wait. There was Rudy, approaching with a crate of pucks.

Mik pushed off, keeping a steady pace with the slowest skaters of the bunch. He didn't want to outshine the players but neither did he want to perform badly. The kids would know that he was purposefully being inept, and there was a fine line between making them feel inadequate and wordlessly encouraging them to push themselves.

In his own Peewee days, Mik's dad had driven him the four hours to Chicago so he could attend a youth hockey camp organized by the city's NHL team. Most of the NHL players had acted as coaches, and they'd been incredibly kind and patient while also demonstrating skills that were slightly above a Peewee skills level, which had made Mik more determined than ever to improve.

That was what he was striving for here.

When he reached the first blue line, he made sure the sharks got almost, but not quite within reach of touching him and executed a couple of power turns in quick succession, safely making it past the second blue line at the same time as one other player.

Araya. Not a surprise.

Mik held out his hand for a fist bump. “Nice work.” The players were excited and laughing—because sharks and minnows was fun—and Mik handed out high fives and a “Good job, everyone. You guys are faster than I was at your age,” which puffed out some chests and pulled out pleased grins.

Rudy stepped onto the ice, toting his crate of pucks and wearing a whistle around his neck. How come he got one but not Mik?

“How was that for a warmup?” Rudy asked. “Feeling good? Ready to get to work?”

The kids whooped and hollered, already red-faced from exertion.

Rudy upended the crate, sending pucks scattering in every direction. “Let’s practice our stickhandling.” Bean bags also fell out of the crate, and Rudy used his hockey stick to position three lines of bean bags, with six bean bags in each line, set a couple of feet apart. “Grab your sticks,” he instructed the players. “You know what to do.”

Indeed, they did, falling into three separate queues. The player at the head of the line went first, stickhandling his puck as he weaved in and around the bean bags.

Mik joined Rudy at the boards. He looked *massive* on his skates. Dressed in track pants, a hoodie, and a windbreaker with Arizona NHL’s logo stitched over the left breast—the final team Rudy had been traded to—hands shoved in his pockets, and that whistle around his neck, Rudy gave off an air of confidence that made Mik want to rub himself up all over him.

“Have fun?” Rudy asked, a smile playing around his lips.

“That’s the most fun I’ve had in a long time.” Mik paused to truly think about that. “Well, outside of lazy morning sex with you.”

Rudy bumped their shoulders together. “Don’t say sex while we’re in the presence of a bunch of preteens.”

“Right. So. Change of topic, then. What do you think the team’s chances are on Friday?”

“Honestly? I think we’ve got a secret weapon in Araya.”

“Hm,” Mik said, distracted, because the player himself was up at bat, so to speak, and he wove around the bean bags with ease, executing clean power turns, and never losing sight of the puck. He was fast too. “How come Araya’s not in the competitive program?”

Rudy shrugged. “You’d have to ask him.”

Once every player had their turn, Rudy separated them into two groups for a scrimmage. Mik grabbed his stick from where he’d propped it earlier and skated to one of the kids. “Hey. It’s Teddy, right?”

The boy looked awestruck to be singled out and a little surprised that Mik remembered his name after only two practices. “Wow. Hi. Yeah. I’m Teddy. Teddy Jersey. And yes, before you ask, that’s my real last name.”

Mik bit back a laugh. “Teddy, has anyone mentioned that your stickhandling hand should be your top hand?”

Teddy’s shoulders slumped. “Yeah. I know I use my bottom hand. Coach Gilmore said so. I’ve tried using my top hand, but it just doesn’t feel right.”

“It’s not a bad thing,” Mik told him. “You’ve got great control of the puck from what I saw. The problem with stickhandling with your bottom hand is that it pulls the top of your stick almost up to your armpit.” He demonstrated with his own stick. “Which pulls the stick closer to your body and you have to look down to see the puck. If you stickhandle with your top hand . . .” Mik gripped the top of his stick with one hand. “And your bottom hand goes a little lower, right here, then your stick is extended from your body, and you can see

the puck without actually having to look down. That will give you an advantage during a game, because instead of watching the puck, you're looking for your teammates. Want to try a couple of drills with me before Coach Snow puts you in the game?"

"Sure."

Mik gestured to Rudy that he was taking Teddy aside for a little one-on-one. Rudy gave him a thumbs-up and got the game started.

"Okay," Mik said when they were tucked into a corner behind the goal line, where they wouldn't get in anyone's way. "Let's start with a simple drill. Without moving your feet, can you alternate stickhandling the puck in front of you and then to the side, using your top hand to stickhandle?"

Fifteen minutes later, it was clear that Teddy *could* stickhandle with his top hand, but for whatever reason, it was instinct for him to do it with his bottom one. "There you go. You did great. A little more practice, and you'll be stickhandling with your top hand without even thinking about it."

"I hope so," Teddy murmured.

"You can also practice at home. If there's space in your living room, practice with a rolled-up sock or something else that's soft so you don't break anything valuable." Mik eyed the parents in the stands. "Or maybe do it in your garage."

Teddy chuckled. "Thanks, Coach."

"Go ahead and join the game."

Later, when practice ended and the kids headed to the changing room, Mik waved goodbye to the parents and sat in the bottom row of the stands, next to a pile of casseroles and pots of stew and chili and Tupperware of baked pasta dishes that the parents had left behind for Josh and Meredith.

"They've got enough on their plate without having to worry about feeding themselves and little Eagan," one of the moms had said. "You'll give them our love?"

Rudy had stood there, sweetly baffled, holding a foil-covered meatloaf, everything else packed into bags at his feet.

“We will,” Mik had told her. “Thank you for this. I know Josh and Mer will appreciate it.”

“And we made them a card,” Araya had said, stepping forward. He’d waved a homemade card at them, basically a folded-up piece of yellow construction paper that the entire team had signed.

Rudy hadn’t seemed to know what to do with that either. But that was Christmas Falls for you. People looked out for one another.

Mik had winked at Araya. “I’ll make sure they get it.”

The Zamboni came out, and Mik watched it for a few minutes, sipping from the Thermos that had kept his dirty chai latte hot.

He’d always felt that retiring from pro hockey when he did had been the right decision. But that didn’t mean that being here, where he’d learned to skate and play, didn’t hit him in the chest with a lightning bolt of nostalgia.

And watching Teddy Jersey properly stickhandle during the game?

That had been satisfying as fuck.

Rudy appeared in his peripheral, and he sat next to Mik with a satisfied sigh. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Mik said. “Where’d you go?”

“I was talking to one of the parents. He wanted to make sure that his son sees ice time on Friday.”

“Ah, hockey parents.” He held his hand out for a fist bump, then reached to untie his skates.

“Why are you unlacing your skates?” Rudy asked.

“Um, because practice is over?” Mik said slowly.

Rudy rose, grabbed his stick, and handed Mik his own. “Come on.”

“Come on . . . what? The ice is being resurfaced.”

“Only half. The driver said we can use the other half for the next thirty minutes.”

“Okay, but . . . for what?”

“A little one-on-one,” Rudy said with an eyebrow waggle. “Let’s see if your slap-shot form has gotten any better in the past few weeks.”

Mik flipped him off. “Get frosted, Rudy.”

Rudy laughed all the way onto the ice.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

On the Saturday before Lilian Gilmore's party, Rudy found himself in Mr. and Mrs. Gilmore's home with Mik, sorting through the copious amounts of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* decorations they'd purchased at Party Garage so they could finally decorate. With the party only a week away, it was now or never, and since they both had the afternoon off until they were needed at their respective pubs—or rather, at the Brew and Cider Festival at Sugar Plum Park, where Frosty's and Rudolph's each had a booth—they had exactly four hours to get the house looking like Jack and Sally threw up all over it.

With maybe a little birthday cheer thrown in.

“What do you think of the Jack and Sally inflatables?” Mik asked. “Think they'll scare the children?”

“I think all of this will scare the children. It's no worse than your Bigfoot, though.”

The front door opened. Josh let himself in, Meredith a step behind him.

“Hey,” Josh said, helping Meredith out of her coat. “We thought you could use an extra set of hands.”

“We brought cookies.” Meredith held up a Tupperware container. “We came from the cookie exchange at Dancing Sugarplums, so we've got gingerbread and shortbread and everything in between.”

Mik took the cookies and hugged the container to his chest as though he was claiming them all for himself.

He probably was.

“Where’s my nephew?” Mik asked, peering around Josh and Meredith.

“With my parents,” Meredith said, stealing the cookies back with a glower. “Trust me, you don’t want him here while you’re decorating. Everything is either food or a toy to him. He would’ve already flung himself at the Halloween Town arch out front and deflated it.” She took the cookies to the couch in the living room, managing to find a corner that wasn’t taken over by bags of decorations. Rudy rushed over and moved them onto the floor, giving her room to stretch out.

She sent him a tired smile. “Thanks.”

“Should you be here?” Mik asked her. “You’re supposed to be on bed rest.”

“It’s not bed rest, remember? It’s—”

“Right. No heavy lifting.”

Another eye roll. “That wasn’t what I said, but sure. Let’s go with that.” Meredith removed the lid from the container and pulled out a reindeer cookie complete with candy eyes.

“Why are you here if you can’t do anything strenuous?” Mik asked.

“Oh, I’m just here to boss you around.”

Mik eyed his brother. “Why’d you bring her?”

Meredith playfully kicked him in the leg. “No cookies for you. Besides, my ass was going numb sitting in bed at home.”

“Because it’s not going to go numb sitting on a couch?”

She flipped him off.

Josh grabbed a bag and joined Rudy at the dining room table, where he was sorting some of the decorations into two piles: things to put up and things to set aside for the day of the party, like paper plates and cups.

Rudy inspected his best friend. Josh had looked haggard ever since Meredith had been diagnosed with preeclampsia.

On Tuesday, when Rudy and Mik had stopped by his house to drop off the meals after practice, Josh had taken one look at the bags of food and the homemade card and started to cry, silent tears of exhaustion and gratitude overtaking him before he'd pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes and sucked in a ragged breath. Rudy and Mik had held him for a long time after that, standing in the kitchen in a group hug while Josh gave them their weight and let them hold him up for a bit.

Today, he appeared several steps beyond exhausted. Eyes bloodshot, bags beneath his eyes, skin pale, shoulders stooped. A man at the end of his rope.

“Hey,” Rudy said quietly, drawing Josh’s gaze. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Josh gave him a grim smile. “It’s been a week, you know?”

“How’s Eagan?”

He’d been home sick with a fever when Rudy and Mik had dropped off the food.

“He’s fine.” Josh pulled a black-and-silver garland out of a bag. “Whatever it was seems to have passed. But he was home with me all week. He wasn’t sleeping well, so he was cranky during the day, and his naps weren’t great. Mer feels guilty that she couldn’t do much to help, and I feel guilty that Mik had to cover most of my shifts at the pub. I had to miss our second cocktail hour because Eagan wouldn’t go down and . . .” He waved a hand and blew out a long breath.

“I thought you were taking a step back from the pub,” Rudy said.

“Yeah, but not this far back. I still want to be involved. There are only so many times Mik can cover for me before he hits burnout.”

“That’s what he’s got your new junior manager for. And didn’t he just hire a new server?”

“No, I know. But they’re still learning. And—”

“Josh.” Rudy squeezed his wrist. “You had an off week. Don’t beat yourself up about it. Mik isn’t. He understands.”

“Yeah, I know.”

They both looked Mik’s way. He’d found a long red wig in one of the bags—which, come to think of it, why the fuck had they bought Sally’s wig?—and draped it over his head, and he appeared to be performing a one-man skit for Meredith that had her howling with laughter.

Rudy’s heart lightened at the sight, and when he caught Mik’s gaze, Mik smiled cheerily, his eyes bright, the wig crooked. Cookie crumbs peppered the corner of his mouth, and Rudy simultaneously wanted to kiss them off and give him a noogie.

Rudy took the other end of Josh’s garland, and together they brought it over to the mantelpiece above the fireplace.

“So . . .” Josh said, sliding a sly glance his way. “How are things going with Mik?”

Keeping his gaze on where he was securing the garland, Rudy opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

Josh’s smile turned into a frown. “Is it bad?”

“What? No, it’s not bad. It’s great. Everything’s . . . great,” Rudy finished lamely. “I just don’t know how to talk to you about this. He’s your brother. It’s weird.”

Josh shrugged. “If you say so.”

Rudy grabbed a box of black ornaments painted with silver glitter off the table. “What do you think? Should we get a tree and decorate it with these?”

“What if we hang them off the garland?”

Rudy side-eyed Josh as they did so, and finally asked the question he’d been holding on to for a while.

“You’re sure you’re okay with me and Mik dating?”

Before his first date with Mik, Rudy had texted Josh about it, figuring he had a right to know.

So I thought you should know . . . I'm kinda dating your brother.

Josh's response had been a very succinct *Figured*. And that had been that. No drama or questions. No grilling him about his intentions.

"It's not weird for you?"

Josh huffed a small laugh. "Mik asked me the same thing. No, it's not weird. I'm happy for you. I know how long you've been crushing on him."

"No, you don't." Rudy squinted at him. "I was super stealthy with my attraction."

"Sure, Rudy. Sure."

Rudy's gaze trailed to Mik again. He still wore the wig. He looked ridiculous and cute, and Rudy committed the shape of him to memory, his heart already cracking with pending loss. Mik had finished his one-man skit and had gotten to work, reading the instructions that came with the Jack and Sally inflatables. Mik's gaze caught his again and he smiled, sending Rudy's heart into his throat.

Rudy sent him a wink and got back to work.



BY THE TIME THE BREW & Cider Festival ended later that night, Mik was peopled out.

Not something he'd ever thought he'd be.

But after decorating his parents' house for the party, vacuuming up stray glitter, throwing away packaging, and spending a couple of hours at Frosty's before working the booth at the festival? He was done for.

The booths had closed down for the night and Sugar Plum Park had cleared out aside from a few stragglers and a handful of skaters making use of the outdoor rink. Snow crunching

under his boots, Mik walked over to a bench, plopped onto it, and released a long breath.

Taking out his phone, he checked his missed notifications and found a text from his mom. She'd sent a selfie of her and Dad. They stood on a beach, the sun setting behind them. Mom wore a massive sunhat and Dad looked sunburned all to hell. But they were grinning as though they'd won the lottery.

Or as though they'd escaped Christmas Falls during festival season. Mik could do with blue skies and warm weather right now, as the bench numbed his ass through his pants.

He texted back a heart emoji, only a smidge jealous of their warmer weather, and contemplated his next move.

Home. Home would be good. Dinner and a beer and snuggling with Rudy.

But something kept him rooted to the bench. A sense of expectation he couldn't explain. It was like the NHL draft, waiting for his name to be called with a sense of urgency that had made his knee bounce. This sense of expectation wasn't much different.

Near the park entrance, a group of Santas laughed uproariously. Tonight had been the Santa Crawl—basically a pub crawl with everyone dressed as Santa for some ho-ho-holiday fun! Mik was sorry he'd missed the fun at Frosty's, but it was equally entertaining watching Santas appear from every direction as they went home.

“Hey.”

Mik grinned at the familiar voice. Rudy appeared next to him, leaning over the back of the bench to grin at him.

And that sense of expectation and urgency quieted, leaving behind completeness and inevitability.

Rudy had found him.

Heart threatening to catapult out of his chest, Mik kissed the corner of his mouth. “Hi. How was your evening?”

“Busy. And I still have glitter under my fingernails from that banner Josh and I hung in the living room.” Rudy straightened. “Come on. Let’s go skating.”

Mik wiggled his feet. “The skate rental is closed, but I guess I could slide around in my boots.”

Rudy crouched to pick up . . .

Two pairs of skates? One of them belonged to Mik; the other he recognized as Rudy’s.

Mik leaned over the back of the bench and peered down. “Do you have a magic Mary Poppins bag or something or do you just always carry those around with you?”

Even in the low light of the park, Rudy’s eyes danced. “Want to keep talking about it or do you want to go skating?”

“I want to go skating,” Mik said, falling into step beside Rudy as they made their way along the path to the skating rink. “But also—how?” He made a show of digging through Rudy’s pockets.

“Stop,” Rudy said, chuckling. He hooked an arm around Mik’s neck and brought him in for a kiss that had Mik’s toes curling in his boots. Mik laughed into it, the blood pumping through his veins and his chest full of happiness that sparkled as bright as the glitter under Rudy’s fingernails.

They only broke apart when a gaggle of loud teenagers ambled past them, heading out of the park. One of them wolf whistled.

Snort-giggling, Mik tucked his head in the juncture of Rudy’s neck and shoulder. “We could go home instead. Where it’s warm and cozy and I have a big inviting bed on which to do fun things.”

“Or . . .” Rudy nipped at his ear and began walking, forcing Mik to walk backward. “You could go skating with me.”

“If you call my slap-shot form lazy again . . .”

“Alas, I’m short a hockey stick.”

“No room for it in your secret Mary Poppins bag?”

The air fogged with Rudy’s breath as he let out a laugh, and a piece of Mik’s heart cracked away to lodge itself with his. “I’ve got more important things in there.” Rudy’s hands slipped to Mik’s ass. “Gatorade. Lube.”

“Good supplies to have while doing fun things in my big inviting bed.” Pulling away, Mik tugged him in the other direction. “Shall we?”

“Nope.” Rudy continued toward the skating rink, towing Mik with him. “Skating.”

“Fine,” Mik grumbled, secretly pleased that Rudy wanted to spend time with him that didn’t involve sex.

In short order, they had their skates on and were circling the rink lazily, hands held loosely between them. There were only a few other people, mostly couples and a pack of four teenagers. The night was starry and cold, but Mik felt warm and cared for and like nobody else existed except for the two of them.

Rudy turned to skate backward and took Mik’s gloved hands in his. “Now that it’s been a few hockey practices, have you thought more about it?”

“Thought of what?”

“Coaching.”

Mik stared at him. “Not really?” he said, aware it sounded more like a question.

“You seemed to have fun.”

“It’s lots of fun.” He swung their arms between them. “And I know coaching is a logical path for hockey players, but . . . I don’t know. I . . . It’s . . . It’s Josh’s thing.”

Rudy made a skeptical sound. “You keep saying that.”

“Well, it is. What about you? Think you’ll coach alongside Josh next season?”

“Nah.” Rudy’s chuckle sounded forced and his gaze slid to the side. “I’ll leave the coaching to your brother. Hey, did I

ever tell you that I lived in a small town in Michigan when I was a kid, and they had an annual Halloween decorating contest?”

“Uh . . .” Thrown by the abrupt change in topic, Mik blinked. “No?”

“The decorations were epic,” Rudy went on. “Think Christmas Falls but Halloween-obsessed. Your Bigfoot would’ve fit right in.”

Mik scowled. “My Bigfoot fits in right here.”

Rudy’s smile was indulgent. “Okay, Miki.”

Setting that topic aside for now, Mik said, “Did you ever resent your parents? For moving you around so much?”

“No, I . . .” Rudy broke off, his gaze going distant. His skating slowed. Mik bumped into him and they came to a standstill while others went around them. “Actually, yeah.” Rudy rubbed his jaw. “I’d forgotten about it, but I did, probably when I was . . . nine, maybe? Ten? Eleven? Somewhere around there. You know that age where you want to go off with your friends without your parents hanging around to supervise? But I couldn’t do that because I was always the new kid, and after a while, making friends seemed pointless. So, yeah. I did resent them for a little bit.”

“But not anymore?” Mik asked, his stomach cramping as it always did when Rudy talked about his rootless childhood.

Rudy shook his head. “I got to see so much of the United States. Plus, in the end, it brought my parents and me closer. And they always made sure that wherever we were, there was a hockey team for me to play on.”

“You didn’t make friends with your teammates?”

“It was the same situation there. Always the new kid.”

“Guess it’s a good thing you ended up in Christmas Falls then, isn’t it?” Mik pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “You’ve got so many friends; you probably don’t know what to do with them.”

“I . . . what? No, I don’t.”

“Sure you do. Josh. My parents. Gran. Joelle and Holly at Jolly Java. Frank. Craig at Tidings & Joy. He thinks you’re BFFs now after the whole cranberry thing, by the way. Oh, and that guy who has a crush on your server. What’s his name? Trevor?”

“Travis? I don’t know that I’d call us friends. I’m just the bartender he tells his love life woes to.”

“He definitely considers you a friend,” Mik told him. “I could tell when I saw you together at cocktail hour. And of course . . .” Threading his fingers beneath his chin, Mik batted his eyelashes. “Don’t forget about me.”

“I couldn’t even if I wanted to, Miki,” Rudy said with more seriousness than the situation warranted.

Then his mouth was on Mik’s and he forgot about everything except for the sensation of their cold lips gliding together, giving himself completely over to Rudy and the magic of the stars.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

For the following Tuesday's hockey practice, Mik came prepared. He rose with Rudy a whole fifteen minutes before his own alarm was due to go off, showered, dressed, stood at Rudy's elbow while Rudy made him a dirty chai latte, and was armed with research. Knowledge was power and all that.

Araya and Teddy Jersey were already on the ice when Mik and Rudy arrived. The commotion from the changing room indicated that the rest of the team was getting ready, and Mik had a sudden thought as he sat in one of the stadium seats next to Rudy. "Who unlocks the door and lets the players in?"

"One of the center's admin assistants starts at six."

"Poor thing."

Rudy bumped his elbow. "As if you don't know what starting work at six a.m. looks like."

"I do. Which is why I sympathize. I don't miss morning skate, let me tell you. Do you?"

Rudy bent at the waist to tie his skates with a sort of absentmindedness that told Mik he was thinking.

"I kind of do," he finally admitted with the air of someone having an ah-ha moment. Straightening, he leaned his forearms on his knees and watched Araya and Teddy Jersey circle the rink. "Not the early wake-up call or even the skating necessarily. It's more the routine of it. Having somewhere to be on a set schedule, seeing the same people every day, knowing what was expected of me."

That was an interesting answer from someone who'd spent most of his life being shuffled from one place to another. Did Rudy even realize that he craved permanency?

Mik wanted to give him that permanency. So, so badly. He wanted to reach out and offer Rudy his hand and tell him he was safe here.

That he was home.

Here and now wasn't the place, though, as evidenced by the hockey players who trudged out of the changing room in full gear, laughing and talking and chirping each other loud enough to wake the half-asleep parents in the stands.

Practice started off much like last week's: a game of sharks and minnows that Araya won again, some stickhandling drills—Teddy Jersey was still struggling, but he self-corrected often—and a scrimmage.

Before the latter got started, Mik pointed a parent out to Rudy.

“Remind me: is that Araya's mom? In the puffy turquoise coat?”

Rudy nodded. “I think so?”

The question mark at the end of that sentence didn't instill Mik with much confidence, but he made his way over to her anyway.

She sat in the stands, about halfway up, and smiled questioningly at Mik when he picked his way down her row on his skates.

“Are you Araya's mom?”

“Yes. I'm Tracy Araya.” Her brow creased. “Is everything all right with Liam?”

“More than,” Mik assured. He took a seat to her left, leaving an empty one between them so he didn't crowd her. “He's great. Nice kid, friends with everyone, and he's good. Really good.”

She blinked. “Oh. Well, thank you.”

“Can I ask . . . Why isn’t he in the competitive program? Actually, rewind a second.” He chuckled at himself and held out a hand. “Hi. I’m Mik.”

“I know.” She laughed as well, her blue eyes glinting. “Coach Gilmore’s brother.”

He barely managed to hang on to his smile. Why was that always the first place people went? “That’s me.”

“Liam was excited when he heard that Coach Gilmore would be coaching his team, and he was bummed when he couldn’t do it anymore. But having you and Coach Snow replace him . . . He’s gotten to meet three NHL players, and he’s been over the moon about it. He has a poster of you on the wall of his bedroom.”

“Me?” Not Josh?

“You, Ashton Yager, the Stanton brothers . . .” She went on to name several NHL players who’d come out as not straight in the past ten-plus years.

It sparked an idea in the back of his mind. Or, at least, the beginnings of one, but he parked it for now and refocused on the conversation.

“Anyway,” she said, waving a hand. “You were asking about the competitive program?”

“Yeah.” Mik angled himself to face her. “I was wondering why Liam isn’t in it. He’s good enough. A quick thinker, fast on his feet—or skates, as it were. He’s running circles around the other players. I looked into what’s involved in the competitive program and it is a little more intense, but if it’s something he’s interested in—”

Tracy held up a hand and he shut his mouth.

“I’ll stop you right there,” she said kindly. “Coach Gilmore approached us about transferring Liam to the competitive program as well, but he wasn’t interested.”

“It is a lot. He’d be on the ice an average of three times a week between practices and home and away games,” Mik told her, repeating the information he’d gotten from the

competitive team's coach during their phone call yesterday—the man who'd armed him with research.

Tracy nodded. "Right. And Liam considered it for a while, but ultimately he decided to stick with the recreational league, and his dad and I respect his decision. He just wants to play hockey and have fun."

"I can respect that as well. I just wanted to make sure you knew it was an option for him. Anyway. I'll leave you to your book." He rose and nodded at the e-reader in her lap.

He was just about to join Rudy in refereeing the game when a man not much older than himself intercepted him. He was big and burly, his eyes gentle, and he wore a ball cap branded with the Vancouver Orcas logo—a Canadian AHL team. He was one of the players' dads, though for the life of him, Mik couldn't remember which.

"Mik Gilmore?"

"Yeah."

The man held out a hand. "Scott Jersey. Teddy's dad. I wanted to say thank you for what you did last week. It meant a lot to Teddy that you took the time to coach him one-on-one."

"I was happy to. He's a great kid, and he really stepped up in last week's game."

"The thing is . . ." Scott rubbed his jaw. "Teddy wants to play in the competitive league, but he doesn't feel ready for it, and he's afraid he'll slow the team down, which is why he wanted me to register him for the rec league this season."

"He wouldn't be slowing them down. He's an asset to this team and he'd be an asset to the competitive team."

Scott's gaze strayed to the game, a smile forming as he looked at his son. "Maybe he'll believe that coming from you, because he sure as hell doesn't believe it from me."

Mik squared his shoulders. "Was it something someone said that made him think he wasn't good enough? Did someone from the competitive team—"

“No.” Scott’s smile dimmed. “Nothing like that. Teddy knows he’s not as fast as some of the other guys and his stickhandling isn’t where it should be.”

“Those are skills that can be improved on, though.”

“Right. Which brings me to my question. Do you offer private coaching?”

Mik gaped for a second. “Do I . . . what?”

“You were great with him last week, and Teddy has been buzzing about you giving him one-on-one coaching all week. He’s been practicing his stickhandling in every spare moment he has.” A proud glint entered Scott’s eyes. “Teddy thrives under private tutelage, and if you offer private coaching, I’d love for you to work with him in the new year so that he’s got the confidence to join the competitive league next season.”

And just like that, that nameless something Mik had been reaching for clicked into place. Clarity sharpened his vision and goose bumps traced a path down his spine.

“If it’s not something you offer or would consider offering, do you happen to know anyone in the area who—”

“I’ll do it,” Mik blurted, his heart thumping madly.

“Really?”

“I’d love to.”

“Thank you.” Scott’s shoulders slumped, relief etched over his features. “Thank you so much. Teddy’s going to be thrilled. Can we grab a coffee later this week and we can talk about your pricing and put a schedule in place?”

A mad little thrill zipped through Mik, and he had to stop himself from bouncing on his feet as he and Scott swapped numbers and scheduled a coffee date at Jolly Java to discuss details.

As Scott thanked him again, smile as wide as any Mik had ever seen, and grabbed a seat, Mik put *research private hockey coaching fees* on his mental to-do list.

It was with a bounce to his step that he finally joined Rudy, an extra oomph to his smile that he fist-bumped the players after practice, and a high-pitched voice that he bid goodbye to the parents and guardians.

When he turned back to Rudy, the man was staring at him with an eyebrow raised.

“What?”

“Did I put too much espresso in your latte?”

Throwing his head back, Mik laughed, a pressure he hadn’t known existed easing off his chest. “No. I got a job.”

“You got a job,” Rudy repeated slowly. “Doing . . . what?”

“Private coaching,” Mik said, sitting down to unlace his skates.

“Coaching? But . . .” Rudy sat next to him, their shoulders brushing as he untied his skates. “You said you weren’t interested in coaching.”

“I know, but I was thinking of coaching in terms of this.” Mik waved a hand at the rink. “What you just did.”

“What *we* did.”

“It was coaching a team that didn’t appeal to me.” He dropped his skates and wiggled into his boots. “I’m not even sure why, to be honest. But then Teddy Jersey’s dad asked me about private coaching, and it just made sense. I have a lot of fun coaching with you, but what I’ve liked the best was coaching Teddy last week. Remember when I took him aside?”

Rudy nodded.

“I liked seeing his face light up when something clicked. I think . . .” Looking away, Mik played with the zipper of his jacket. “I think I’d be good at it. I think I could make a difference.”

Rudy bumped their shoulders. “You’d be amazing at it. Congrats, Miki.”

The goose bumps erupted again, shivering down his arms to make his fingers tingle.

And Rudy's faith in him . . . it meant a lot. More than he ever would've thought possible. More than he could express. He was used to people having blanket faith in him—his family had always encouraged him and believed in him. But he was also used to people—sportscasters, fans, reporters, analysts, bloggers—second-guessing his every move and comparing him to Josh.

Rudy had never compared him to Josh, and Mik wished he had the words to tell him how thankful he was for that. Hell, he wished he had the words to tell Rudy that they had something special. That he was sorry it had taken him so long to see him, but he was all in now and thinking ahead to their future Christmases, and would Rudy please step that foot he had out the door back into Christmas Falls?

“How come you never considered private coaching before?” Rudy asked, jolting Mik back to the present. He stood, grabbed their skates, and offered Mik a hand. “Private coaching isn't uncommon.”

Mik thought about that as they made their way into the reception area of the community center, where they'd wait until all the players had left to ensure everyone got picked up without issue.

“I guess because coaching was always Josh's thing,” he eventually said, sounding like a broken record. Shoving his hands in his pockets, Mik leaned against the registration desk. “And I wanted something different than he had.”

“There's nothing wrong with wanting what he has.”

Mik opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again with a snap. He stared at Rudy. Replayed the past decade in his mind.

Had he fed their rivalry for years because he'd been unconsciously jealous that Josh had Rudy? Had he sabotaged himself because he hadn't wanted to want Rudy, because for once he wanted something of his own that wasn't the same as Josh's?

That was fucking mind-boggling.

“I know that,” he rasped. “But my whole life I’ve had what Josh has. Our birthdays are less than a week apart, so our birthday parties were always on the same day. Family would always get us the same presents, and that was usually whatever Josh was into. And because we’ve always been close, everyone assumed we were into the same things, from video games to sports to favorite snacks. I mean, I guess the sports thing was true.”

Rudy snorted a laugh. Now that all the kids had left, he grabbed Mik’s hand and tugged him outside, where the sun was finally up but it was cold as hell.

“Even when we were both in the NHL,” Mik went on, unable to stop the word vomit now that he’d started, “it was Josh Gilmore’s little brother this and Gilmore’s baby bro that. None of that is Josh’s fault, obviously. He’s the best person I know. But . . .” He huffed out a breath that clouded the air. “I guess I thought that by wanting something different, people would start to see me as me instead of as Josh’s shadow.”

Cheeks pinked from the cold, Rudy stopped them in front of his car. Then, a pair of skates hanging over each shoulder, he cupped Mik’s face in his chilly hands and kissed him.

Mik opened instinctively and clutched at Rudy’s coat to steady himself. Cold lips warmed quickly, and Mik moaned at the taste of Rudy, at how he kissed him so slowly, leaving Mik lightheaded and giddy.

Rudy pulled back an inch, snuffled their noses together, and whispered, “I see you,” in the space between them.

“I know,” Mik murmured, his heart giving three quick thumps before resettling into its normal rhythm. “I know.”

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Working on the staff schedule for Rudolph's was Rudy's least favorite aspect of the job. Trying to consider everyone's availability and any requested days off, plus factoring in staff who didn't get along and ensuring they didn't end up on the same shift was like juggling eight balls at once.

Rudy had worked out a system where he only did the scheduling once a month to save himself the hassle. So mid-month, he sat at his desk at Rudolph's for a couple of hours and created the schedule for the following month. If any of his staff ran into any last-minute issues and needed to swap shifts with someone else, Rudy let them handle that themselves, as long as the paper copy of the schedule that was pinned to the corkboard in the staff room was updated.

Closing his eyes, he squeezed the bridge of his nose and let out a breath through gritted teeth.

Literally everyone wanted January first off. To sleep off their New Year's Eve hangovers, no doubt.

His phone rang, offering him a welcome distraction, and he answered with a moody, "Hi, Mom," without looking at the caller ID.

"No one's ever called me Mom before, but I guess I can get into it if that's what you're into."

Rudy frowned at his computer screen. "Toshie? Shit, sorry. I thought you were my mom."

“So I gathered. All good, man? You sound like you haven’t seen sunshine in days.”

“Sure feels like I’ve been cooped up in this office for days. You ever tried putting together a schedule when everyone wants the same day off?”

“Can’t say that I have. This a bad time? I have good news if you can put your scheduling aside for a few minutes.”

Rudy sat straighter. “Shoot.”

“I know Fatima said we’d get back to you within two weeks, but she wanted to interview other candidates, which is why it’s taken a little longer for me to get back to you.”

Had it been more than two weeks since Rudy’s interview? Honestly, he’d been so wrapped up in Mik that he hadn’t noticed the passing of time.

“So I apologize about that,” Toshie continued, “but the good news is . . . buddy, the job’s yours.”

Mingled excitement and indecision swirled in Rudy’s gut, and he couldn’t decide if Toshie’s news was truly good news or not.

“Wow, I . . .”

Before Mik, he would’ve jumped on this opportunity.

Now . . . Now there was Mik.

“You need to know by February fifteenth, right?”

On his computer, a notification popped up reminding him of his dinner with Mik tonight, after the dinner rush at their pubs. Was it irony or fate that Mik was virtually intruding on his conversation about a new job that would take him out of state?

“Well . . .” Toshie drew the word out. “Things have changed a little on that front. We originally wanted to launch the podcast in September, but my bosses now want to launch in August to build a fan base and start airing in the lead-up to college hockey season. Which means we need to get going on

this earlier than expected, and we need your answer by Christmas.”

The bottom fell out from Rudy’s world. “Christmas. That’s . . . eleven days away.”

“Right. And actually, our offices are closed as of noon on Christmas Eve, so we’d need to know by noon on the twenty-fourth.”

Ten days. Rudy only had ten days to make a decision that could change everything.

Fuck.



“YOU’RE sure you’re going to be okay?” Mik asked, grabbing his coat from the small office tucked behind the bar at Frosty’s.

“Promise.” Juan practically shooed him out of the office and into the dining room, currently about three-quarters full with diners enjoying the food, beer, and guitar player Mik had hired to sing holiday covers this week. “And if I run into a snag, I have your number,” Juan said loud enough so Mik could hear him over “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” Appropriate, given Mik was about to ask a certain someone to spend Christmas with him. And next Christmas and the one after that.

Not that Mik was proposing marriage, not this early in their relationship. But he wanted to have an honest conversation about where they were and where they wanted to go. Tonight was the night he spelled out exactly what he wanted, and what he wanted was firmly in the let’s-make-this-official camp.

He and Rudy were going to have The Talk because Mik needed to know where he stood. Needed to know if Rudy had one foot out of town or if Mik was making up fears where there shouldn’t be any.

There was more shooing, this time toward the front door.

“If the distributor calls about the—”

“Forward it to your cell,” Juan said. “I know.”

“And I’m expecting a late delivery from—”

“I *know*.” Juan gave a little laugh and opened the door. “I’ve got this. Trust me.”

“No, I do. Obviously.” It was the first time Mik would be leaving Juan to manage the pub on his own for more than a couple of hours. On a Thursday, no less, which were always busy. Everyone knew that Thursdays were the new Friday.

Leaving Juan in charge was a little like what he imagined it felt like for a parent to drop their child off at daycare for the first time. Guilt, anxiousness, and a new sense of freedom.

“Just, like, don’t fuck it up.”

Juan guffawed and shoved him out the door. “Enjoy your night and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The door closed in Mik’s face.

Staring at it, Mik huffed, more amused than anything. “Well. Okay, then.” He zipped up his coat, removed his hat and gloves from his pocket, put them on, and headed home.

He’d just finished making dinner when Rudy walked in the door, and Mik’s nerves lit up like fireworks.

“Hey,” Rudy called from the foyer, his voice lacking its usual warmth, and Mik heard the *zzzz* of a zipper being lowered.

“Leave that on!”

“Leave what?” came the confused response. “My coat?”

“Yup.” Mik removed the sandwiches from the panini press and licked garlic aioli off his thumb. “And your boots. Or maybe take your boots off and put them back on over here so you don’t track snow and water through the house. Bring your hat too.”

“Are we going caroling?” The way Rudy asked made it seem like caroling was on par with murdering baby animals.

“Because I can think of better ways to spend my evening.”

“Nope.”

“Are we finally doing the holiday house light-tour thing? Because I gotta be honest—looking at other people’s decorations isn’t really my thing.”

“Yeah, I know you don’t care about that. You’re obsessed with Bigfoot.”

“Not how I’d put it,” Rudy said, closer this time.

Mik looked over his shoulder as Rudy came into the kitchen and tilted his head back for a kiss. “Hi.”

“Hi. What are you making?”

“Dinner. Or a late-night snack, I guess. Did you eat dinner?”

“I had a little something hours ago, just to tide me over.” Rudy wrapped his arms around Mik’s waist from behind and rested his chin on his shoulder. “That looks good.”

The rumbling words in Mik’s ear made him shiver. “It’s just turkey, cheese, and apples with garlic aioli on thick-sliced twelve-grain from Ginger’s Breads.”

“Apples in a sandwich?”

“Trust me. You’ll never not put apples in your sandwich again.” He’d also sliced carrots and celery and added them to the plates along with little ramekins of ranch sauce for dipping.

He turned his head to press a quick kiss to Rudy’s mouth, then extracted himself to dress in his own layers. “That one’s yours,” he said, pushing one plate toward Rudy and grabbing the other along with two bottles of beer. “Follow me.”

Mik led them out the Dutch kitchen door and onto the screened porch. He’d had the space heaters going for almost an hour, so it was warmish, which was good, because they couldn’t eat sandwiches with gloves on without it getting rather messy. He flicked a switch, and the fairy lights he’d strung up when he’d bought the house burst to life.

Cozy couches lined the perimeter of the porch, draped with furniture covers for the winter. From his basement, he'd brought up the iron table for two and matching chairs that his parents had gifted him as a housewarming present, and he'd added two place settings, glasses of water, and one of those fake candle things that turned on via a switch on the bottom. It was cute, though, wrapped in a sparkly red ribbon and sitting in the center of a dinner-plate-sized wreath, so it was Christmassy at least.

"Wow." Rudy whistled low. "It looks nice out here, Miki. What's the occasion?"

They sat across from each other, and Mik tried not to fidget in his seat as his nerves exploded in his chest. "No occasion. Just . . ." He jerked a shoulder. "I wanted to do something nice for you."

Rudy's eyes softened, sparking with an emotion Mik couldn't name, and he reached across the table to lay a hand on Mik's wrist. "You didn't have to go out of your way."

"I didn't. I . . ." Mik picked up his sandwich for something to do with his hands. "You do nice things for me all the time. I wanted to return the gesture."

"It's not a competition."

Mik raised both eyebrows.

"It's not," Rudy insisted, chuckling.

"I guess I know that." Mik took a bite of his sandwich and chewed slowly, organizing his thoughts. "It makes me feel . . . important . . . when you do nice things for me," he admitted quietly. "I wanted to do something to make you feel important too. Because you are."

To me, he didn't add, because he figured he'd gotten his point across when Rudy's expression went from amused to . . .

Slightly panicked?

Oh god, oh shit, oh fuck. Had Mik said too much too soon?

"You are important, Miki," Rudy rasped, his gaze intense on Mik's. "Never forget that."

The way he said it almost sounded like . . . goodbye? Dread crawled up Mik's throat as Rudy gave him a smile that didn't meet his eyes and asked about his day.

Mik's stomach plummeted, taking any thoughts of The Talk with it. Was he moving too fast? Did Rudy want to take things slow?

Did he have one foot out of town after all? *Both* feet?

They chatted as they ate, but the magic of the evening had dimmed. Mik lost his appetite, but he continued eating anyway even though the food had turned bland in his mouth. He gulped water to wet his dry throat.

As the evening wore on, though, Rudy seemed to get back to his usual self, and the tension bled out of Mik's shoulders. Had he misread things? There was a kind of tension between them that hadn't been there before, and a tenseness to Rudy's shoulders Mik didn't know how to read.

"I would've brought dessert if I'd known about this," Rudy said once he'd finished his meal. "It was delicious, Miki. Thank you."

He shifted his legs, and the gift bag beneath the table that Mik had forgotten about fell on his foot.

"Whoops." Frowning, Rudy looked under the table. "Did I knock something over?"

"Uh . . ." Mik picked up the gift bag, debated with himself for a second, and handed it over. "It's for you. Just . . . a little, uh, something. That I wanted you to have."

Mik didn't think he'd ever forget the expression that crossed Rudy's face then, a combination of disbelief and pleasure and *greed*.

Rudy pulled out the tissue paper. Peered in the bag. Withdrew the item inside.

His breath caught. "Miki . . ."

"It's you and me," Mik said inanely and immediately rolled his eyes at himself. As if Rudy couldn't see the photo in the frame.

It was a crude-as-fuck frame, four popsicle sticks bordering a selfie of the two of them that Mik had taken the day they'd gone to Milton Falls Christmas Tree Farm for a tree. He'd also glued a ribbon to it to make it an ornament.

"Eagan helped me make it," he said, nerves sending his mouth running. "When I had him on Sunday. He's the one who colored the popsicle sticks and helped me glue them on the photo. And I know you don't have a tree at your place. Or much of anything at your place, really." Whatever the word was between *empty* and *sparse*, that was Rudy's house. The most personal thing he had were his plants. "There's still a few days until Christmas, so there's still time to get you one if you want. Or, uh . . . you could put it on our tree next year. Or, you know, hang it on the rearview mirror in your car—"

"Miki," Rudy interrupted hoarsely. "I need to tell you something."



HEART IN HIS THROAT, Rudy stared at the gift Mik had given him, trying to remember when the last time was that he'd been given something he could keep, and when he'd owned something other than necessities that he actually wanted to bring with him when he moved on.

The photo was perfect. Mik in the foreground, making a peace sign like a dork, his slouchy beanie over his head. Rudy behind him, sunglasses on, wearing the knit hat Mik had bought him. Christmas trees around them, waiting to be taken home for the holidays.

Mik rambled on about Eagan and hanging the photo on a tree or the rearview mirror of his car, and suddenly, Rudy couldn't do it anymore. Couldn't sit here and pretend things weren't possibly going to change.

"Miki. I need to tell you something."

Fear passed behind Mik's eyes, and Rudy hated himself for putting it there.

“Okay,” Mik said, drawing the word out.

Rudy considered various ways to broach the subject and finally went with a simple, “I got a job offer.”

“Oh.” Mik’s shoulders sagged. He exhaled sharply and passed a hand down his face, muttering a relieved, “Is that all?” under his breath. “That’s cool. Where is it? Wait, did The White Elephant poach you?”

“No, I . . . Are they hiring a new manager?”

“I don’t know. Where are you moving to, then? The Snowflake Shack?”

“No.” Rudy inhaled a breath scented with snow and apples. “I was offered a job in Indianapolis.”

Mik stared at him. Stared some more. With zero inflection whatsoever, he said, “You’re going to manage a pub in Indianapolis?”

“No, I . . . I got a job with the NCAA.”

A crease appeared between Mik’s brows. “Doing what?”

“Co-hosting a college hockey podcast.”

“Oh. That sounds . . . fun?” Mik said slowly, clearly trying to wrap his mind around it. His eyes widened and he abruptly sat forward. “You said you were *offered* a job. You didn’t accept it?”

“Not yet,” Rudy said, an ache forming in his gut.

Apparently, that was all he needed to say. Mik’s face fell. “But you’re going to.”

It wasn’t a question.

“I don’t . . . know. I’ve never spent as much time in one place as I have Christmas Falls, and lately I’ve been itching to get back on the road and . . .”

And what? Mik was sitting right in front of him. What else could there be?

But the job. Damn, it sounded fun, and he’d be *good* at it. Plus, he’d get to travel, see new things, meet new people.

Mik's eyes went glassy, and he blinked rapidly.

It was like being stabbed in the heart with a knife. "Miki ___"

"What has this been, then?" Mik waved a hand between them. "A fling? Because this was never a fling for me. You told me you liked me, and I jumped in with both feet." The fight left him and he closed his eyes. "But maybe that wasn't obvious enough and I should've said something about what this meant sooner."

Rudy didn't know what to say. Everything felt too heavy and too unresolved, and it sucked the air out from the screened porch.

Mik didn't appear to know what to say either.

So they didn't say anything.

The night was quiet, if a little windy. The lights were starting to go out in the houses around them, and somewhere on the street, a car honked once as it was locked.

"When do you leave?" Mik asked quietly, as though the job were a done deal. As if he was bracing himself for the inevitable.

"I don't know," Rudy said. "I need to let them know whether I accept the job or not by Christmas Eve, but I'm not sure when I'd be needed in Indianapolis."

Mik nodded once, and when he spoke again, his voice was thick. "Excuse me. I need a minute." Tossing his napkin onto the table, he rose, gathered his plate, and went inside, the door snicking closed softly behind him.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

Rudy scrubbed both hands over his face. Pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. Groaned under his breath.

Should he have waited until he'd made a decision before telling Mik? But that didn't seem fair. If they were together like Rudy wanted them to be, that made them partners. And partners talked to each other.

In fact, he should've told Mik about the job when he'd first interviewed for it.

He watched Mik through the kitchen window, Mik's face blurred by the screen. What could there possibly be in Indianapolis that Rudy didn't already have in Christmas Falls?

Nothing.

But then he thought of his parents and their adventures, his desire to see the world.

He was being pulled in two opposing directions, and the result was that he was stuck in the middle with no easy answers.

But when had life ever given him an easy answer?

He was supposed to have two more months to make this decision. Two more months to solidify things with Mik—as much as a new relationship could be solidified in two months. Instead, there was a hammer hanging over his head.

Inside the house, Mik had turned away from the window, giving Rudy his back. Rudy wanted to wrap himself around him, glue Mik to him until neither could breathe or until all they could breathe was each other.

He pushed his chair back with a screech and was flinging open the Dutch door in the next second. "I'll stay."

The glower Mik turned on him, even stained with tears, would've felled a lesser man. "Get frosted, Rudy. I don't want a pity stay."

"A pity . . . what?"

"I don't want you to stay because you feel sorry for me, standing here crying over my sandwich."

"You ate your sandwich."

Another glower. "Semantics." He turned back to the dishes. "I don't want you to stay for me. I want you to stay because you want to. Because what if this thing between us falls apart next week or next year or, hell, five or twenty years

from now? And you're stuck in this town you hate that has nothing to offer you—”

“I never said I hated it,” Rudy interrupted. “Or that it had nothing to offer me. Far from it.”

Mik flung his arms wide, water droplets going everywhere, and rounded on him. “Then why are you leaving?”

“Because I don't know how to stay!”

Mik's chest heaved. His breathing hitched. Every molecule in Rudy's body wanted to go to him, but he stood in place, unsure of his welcome, his pulse echoing in his ears.

“You're an idiot,” Mik whispered, sounding like he'd just run a five-minute mile.

“I'm not disputing that.”

Any second now, Mik was going to kick him out. Tell him to collect his things and leave, that he was finished playing with his heart and he never wanted to see him again. Rudy was conjuring up every excuse in the book to convince Mik to let him stay . . .

When Mik kissed him.

It was the complete opposite of what he expected, and he froze for a moment, his thoughts reorienting themselves to Mik kissing him stupid.

Not asking him to leave?

Maybe that was still coming.

Mik retreated an inch to whisper a hoarse, “Kiss me back, you idiot,” and that was all Rudy needed to get his head in the game.

Mik's lips on his were rough. Fierce. Angry. Tasting of salty tears. He shoved Rudy backward into the hall, then sprang at him again. Clothes were removed, left on the floor like breadcrumbs leading to the bedroom. And when they came together, it was with a combination of resignation and furious desperation, nails leaving crescents in sensitized skin and teeth biting into shoulder blades. Rudy memorized Mik's

every groan, every gasp, every muttered curse. Memorized the curve of his lips and the shape of his eyes when he came so he could keep Mik with him forever, even if it was only in his heart.

Later, they lay curled into each other, bodies cooling. They shared a pillow, and every exhale of Mik's breath puffed gently against his neck. The bedroom was dark yet bright with the unsaid and unknowns between them.

"Should I go?" Rudy asked, afraid of the answer but willing to do whatever Mik asked of him.

"Don't make me call you an idiot again," came Mik's sleepy reply.

The tension bleeding out of his body and into the sheets, Rudy wrapped Mik close, one hand in his hair to keep himself grounded. He lay awake, watching over Mik's sleeping form, until the sun started to rise and sleep finally took him.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

After going to the gym and spending two hours punishing his body, Mik went to the person he'd always gone to when life was a suckfest.

His big brother.

Sighing, he eased his car to a stop at the curb in front of Josh and Meredith's house and parked. Fuck. Everything hurt. He hadn't gone easy at the gym, and though he was used to hard workouts, this morning he'd been like a man possessed, pushing himself until he was ready to collapse.

But the worst pain? That was in his heart, and there was no curing that with a hot bath or painkillers.

When he'd awoken this morning, he'd been so, so tempted to snuggle in to Rudy's big body and go back to sleep, but he'd needed some space. So he'd dressed and snuck out while Rudy slept, snagging his gym bag on the way.

Had he done the right thing last night? Should he have sent Rudy packing? Maybe, but he hadn't wanted to, even though the man was leaving to take a job with the NCAA in fucking Indianapolis.

Not that there was anything wrong with Indianapolis.

Oh, wait. Yes, there was. It was five fucking hours away. Not the ends of the earth, and it could be a lot worse, but it was enough hours between them to call what they had a long-distance relationship, assuming Rudy wanted to go that route.

And the worst part?

Rudy hadn't seemed excited about the job. He'd been indifferent.

He didn't want to leave Christmas Falls. Mik could feel it in his gut. When Rudy had yelled that he didn't know how to stay, Mik had a feeling that Rudy had never spoken truer words in his life.

Mik was still convinced that Rudy craved permanency, not that the knowledge did him any good. Wouldn't do Rudy any good either.

That was something Rudy had to figure out for himself.

And *that* was why he hadn't sent Rudy packing. Assuming his new job started in the new year—nobody started new jobs during the Christmas holidays—it gave Mik two weeks to convince Rudy that he belonged right here.

Mik wasn't letting him leave without a fight.

Tugging his beanie over his wet hair—he hadn't cared enough to dry it after his shower at the gym—he shoved the car door open and stepped into a morning that was cold enough to freeze the breath in his lungs. His stomach rumbled and he wondered vaguely if Josh had any Toaster Strudel. Eagan would've been dropped off at daycare already, so Josh was probably doing . . . whatever he did mid-morning on a Friday.

He was halfway up the driveway when a car pulled in behind him. Mik got out of the way, and there was Josh, waving at him from behind the wheel.

"Hey," Mik said when Josh stepped out. "Are you just coming back from dropping off Eagan?" He checked his watch. Ten thirty. "Don't you usually drop him off at eight?"

"Yup." Josh rounded the car and popped the trunk. "Went grocery shopping after. Help me with these?"

Together, they brought the groceries inside. Mik unpacked while Josh put away, and once that was done, Josh put on a pot of coffee, then went upstairs to check on Meredith.

Mik sat on a barstool and looked around at a house that screamed *kids live here!* Eagan's play area was a mess, Cheerios and fish crackers littered the floor under and around his chair, there were bags from Santa's Workshop on the dining room table—Christmas gifts for Eagan, no doubt—dirty dishes in the sink, and an unwrapped gift box on the counter.

Shameless, Mik peeked inside. It was a pashmina in deep purple.

A gift for Gran, then. Meredith was more into earthy tones and Mom wasn't interested in scarves without fringes or feathers.

Mik closed the box back up. He could imagine what Josh's to-do list looked like as though he'd written it himself, so he grabbed a broom in case Meredith was sleeping and started sweeping.

Josh came down a few minutes later. "You don't have to do that. I was going to vacuum later."

"I don't mind helping."

Sinking into a chair with a groan, Josh ran a thumb between his brows. "You know what? I'm going to let you."

Mik snorted a laugh. "How's Meredith?"

"Napping," Josh said. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

"Maybe you should go join her?"

"Nah." Josh shook his head and blinked his eyes open. "Too much to do before Gran's party tomorrow."

"Uh, you don't have anything to do for Gran's party. Me and Rudy are in charge, remember?"

"No, I know, but I want to bring the folding chairs up from Mom and Dad's basement—"

"I already did that. Rudy and I set everything up a few days ago. We reorganized the living room to add more chairs, set up extra tables for food, and put out the disposable plates

and cutlery and cups on the buffet table. We're missing napkins, but I can pick those up later. All I need from you is to show up with Meredith and Eagan."

The coffee machine beeped that it was ready. Josh rose and poured them each a cup while Mik swept the floor debris onto the dustpan and tossed it in the garbage.

Josh handed him a mug and the sugar. "So. What's going on with you?"

"Not much."

"Your face says otherwise."

Mik added enough sugar to his coffee to cause a sugar coma and sent his brother a smile. "I'm good." He'd intended to talk to Josh about everything going on with Rudy—and okay, yes, maybe vent a little—but Josh didn't need his crap piled on top of his own.

"Mik." Josh cupped his elbow and turned him to face him. "Talk to me. Please. I beg you. Tell me anything not related to toddlers or babies or pregnancies."

Mik laughed a little and started with something good. "I got a new job."

A whole host of complicated emotions crossed Josh's face, the foremost being a boatload of dread roughly the size of Santa's bag of gifts.

Mik replayed his words and cursed. "I'm not leaving the pub," he said hurriedly. "Shit. Sorry. I should've led with that."

"Christ." Josh blew out a relieved laugh, took his coffee, and resumed his seat at the table. "Scared me there for a second. So tell me about the new job, then."

"It's private coaching for Teddy Jersey. And hopefully that leads to more private coaching in the future." In fact, he was meeting Scott Jersey at Jolly Java this afternoon to discuss scheduling for the new year.

"Private coaching," Josh repeated, his expression brightening. "Well, shit. That's perfect for you."

Secretly pleased, Mik bit back a grin and sat at the table. “You think?”

“Yeah. You’re great at training people. Look at what you did with Juan and the new server.”

“Thanks.” Mik sipped his coffee.

Josh went silent for a second, his too-knowing gaze pinning Mik to his chair.

Avoiding his gaze, Mik flicked a nail against the handle of his mug.

Finally, Josh said, “Want to tell me what’s bothering you now?”

Mik bit his lip. “You’re not going to like it.”

Or hell, maybe Josh already knew.

Josh’s face leached of color. “Why? What’s wrong? Are you sick?”

“What? No. I’m not— Ugh. My lead-ins are terrible today.”

“Yeah,” Josh muttered with enough attitude to refill Mik’s coffee.

“Sorry. It’s not about me. It’s about Rudy.” Mik swallowed the lump in his throat. “He’s leaving.”

Josh furrowed his brow. “What?”

“You didn’t know?”

“No, I— Where is he going?”

“To Indianapolis. He got a job with the NCAA, co-hosting a new college hockey podcast.”

“Well, shit. He’d be perfect for that. Did you know he co-hosted a podcast when he played for Columbus? I forget the name of his cohost. One of his teammates.”

“Satoshi Matsumoto,” Mik muttered. “Toshie.”

He knew. Of course he knew. It had been all over social media when it launched. Mik had even listened to it when the

episodes had first aired, and he'd re-listened to the first few episodes this morning during his workout.

"Indianapolis, though." Josh's frown deepened. "Does Rudy *want* to move?"

"No, he fucking does not."

"He said that?"

"It was written all over his face."

"So why is he leaving then?" Josh asked.

"Because, according to him, he doesn't know how to stay."

"Ah." Sighing, Josh stared into his mug. "Yeah. That makes sense. He tell you how he grew up?"

"Yeah."

They lapsed into silence. Mik rose to grab the coffeepot and refilled both their mugs. "Why don't you look as surprised as I did?"

"I am. And I'm also not." Josh sat back and rubbed his jaw. "He's been here for two and a half years. It's the longest he's lived anywhere, and I thought, *that's it. He's settling down. He's staying.* But his house . . . He's renting, so everything in there belongs to the owners, but he hasn't even tried to make it his own aside from his stupid plants. I convinced myself he was waiting for the right house to go on the market so he could snatch it up. Put down roots. Stupid, in hindsight."

"It's not stupid." Mik sat next to his brother and touched the back of his hand. "Hopeful. But not stupid."

Josh sent him a weak smile. "I'm surprised he'd leave you."

"What do you mean?"

"He's had feelings for you for a long time. Now he has you. Why would he let you go? You're the best."

Tears stung Mik's eyes and his nose burned. He rolled his lips inward to keep his chin from trembling.

“Unless you plan on doing the long-distance thing?”

He cleared his throat. “We . . . haven’t, uh, discussed that yet, but . . . Wait. Can you go back to the feelings-for-me thing? How long is a long time?”

“I don’t know. I can’t remember when I first noticed it. Less than a decade but more than five years, for sure.”

Holy. Fuck.

Years.

Rudy had had feelings for him for years.

The thought should’ve buoyed him.

Mostly, it made him incredibly sad. Because if Rudy was thinking about leaving, it meant he didn’t believe he could have him. It meant he believed that Mik was something else in his life that was going to be taken away, when in reality, Mik was ready to throw himself at him and commit. *Had* committed.

Tears escaped, silently trailing down his cheek to drip off his chin.

“Ah no.” Josh pulled him close in a hug that Mik hadn’t realized he desperately needed. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Pulling away, Mik sucked in a breath and wiped his nose on the back of his hand. “He doesn’t want to go.”

“I know.”

“Why doesn’t *he* know?”

“Stubborn son of a bitch.”

Josh was equally glassy-eyed, the thought of losing his friend to another state hitting him hard. Mik reached an arm out and took his hand, earning himself a wan smile.

Mik regarded his brother, this man who’d always been a part of his life. For so long, Mik had wanted to stand as his own person, to be seen for who he was, instead of being trapped behind Josh’s shadow.

But it hadn't been so bad in Josh's shadow. It was safe there. He'd always had a protector, someone to look out for him, a kind of guardian angel in the flesh. And maybe Mik didn't always need it, but he'd always known the support was there.

And the important people—Josh, their parents, Rudy, Gran—they knew who he was. And that was what mattered. It was time for him to stop fixating on what other people thought of him and to focus instead on what he wanted.

He was comfortable with who he was. Always had been. And he'd learned to be his own person from Josh.

All that other stuff? It was just noise.

It didn't matter.

“You could join him in Indianapolis,” Josh suggested quietly.

Mik's huff of laughter lacked any humor. “What would I even do there?” Besides, his new gig with Teddy Jersey was here.

“It's telling, though,” Josh said, “that your first response wasn't an automatic no.”

Mik had no idea what to think about that.

Josh squeezed his hand. “Want to get out of here? Take a walk? We can get candy at Dancing Sugar Plums and gorge until our stomachs hurt like we used to when life threw us a curveball.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Rudy stared at the display of napkins at Tidings & Joy on Saturday morning. Mik had awoken in a burst of energy, jabbering about how he'd meant to get napkins for the party yesterday, but he and Josh had eaten their weight in candy before Mik had met with Scott Jersey at Jolly Java, and by the time *that* was done, he'd had to get to Frosty's for a meeting with one of his distributors before they opened for dinner.

The napkins got forgotten.

"You have napkins," Rudy had croaked, voice still not fully awake. "Those white ones in the cupboard."

"I need Christmas napkins." Mik had snapped his fingers. "Or birthday napkins. I don't care which. I can't believe they didn't have *The Nightmare Before Christmas* napkins at Party Garage, and now it's too late to order some from Amazon." He'd tugged on the nearest pair of jeans. "I'll go get them now before—"

"I'll go." Rudy had rolled out of bed. "You get ready for the party, then go wait at your parents' for the food delivery. I'll get the napkins, come back here to get ready, drop off the napkins with you, then pick up your parents at the airport. Okay?"

"Yes." Mik kissed him, a wet, lazy press of lips that mostly missed his mouth. He ran for the bathroom, calling a "thank you" over his shoulder.

The plan had been for Mr. and Mrs. Gilmore to await the food delivery, but their flight home from Florida the day before had been delayed, then canceled altogether—because airlines were just a *delight*. The earliest flight they could catch had been this morning. Once they landed in Chicago, they had a connecting flight to Reindeer Runways, the small regional airport nearby. And since Mik was busy with party stuff and Josh had a toddler to wrangle, Rudy had been nominated to pick them up.

He selected a package of napkins at random. Put it back. Cartoon trees didn't exactly go with the party's décor. Problem was, a week before Christmas, the festive napkin selection was decidedly slim.

“Help you with anything, Rudy?” Craig asked, rolling a dolly of crates past him.

Rudy smiled at the owner. “Got any more Christmas napkins in the back?”

“That's it, I'm afraid. Slim pickings, I know.” Craig paused to squint at him. “First the cranberries, now the napkins.” He patted Rudy's shoulder. “A little more advanced planning next time, huh?”

Rudy couldn't help but laugh.

Craig continued on his way, and Rudy went back to the napkins. Festive Christmas tree? Santa hauling a bag of gifts? Cute gnomes? The birthday napkins were geared toward kids, so he ignored those entirely.

“Rudy!”

He jumped as Lilian Gilmore materialized out of nowhere. “Hi, Mrs. Gilmore.”

“It's Lilian,” she corrected, swatting his arm. “How are you, dear?”

“Good. Just . . .” He waved at the display rack. “Trying to pick a napkin.” Hey, since he had the woman of the hour here . . . “Which one's your favorite?”

“Hm.” Mrs. Gilmore circled the rack, taking in all the options, and finally selected one at the bottom. “This one.”

Jaunty Christmas elves. “Yeah, that jives with this family,” Rudy muttered.

“What’s that, dear?”

“Nothing.” Rudy grabbed a second package even though the elves also didn’t match the décor, recalled how many people were coming to the party, then grabbed the remaining four. Mrs. Gilmore followed him to the register. “What brings you here, Mrs. Gilmore?” Rudy asked as Craig’s high school part-timer rang up his purchase.

“I saw you through the window and thought I’d come say hello.”

“Oh.” A rush of warmth enveloped him and he smiled at the tiny powerhouse. “That was nice of you.”

Mrs. Gilmore hummed.

Rudy put his wallet away and nodded at the bag hanging over her left wrist. “Christmas shopping?”

“Indeed. I get my grandchildren a tree ornament every year.” She pulled out a bundle wrapped in tissue paper, unwrapped it, and held it up. “For Mik. I couldn’t find a Bigfoot, so this will have to do.”

“It’s hideous,” Rudy said, poking the Grinch wearing an ugly Christmas sweater. “He’ll love it.”

“That was my thought too.” She rewrapped it and put it back in the bag.

Rudy peered inside to see what else was in there.

“No you don’t.” Mrs. Gilmore hugged the bag to her chest. “You don’t want to see yours and ruin the surprise, do you?”

Another wave of warmth made his heart ache. “I get one too?” He’d gotten one last year, and the year before, *and* in every holiday care package she’d sent him when he’d been playing, but it was still a surprise when anyone included him in their traditions.

“Of course,” Mrs. Gilmore said. “You’re family, aren’t you? Now grab your napkins and let me walk you home.”

“You don’t have to—”

But she was already out the door.

“Okay then.”

Rudy couldn’t tell her that he wasn’t heading home. He was actually going to Mik’s to get ready for her own surprise party, but she seemed to know that because she went left up Christmas Boulevard instead of right toward Rudy’s house, waving hello to everyone who called a, “Hi, Lilian! Hi, Rudy!”

“So,” she said, once they’d turned onto Dasher, linking her elbow with his. “How are things, Rudy?”

“Good. Fine. Just swell.”

“Mm-hmm. Because it looked like you were contemplating more than napkins in there.”

“Ah well. You know . . . Things are . . . complicated. Life is being . . . life.”

“Messy?”

“A little.”

She patted his hand. “Want to tell me about it?”

He jerked one shoulder. “I’ve been feeling restless and I’m not sure what to do about it. Has that ever happened to you? Where you get the urge to just go? Be somewhere else? Do something different?”

“Oh, yes. Not so much anymore, but quite often when I was younger.”

“Really?”

“Mm-hmm. Want to know what I used to do when the restlessness would hit?”

“Yes. Please.”

“Take a trip.”

“Take a . . . trip.”

“A trip,” she confirmed with a nod. “My husband and I would pick a destination and fly off for a week or two. Nothing rejuvenates the soul like a vacation. We were never the type to sit around on a beach or rent a cottage in the country. We’d choose locations where there were places to see and things to do. New York, Rome, Rio, London, Paris. Even with a busy sightseeing schedule, we always came home refreshed and ready to tackle real life again.”

So she would leave . . . and come back.

Jesus Christ, the answer was so fucking obvious.

Rudy could come back.

He could leave . . . and come back.

He could go to Indianapolis—or not go to Indianapolis, because who was he kidding? As much as he wanted the job, he wanted Mik more. A job was a job. There’d be others.

There was only one Miki Gilmore.

So he could leave, take a vacation, a road trip . . . and come back to his pub and his staff and his best friend and . . .

And his Miki.

“Do you think a trip would help with your restlessness?” Mrs. Gilmore asked, oblivious to his circling thoughts.

“I think so. Yeah.”

“Where do you think you’ll go?”

“Probably meet my parents somewhere and—”

His parents.

He thought back to the conversations he’d had with his mom recently and the photos she’d sent of their journey south. And with sudden clarity, it hit him that it wasn’t their travels he wanted to experience.

It was *them*.

He missed the absolute fuck out of them.

A stupid thought for a thirty-two-year-old to have, maybe, but he was still their son and they were still his parents, no matter how old he was. Hitting the road with them as a kid had been some of the best times of his life, but in hindsight, it wasn't because of *where* they'd been—it'd been because of *who* he'd been with.

Mom and Dad. The people who'd been his rock for so, so long.

He didn't miss the nomadic lifestyle.

He missed them.

“Actually . . . maybe I'll invite them here for Christmas.”

“Oh, please do.” Mrs. Gilmore patted his hand again. “They're more than welcome for Christmas dinner. I look forward to hearing about your father's new art project.”

Whipping out his phone, Rudy texted Toshie and hit Send.

RUDY

Hey, man. I know you went to bat for me with your bosses, and I appreciate this opportunity more than I can say, but I can't commit to relocating. I've got people and a life here that I'm not willing to leave. So I'm going to have to decline the offer.

The wave of relief that crashed into him nearly knocked him on his ass.

But he wasn't done.

RUDY

Hey Mom. Not sure where you and Dad are right now, but if you're anywhere near Illinois . . . want to come spend Christmas with me? You'll have my place to yourselves. I'm at Mik's most nights. And Mrs. Gilmore says she's setting plates for you at the table for Christmas dinner.

He laughed, the sound bouncing around them.

Mrs. Gilmore grinned up at him. “You’re looking a lot happier than when I found you sulking in front of Christmas napkins.”

“I suppose.” He passed a hand over his face, unsurprised to find his cheeks hot. “I guess I thought that I couldn’t have anything of my own because of the way I grew up.”

“Josh told me a little bit about it. You moved around a lot.”

“Yeah. And because of that, I’ve always believed that nothing is permanent, so lately I’ve been feeling more and more like I *had* to go.”

They stopped in front of Mik’s house, and Mrs. Gilmore unhooked their elbows to stare at him. She stared for so long that Rudy began to fidget.

Then she started to laugh, a little titter that turned into a full belly laugh complete with tears.

Wide-eyed, Rudy looked around for help.

“I’m sorry,” she said, still laughing. “I’m sorry, dear, I don’t mean to laugh at you. But sweetheart, you’re right. Nothing is permanent. *Life* isn’t permanent. Oh gosh.” The laughing subsided into chuckles. “I haven’t laughed that hard in a long time.”

“Um . . . okay?”

Another pat, this time to his cheek. “Did you know I was married twice before I found the love of my life? My husband passed several years ago, bless him, and I’ll be gone one day too. People age, they grow up. Friends move out of town, strangers move into town and become friends, people change careers multiple times before they’re fifty, cars break down and new ones get purchased, people downsize or upgrade their homes.”

“Well, when you put it like that . . .”

She smiled, and it was so gentle it reminded him of his mom. “Some things are more permanent than others. Josh and Mik’s relationship. A long-lasting marriage. The couch in my living room.”

Rudy choked on a laugh.

“But it doesn’t have to be permanent for you to make the most out of life. There will be ups and downs along the way, but as long as you grab onto the things that matter with both hands, life will be a grand adventure.”

A grand adventure. Wasn’t that what he’d thought he’d wanted? The open road, the wind in his hair, chucking the map out the window and discovering new things?

But his grand adventure was right here.

“Now.” Mrs. Gilmore offered her cheek for a kiss, and he ducked and obliged. “I need to get home and change. I’ll see you at my surprise party later, won’t I?”

“Still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She waved over her shoulder, her heeled boots click-clacking along the sidewalk.

Chuckling, Rudy went inside.

To the place that was home.



RUDY’S first order of business upon arriving at the party was to find Mik, tell him he was staying, and kiss the hell out of him.

Or it would’ve been, had he not parked on the street, Mr. and Mrs. Gilmore in tow, mere minutes before Lilian was due to arrive.

Their connecting flight from Chicago had been delayed due to an incoming storm, a fact Mik had not been impressed about when Rudy had called him while waiting in Arrivals at Reindeer Runways. Mik had grumbled in his ear for thirty seconds, muttering about flight disruptions and, “Why the hell didn’t they fly back a few days early instead of waiting until the last possible day? It’s the damn holidays. Of course there are going to be delays.”

Rudy let him talk his ear off, if only to hear the sound of his voice.

“Hey, Miki?”

“Huh? No, leave those there,” he said, clearly to someone else and clearly annoyed. “They go next to the plates.” Back to Rudy, he said, “Sorry. Things are crazy here and Mer keeps wanting to move the napkins. What’s up?”

“I love you.”

Silence. Absolute, chaotic silence.

Rudy began to smile, knowing exactly what was coming. He could predict Mik’s responses as surely as he could predict his lazy-ass slap-shot form.

And sure enough . . .

“You’re telling me that *now*? Over the *phone*? When there’s fucking *Indianapolis* looming in our future? Asshole. You better get over here and tell me to my face.”

And he hung up.

Rudy laughed until a security guard looked at him suspiciously. And then he laughed some more.

When he turned onto Mr. and Mrs. Gilmore’s street an hour later with Mr. and Mrs. Gilmore, it was to find it lined with cars, even though Mik’s original email invitation—and the reminder he’d sent a week ago—had instructed guests to park on a side street so Lilian didn’t suspect anything.

Rudy *did* park on a side street, because he’d never hear the end of it from Mik otherwise.

“What time’s my mother expected?” Mr. Gilmore asked, unbuckling his seat belt.

“Six,” Rudy said.

Mr. Gilmore glanced at the time on the dash: 5:55. “Shit. Move it, people.”

They moved.

Inside the house, it was absolute bedlam. Mik and Josh were trying to corral people into hiding places, but kids were running loose, a baby cried from somewhere near the kitchen, and several people were going through the pile of coats on the banister, looking for cell phones to capture the moment of surprise.

Then there was Meredith, sitting on the living room couch with her feet up, casually dunking a quesadilla into a pile of sour cream. Rudy waved.

She waved back.

As a pregnant lady with preeclampsia, she obviously got a pass. Mik and Josh clearly thought so too.

Josh was bribing the kids to hide with the promise of cupcakes, so it was Mik who spotted Rudy and his parents in the doorway when they came in. “You’re here!” He rushed to them. “Hi. Welcome back. Missed you. Go hide. You.” He grabbed Rudy’s face in both hands and kissed him, right there in front of everyone, and Rudy would’ve laughed at Mrs. Gilmore’s, “So I guess that’s a thing finally,” if he’d had the breath left to do so.

Rudy yanked him close despite—or maybe because of—the wolf whistles (Meredith) and the gagging (the kids).

It wasn’t until someone whisper-shouted, “She’s coming up the driveway,” that Mik pulled away with a gasp and dragged Rudy behind Meredith’s couch, where Josh had saved a spot for them.

Rudy shook his head to clear it of inappropriate lust just as Josh shushed everyone. The guests quieted, even the baby.

Lilian’s boots clacked against the porch. The door opened.

“Surprise!”

Lilian jerked back, one leather-gloved hand coming up to grasp her chest. “Oh my!”

“Happy birthday, Mom.” Mr. Gilmore swept her into a crushing hug, which prompted a rush of greetings that followed. Lilian got lost in a sea of people.

Next to Rudy, Mik huffed. “She totally knew.”

“Definitely,” Josh agreed.

Mik scowled at the crowd of guests. “I *will* find out who spilled the beans.”

“My money’s on Sue,” Meredith said. “She looks like a squirrely little thing.”

As one, all four of them looked Sue’s way. She squeaked and scurried off.

Mik sighed. “Oh well. Come on, let’s get the food out.”

The bedlam continued well into the night, and Rudy couldn’t catch a moment alone with Mik. He’d have better luck catching Santa and his reindeer on Mik’s rooftop on Christmas Day. Mik and Josh were busy warming up food and bringing it to the buffet table, consolidating half-empty platters, and running empty ones back to the kitchen. They made sure the water dispensers didn’t go empty, that there was enough ice in the coolers that held beers and soft drinks, that the kids had juice boxes, and that empty wine bottles were replaced with fresh ones.

Rudy, for his part, tried to keep up with the dishwashing so there wouldn’t be as much to do at the end of the night. Frank eventually cornered him with a suggestion for adding mac and cheese with crabmeat and Brie topped with breadcrumbs to Rudolph’s menu. And Rudy couldn’t escape him, stuck at the sink with soapy hands that were slowly turning wrinkly.

It was Mik who eventually rescued him.

“Frank, the cake’s being cut if you want some.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Frank toasted him with his glass of wine. “Thanks, Mik. Rudy, we can talk later.”

“Sure, Frank.”

“You.” Mik rounded on him. “Come with me.”

“Ok—”

He didn’t have time to finish his word or properly dry his hands before Mik pulled him outside onto the back patio.

“Mik—”

“Shut up,” Mik said, then kissed him again.

Rudy didn't argue. Mik could kiss him until the end of time.

He ended up with his ass against the patio railing, Mik between his legs, and honestly? He couldn't think of anywhere else he wanted to be.

Mik tasted like beer and he felt so good in his arms. Rudy wrapped one leg around Mik's hip, holding him close. Closer. Mik groaned into his mouth. One of his hands found their way into Rudy's hair and pulled, and the pain was deliciously sweet. Rudy made a desperate sound.

“Tell me,” Mik panted when he came up for air.

“I love you.”

More kissing, frantic, almost unhinged. Rudy wanted more, more, more. He wanted everything. Fire licked at his skin, lust turned him into a hormonal pile of desire, and he pulled Mik's shirt free, sending his hands down the back of Mik's pants.

“Tell me again.” Mik nosed up his jaw to his ear.

“I love you,” Rudy said. Quickly, before Mik could kiss the brains out of him again, he added, “And I'm not leaving.”

Mik stilled. Took a step back. “What?”

“I'm not leaving. I turned down the job.”

“But . . .” Chest heaving, Mik looked unsure as hell even in the dim lighting of the house's outdoor lights.

“And before you ask, no, I'm not staying entirely because of you. It is partially because of you, but it's also this town, the people, my pub, Josh. This is where I want to be.”

Mik's breathing went choppy. “Are you sure?”

“I'm sure.”

Leaning into him, Mik rested his forehead against his temple. “I knew you didn't want to go. I was just waiting for

you to figure it out.”

“Took me a while to get there.”

“Two whole days.”

“Not quite. I interviewed for the job almost three weeks ago and was basically told it was mine but that they had to conduct more interviews. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the job sooner—”

Mik interrupted him with a shake of his head. “Water under the bridge. Can I ask, though . . . Why were you looking for jobs out of state?” He ran his hands down Rudy’s arms to twine their cold fingers together.

“I wasn’t,” Rudy admitted. “But I was feeling restless, and this job opportunity fell into my lap when I was starting to think of doing something different. It seemed like kismet. And when you grow up like I did, you grow up believing that nothing is permanent and whatever you think is yours, you can’t keep. I didn’t think I could keep this. This town, you, Josh. All of it.” Rudy rested their foreheads together. “I didn’t think I could keep you, Miki. Didn’t ever think I’d be allowed.”

“Well, I’m keeping you,” Mik whispered. “Is it easier to grasp the concept if you look at it that way?”

“Nominally. I think I’ll like being kept.”

“Damn right.”

Rudy chuckled and leaned in to kiss him again, but Mik cupped his cheeks and brought them nose to nose. “Rudy. Are you sure? Because hosting a college hockey podcast for the NCAA sounds perfect for you.”

“Baby.” Rudy kissed his nose. “I promise.”

“Okay.” Mik sighed, the tension leaving his body, and snuggled into him. Then without looking, he smacked Rudy in the arm.

“Hey!”

“That’s for telling me you love me over the stupid phone.”

Rudy was about to make a joke about how it was worth it just for Mik's reaction but opted for honesty instead. "I couldn't wait another second to tell you."

Mik straightened and, very clearly and very deliberately, said, "I love you too." Then he smirked. "See how I did that? Said it to your face the first time?"

"Ha ha."

The patio door burst open, spilling party sounds into their moment: clinking glasses, conversation, laughter, and Michael Bublé. It closed again a moment later, muffling the party, and putting a very pissed-off Josh on this side of the door.

"Hey, man."

"Don't 'hey, man' me." Josh stalked forward and jerked a finger in his face. "How dare you pack up and leave? You don't get to start dating my brother and then just leave him behind like, like, like . . ."

"An overpriced buffoon on skates?" Mik oh-so-helpfully offered.

"Yes! That." Josh frowned. "Wait, what?"

"Just go with it."

"And furthermore," Josh went on, clearly taking Mik's advice and going with it. "What could there possibly be in Indianapolis that we don't have here? Huh?"

Was it irony or coincidence that Rudy had recently asked himself the same question?

"This is your home." Josh poked Rudy's shoulder. "It couldn't more obviously be your home. Your name is *Rudy Snow* and you work at *Rudolph's*."

"And you have plants," Mik added. "And they're on a watering schedule. That doesn't scream *desperate to get out of town* to me."

Rudy shot him a look. "You're not helping. And you." He batted Josh's hand away. "Like I just told your brother, I'm not leaving."

Josh's mouth dropped open. "You're not?"

"No. I plan on taking trips every once in a while—"

"Ooh." Mik bounced on his toes. "I want to come."

"Obviously. But otherwise . . . this is home."

Mik grinned like a fool.

Josh, conversely, didn't appear to know what to do with that information. "Oh. Okay. Well. Good." He nodded once. "Carry on, then."

He turned to go back inside, but Rudy grabbed his wrist and yanked him into a hug. "Thanks, man."

"For what?"

Rudy couldn't even begin to explain the role Josh had played in his life, so he went with a simple, "For picking me."

Josh huffed into his shoulder. "Always. No question." He squeezed Rudy's shoulder. Squeezed Mik's. "Don't stay out here too long. It's freezing." And went inside.

Mik slunk up to Rudy, his smile a touch naughty. "Bet I can keep you warm."

"I bet you can," Rudy murmured and hauled him close.

EPILOGUE

For as long as Mik could remember, Christmas dinner had been held at Gran's. This year was no different except for one thing: Gran decreed a potluck.

"I can't keep up with this growing family," she'd said after her birthday party. All the guests had cleared out, leaving Gran, Mom and Dad, Josh—who'd returned to help tidy up after taking Meredith and Eagan home—Mik, Rudy, and a couple of cousins who'd stayed to help. "And I certainly can't cook for all of you anymore. I'd need to start cooking tomorrow to be ready on time. Every household brings a dish or I'm not letting you through the door."

Mik had snorted a laugh. "We can do the turkey at our place and bring it over."

Rudy had raised both eyebrows at that, and for a moment Mik had thought he'd been upset that he'd volunteered him for turkey without asking.

Until he'd replayed his words and realized he'd said *our place*.

Oops.

Rudy had never said anything about it, though, and Mik had left it alone.

He also made mashed potatoes and once they were done, he drove them to Josh and Meredith's and told them to pass it off as their own contribution. Meredith eyed the bowl hungrily while Josh dithered and sputtered, "Mik, you didn't have to do that. I was going to make this later."

“Consider it my Christmas present for the new baby,” Mik said, which was total bull—he had actual Christmas presents for the new baby and the rest of them that he was bringing to Gran’s, but whatever. Emmanuella, born two days after Gran’s party, was gurgling softly on her dad’s shoulder, and Mik kissed her tiny head before saluting Josh and Meredith—he didn’t know why—and went back home to his boyfriend.

Since the potatoes were done and the turkey was in the oven, they had a few hours to kill before they were due at Gran’s. On his coffee table was a notepad with notes he’d scribbled over the past few days. That idea he’d had while speaking with Tracy Araya at Peewee practice was turning into something bigger than he’d anticipated, but he couldn’t wait to see it come to light. Assuming he could pull it off, that was. He had no idea how to go about setting up hockey camps for queer kids run by queer players and former players, but Rudy had committed to helping him, and so had Josh in the minimal spare time he had.

Not that Rudy would have much spare time either. The people who’d interviewed him at the NCAA had wanted him so badly for their podcast that they’d offered to let him record it remotely as long as he came into Indianapolis for a few days once a month for meetings. And there’d still be travel involved because Rudy would need to attend some games in person, but eighty percent of his time would be spent at home.

He’d already let Rudolph’s owner know, and they were working on a plan to promote their junior manager to full manager because Rudy couldn’t realistically work two full-time jobs. He still planned on bartending when he could, but he couldn’t manage the bar anymore.

As Rudy had said when he’d signed the offer letter, “I get to have my cake and eat it too.”

Mik had dragged him into the bedroom to eat his own cake.

Crude, but accurate.

Today was not a day for work, though. Mik turned on the TV and channel surfed until he found something that wasn’t

Home Alone, finally landing on *A Christmas Story*. Rudy's parents would be joining them in about an hour for pre-dinner appetizers, and Mik wanted to give Rudy his Christmas gift before they arrived.

God, Rudy's parents were a hoot. They'd arrived two days ago and were staying at Rudy's place. Mik and Rudy had hosted them for dinner last night, and Mik couldn't recall ever seeing Rudy so happy. Plus, Mik had gotten to hear all sorts of stories from Rudy's childhood.

Speaking of Rudy, Mik sat by the tree and pulled a gift bag closer. "Come open your present."

"I get a present?" Rudy asked. He held a plate of toast for them to eat since neither had had time for breakfast yet. "I didn't get you anything."

"What's that, then?" Mik pointed at a gift bag beneath the tree.

Rudy mock gasped. "Santa brought you a present! This must be the first time you've made the nice list, huh?"

Mik flipped him off. "Be nice or I won't give you your gift."

"I'm always nice."

"Swiffer commercial."

"Not my fault."

"Uh-huh. Here." Mik thrust the tiny gift bag at him. "Merry Christmas and all that."

Rudy laughed and tugged out the tissue paper. "Gosh, you're just so sentimen—" He broke off, gazing into the gift bag. Slowly, that gaze lifted to Mik's, and Mik had to stifle a laugh at the incredulity written all over Rudy's face.

"Are you for real?" From the bag, Rudy pulled a thumb-sized Bigfoot tree ornament that Mik had found hidden in a dusty corner of Nutcrackers.

Mik wiggled on his butt. "Now you can start your own collection."

“You have lost your ever-loving mind.”

Unable to hold it in anymore, Mik fell over laughing. Shaking his head, Rudy hung Bigfoot on the tree, where it was in good company among several other Bigfoot ornaments, as well as the popsicle stick-framed photo Mik had made for him.

“I’m just kidding.” Mik reached behind the tree and came out with a second bag that he’d hidden back there. “This is your real gift.”

Eyeing him warily, Rudy took it.

“This one doesn’t bite.”

Rudy didn’t look convinced. He was a little more careful with this one, probably expecting a palm-sized Bigfoot this time, and he frowned when he extracted a jewelry box roughly the size of a mass-market paperback.

He popped the lid off. Removed swaths of tissue paper. And there, tucked between tissue and foam packing peanuts to keep it safe, was a compass. Mik had found that at Nutcrackers too, and he’d had it engraved with a single word.

Home.

Rudy swallowed hard. “Is this so I’ll always find my way back to you?”

“Oh.” Mik blinked. “Well, that’s sappy as fuck.”

Rudy let out a wet laugh.

“I can see why you’d think that given the engraving, but no. You said you wanted to travel—for vacation, right?—but you’ll also be traveling for work, so . . . compass. The engraving is meant to remind you to come home. Here.”

“I’d never forget.” Rudy gripped his chin and brought him in for a hard kiss. “Thank you.”

Mik beamed, the tenderness in Rudy’s eyes sending his pulse fluttering. “You’re welcome.”

“Now you.” Rudy passed him the remaining gift bag. “Merry Christmas and all that.”

Chuckling, Mik tore out the tissue paper, not bothering to go slow and savor the moment. That had always been Josh's thing.

He pulled out his gift. Gaped at it.

A Bigfoot ornament. Rudy had gotten him a Bigfoot ornament, but instead of Bigfoot's face was his own.

It was hideous.

"I love it!"

"And it's not even a gag gift," Rudy muttered.

Mik jumped up to find the perfect spot for it on the tree while on the television, the leg lamp was delivered. "Where'd you get this?"

"Believe it or not, I had it commissioned from one of the makers at the arts and crafts fair."

They settled down to watch the movie and eat their cold toast. Rudy sat in the corner of the couch with his feet propped on the coffee table. Once Mik was done with his toast, he pillowed his head on Rudy's thigh and tried not to fall asleep from the contentment of it all.

This Christmas was massively different than any he'd previously experienced. He'd only made it home for Christmas twice while in the NHL. The other times, being so far removed from home, he'd never felt like he'd missed out on anything, especially since he'd usually spent Christmas with teammates.

Now that he was here, though, he couldn't imagine being anywhere else for the holidays.

Movement outside snagged his attention and he squinted at the window. "It's snowing. Come outside with me."

Rudy grumbled about it being cold but followed anyway. Mik ignored him and stepped out onto the covered porch in his socks. "It's pretty."

"Yeah." Rudy came up behind him and hugged him close, one arm around his neck, the other at his waist.

The street was deathly silent, the kind of quiet hush that came with a snowfall when the rest of the world was cooped up indoors. Eventually, there'd be the sound of shovels and snow blowers and the rumble of snowplows, but for now, it was just the two of them and a white Christmas.

And Bigfoot.

Mik grimaced. "Bigfoot's Santa suit is looking mangy."

"There's bird poop on it."

"Ugh. I saw a squirrel nibbling at the fur the other day."

"Don't squirrels hibernate?"

"That's what I thought too, but when I looked it up, Google said the squirrels we have here are active year-round."

As they watched, a squirrel burst out of the nearby underbrush, eyed them with considerable judgment, climbed up Bigfoot . . . and grabbed an acorn from the hood.

Mik gaped. "Has it been stashing its food in my Bigfoot?"

Silent laughter shook Rudy's entire body.

"Gross. I don't want to touch the suit to take it off when it comes time to put Bigfoot away."

"Guess you'll just have to get rid of the whole thing."

Mik turned and planted his hands on his hips. "That was your plan the whole time, wasn't it?"

A blink. "No."

"It was!"

"It wasn't. Honest." Rudy was laughing, though. "Put on rubber kitchen gloves and get pruning shears. Cut the suit right off."

"I suppose." Mik shivered, the allure of the snow long gone, together with his body heat. "Let's go inside. It's cold."

"Didn't I say that before we came out here?"

Inside, Mik shook himself like a wet dog in an effort to get warm and checked the time. Rudy's parents would be here

soon, so he headed for the kitchen to get the apps out.

“Can I move in here?”

He froze. Turned slowly, half expecting it to be a joke. The blood pumped in his veins and yearning detonated through him like an exploding Christmas cracker. “Yes.”

“I mean, most of my stuff’s already here,” Rudy went on, as though he hadn’t heard him. Maybe he hadn’t. He still stood by the door, looking all sexy in his blue sweater and dark jeans.

“Yes.”

“It doesn’t make sense to keep renting my house, considering I’m always here, anyway. And—”

“Yes,” Mik repeated, louder.

Rudy’s gaze jerked to his. “Yes?”

“Yes. Yes, yes, yes.” Heart galloping, Mik ran. Leaped. Wrapped his arms and legs around Rudy and peppered kisses all over his stupid, sexy, scruffy face. “Yes.”

Rudy laughed, the puff of his breath tickling Mik’s lips. “Yeah?”

“Yes. I even have a key for you. I was going to give it to you on your birthday.” It was right after the new year. “But you can have it now. Wait here.” He hopped down, ran into the bedroom, grabbed the key from where he’d stashed it, and slid back into the living room.

Rudy was still by the door, looking a little unsure and a lot thrilled.

Palms sweaty, Mik held out the key with a steady hand. “Ta-da.”

Expression turning an odd mix of greedy and hopeful, Rudy stared at it for a few seconds before snatching it out of Mik’s hand. He curled his fist around it, like maybe he was afraid it would disappear if he didn’t.

Fighting his swelling heart, Mik cupped Rudy’s fist in both hands. “Welcome home.”

THE END



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy's lived with her head in the clouds since she first picked up a book as a child, and being fluent in two languages means she's read *a lot* of books! She first picked up a pen on a rainy day in fourth grade when her class had to stay inside for recess. Tales of treasure hunts with her classmates eventually morphed into love stories between men, and she's been writing ever since. She writes evenings and weekends—or whenever she isn't at her full-time day job saving the planet at Canada's largest environmental non-profit.

An unapologetic introvert, Amy reads too much and socializes too little, with no regrets. She loves connecting with readers. Join her Facebook Group, [Amy Aislin's Readers](#), to stay up-to-date on upcoming releases and for access to early teasers, find her on [Instagram](#), or sign up for her [newsletter](#) for a free novella.

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