



HELP!
I'M THE BIG CITY BOY IN MY
CHRISTMAS
COMFORT
MOVIE



INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOEL ABERNATHY



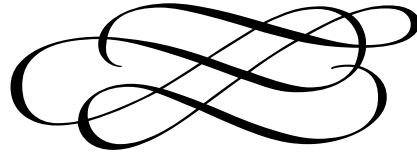
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Dear Reader



Merry Christmas... FOREVER.

If there's anyone who can help Matthew Harrington get over his broken heart, it's the man who made him believe in love in the first place.

Unfortunately, Ben Clark, the six-foot-six Christmas tree farmer with soulful blue eyes and rugged good looks, is literally too good to be true—he's the love interest in Mistletoe Hollow, Matthew's favorite Christmas comfort movie.

Matthew wishes he could find a guy like Ben after his ex runs off with another man, but his wish comes a little too true.

When he puts Mistletoe Hollow on in hopes of raising his spirits only to literally get sucked into the movie, he's rescued by none other than Ben himself.

Is a little holiday magic really enough to bridge their worlds and give them a happily-ever-after even a cynical city boy can't resist?

~

*Author's Note: This is a standalone holiday romance with a magical isekai twist. Filled with found family in a small town where it's always Christmas, a cursed VCR player, peppermint when (and where) you least expect it, well-meaning interdimensional interlopers, and creative uses for candy canes that are definitely **not** Santa-approved.*

CHAPTER 1

MATTHEW



Leaning against the cool glass of the floor-to-ceiling windows in my New York penthouse, I found myself mesmerized by the glimmering rainbow of Christmas lights twinkling below.

The magical scene normally made me feel like I was literally on top of the world, but now, it was a reminder of the life I was on the verge of losing.

Then again, this designer apartment had never truly been mine.

It was *his* .

The boyfriend who had insisted we needed a posh high-rise only to leave me for another man.

And right before Christmas, too, which had always been my favorite time of the year.

He'd ruined that just like he'd ruined everything else.

My reflection stared back at me from the rain-streaked glass, the face behind black rectangular glasses and a mop of dark hair appearing just as lost as I felt.

There was no way I could afford this place on my own. Every penny I made had gone into that two-faced liar's dreams of grandeur.

I was a moderately successful scriptwriter, but I was still facing financial ruin because I had believed in love.

Because I had believed in *him* .

I turned away from the window, adjusting my glasses, which had slipped down my nose at some point. Time to get back to work.

I hadn't had any luck selling the latest drama I'd been writing, but it was hard to say if that was a reflection of my work or the current market.

I sank into my plush leather desk chair, booting up my laptop. The screen flickered to life, casting a pale glow across the polished dark gray marble surface. This desk, like everything else in the apartment, was a sign of his influence over my life. It was fitting that the decor was downright villainous.

I came from old money, born into a wealthy family that expected perfection and conformity. As the black sheep who chose writing over law or medicine, I'd always been eager to forge my own path.

So when he came along flashing his charisma and big dreams, I was intoxicated. I thought he understood my need for independence.

Clearly I was wrong.

My parents had warned me about him, which just rubbed salt into the wound. After they gave up on trying to convince me to see the light, their disapproval was always evident in pursed lips and disdainful looks.

But I was stubborn as hell.

It didn't help that they'd always been controlling, too, or I might have seen they had a point about my sexy new boyfriend giving snake energy.

Now here I was, struggling to keep up the lavish lifestyle he'd crafted for us. My family's wealth was out of reach. That bridge had burned a long time ago.

Independence had its price.

So did cock, apparently.

Because his superhuman abilities in bed had been a big part of why I'd put up with his less redeeming qualities.

And oh, boy, did he have some issues.

With a deep breath, I cracked my knuckles and started typing even as visions of my former life swirled mockingly around me.

I stared at the blinking cursor after a few words, willing more words to come.

They didn't.

Since he'd left, writing was its own form of torture, and to say I had writers' block was the understatement of the year. The fact that my apartment looked like an evil lair didn't help, obviously.

Hell, we had a metal sculpture of a nude male demon in repose on our kitchen island.

But even if the decor and lighting were less depressing, how could I craft compelling stories of love and connection when my own happily-ever-after had completely fallen apart?

After five years together, I never imagined he was unhappy. Never guessed his smiling face and tender embrace could hide such deceit. When I'd noticed the credit card charges for lavish dinners I hadn't attended, I'd actually believed it had been some kind of mistake.

And that was what he called it, too. A "mistake."

As if that homewrecker had fallen from the sky into his lap and onto his dick.

He had spun an intricate web of lies, betraying my trust in the cruelest way.

As a writer, maybe I would've seen it coming if his name had been something a little more ominous, like Damien or something.

But *Greg* ?

I removed my glasses, massaging the bridge of my nose. My eyes were still puffy and red from my latest crying jag, and my sinuses felt like they'd been injected with rubber cement.

Yeah. It was going to be a long night.

My phone buzzed out of the blue, and I immediately blamed it for distracting me even though I wasn't exactly getting anything done.

I normally had it face-down and on silent when I was working, but with everything going sideways lately, I didn't know if the next call would be something urgent.

When I saw it was Evie, my long-suffering agent, I hesitated.

She always meant well, but her relentless optimism and vibrantly enigmatic personality could be... a lot. Still, she was the only person who'd stood by me after the split. She'd been a constant in my life for a long time, ever since she saw promise in me for whatever reason.

"Hey Evie," I said, trying to sound cheerful as I answered the phone. "How's it going?"

"Matthew, *darling*!" Evie's dramatic voice filled my ear. Did she really have to sing every word? "I'm fabulous, but I would be even better if you had good news to share. Please tell me you've got something for me to read."

I winced, staring at my blank document. "Yeah, about that..."

Evie cut me off with a disapproving cluck of her tongue. "Now, Matthew, we've talked about this. Wallowing in self-pity won't get the job done. You're better than him. Better than *all* of them."

"I know, I know," I said with a sigh, tucking my phone between my ear and shoulder so I could stand up to pace around.

It was a habit I'd inherited from my father, along with his penchant for making terrible life decisions. "It's just... I can't seem to get back in the groove, you know? The usual tricks aren't working."

"Have you considered returning to your roots?" Evie asked gently. "Revisiting the kinds of stories you told before the high-concept thrillers and dystopian dramas? The ones about everyday people finding love?"

I scoffed. “Small-town romance? You know I don’t write that stuff anymore.”

“I know, and I’m trying to get the drama sold,” she said, her voice strained with apprehension, like she knew I wasn’t going to like what she had to say next. “Trust me, I am. But that’s a tough sell right now. With everything going on in the world, people want to feel good, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” I muttered.

“You are good at writing sweet stories,” she reasoned. “There’s no one better. In fact, I was just talking with an executive at a new network at last night’s fundraiser.”

“A new network?” I asked warily. With the rise of streaming services, there was no shortage of them.

“Yes, it’s called Miracle Network,” Evie said, a hint of excitement in her voice. “Their whole brand is feel-good inspirational programming. You know, stories about people overcoming obstacles and finding hope. Finding... love?”

I let out a long sigh, collapsing back onto the couch.

“Just hear me out. We both know you need a miracle.”

“Thanks, Evie. I appreciate it,” I said dryly.

“I know romances aren’t your thing anymore,” Evie continued gently. “But you’ve got to get back on the horse. And this could be your ticket back into the game. I really think you could knock this out of the park. Perhaps you should watch that Christmas movie you’ve always loved for inspiration. It is that time of the year, after all, and it *is* full of magic.”

I raised an eyebrow even though she couldn’t see me. “Mistletoe Hollow? You remembered that?”

“Of course I do, dear. It’s my favorite, too.”

I sighed, knowing she was right. If I ever wanted to sell my passion projects again, I had to prove I could still deliver.

What was the worst that could happen? It wasn’t like I’d have to live in whatever I wrote. I could just bang out something

sweet and fluffy, and maybe then I'd be able to move on with my life.

"Alright," I said. "I'll put together a pitch for them."

I could practically hear her beaming over the phone. "I know you'll come up with something great. You always do, Matthew."

At least someone had faith in me.

That was a hell of a lot more than I could say for myself.

CHAPTER 2

MATTHEW



I climbed the rickety ladder to the attic, desperate for a break from my glaring laptop screen. Dawn's sunlight filtered in through the small window, casting a golden glow over the mountains of dusty boxes and forgotten memories.

Greg had never liked coming up here because he was convinced we had ghosts.

Ghosts in a newly built high-rise where no one had died—I'd even looked into it in a vain attempt to make him stop rambling about it—didn't seem particularly likely, but now that I was thinking about it, I had to wonder if it was because he didn't want *me* up here.

Shoving guys into a dusty, gross attic to hide them from me when I came home unexpectedly was definitely peak Greg.

I tried to put that thought out of my head and focused on rifling through the boxes instead.

The stifling heat and plumes of dust sucked, but I was determined to find the one thing I thought might give me some inspiration.

"It's gotta be here somewhere," I muttered to myself, or maybe Greg's imaginary ghosts, wiping a sheen of sweat from my brow with the back of my hand.

This would have been *so* much easier if Greg had just helped me go through all this shit earlier. But he didn't want me to know he couldn't lift more than ten pounds with his noodle arms.

Just when I was starting to entertain the idea of giving up, I spotted it—a VHS tape with “Mistletoe Hollow” scrawled across the white label in faded purple marker. I’d even drawn a shitty little Christmas tree.

My heart leapt with rare excitement.

Back in the days we’d had to record shows on TV if they were running while we were at school or dragged along on errands, I’d always wanted to make sure I had my favorite comfort movie ready to go at the drop of a hat. I’d never imagined back then that I’d be able to find whatever I wanted streaming online, but that wouldn’t be the same anyway.

This was *my* Mistletoe Hollow.

I’d told myself I just wanted some inspiration and Evie herself had recommended it, but considering the rush of joy I felt when I saw the tape, that was probably a lie.

In all honesty, I just needed something to lift my spirits.

Even just a little bit.

Couldn’t hurt, though, considering I kept struggling with writing a romance where the love interest wasn’t a total douchebag. My fears about my own issues shining through my work were apparently not remotely unfounded.

If I based him off the love interest in Mistletoe Hollow, maybe I’d have better luck.

Ben Clark was the real star of the movie in my eyes. I’d had a crush on him from the moment I first laid eyes on him. His boyish good looks, tousled chestnut hair, and million-watt smile that made his blue eyes sparkle had caught my attention immediately.

All the other boys in my grade were trying to sneak peeks at their older brothers’ Playboy magazines, but I just wanted to watch Mistletoe Hollow on repeat, imagining myself ice skating with Ben like the leading lady in the movie did, slipping and falling into his strong arms and clinging to that red flannel shirt and leather coat that barely contained his muscular frame.

Oh, yeah.

Definitely my gay awakening.

Maybe Greg had subconsciously reminded me of him. He did kind of look like Ben in a cheap knock-off way.

I hurried down the attic stairs, the tape clutched to my chest like I was escaping a cave with stolen treasure.

The living room was dim, with only a sliver of sunlight peeking through the curtains. Perfect ambiance for getting lost in another world.

Now that I'd found my movie, I just needed a VCR to play it on.

There was a thrift store a few blocks away that had to have one. I'd always wanted to check it out, but Greg had never let me go in there because it would "embarrass" him if someone spotted me thrifting.

Oh, but leaving me destitute was fine.

The second I stepped outside, I was engulfed by the vibrant energy of the city. It was a bustling hive of activity, a living, breathing organism that never truly slept. And during the holiday season, it was even busier than usual.

People from all walks of life went about their business, each immersed in their own little worlds, completely oblivious to my personal quest. Street vendors wearing Santa hats and headbands with reindeer antlers hawked their wares, their voices drowned out by the cacophony of car horns and the distant wail of sirens. Office workers in crisp suits navigated the sea of humanity with practiced ease, weaving around tourists gawking at the towering skyscrapers as they struggled in vain to capture their massive height in smartphone cameras.

As I walked, I took in the sights and sounds of the city that had been my home for years. The familiar facades of the buildings, the murals that adorned the walls, the smells of fresh hot dogs and pretzels and other delicious street food—all of it was a comforting reminder that life went on, regardless of personal heartache.

The chime above the door announced my arrival as I stepped into the thrift store. The air was thick with the smell of old clothes, mothballs, and musty furniture. I sneezed and got a few dirty looks.

I felt like I had stepped back in time as I wandered through the aisles, passing racks of vintage clothing and shelves filled with knick-knacks from a bygone era. A woman was haggling with the cashier over the price of a porcelain doll, her voice rising in frustration. An old man inspected a record player, his fingers gently caressing the needle. The whole scene was like something out of a movie.

I finally found what I was looking for in the electronics section. The dusty gray VCR player looked like it had seen better days, but so had I, and it was only ten bucks. I picked it up and felt an instant connection as nostalgia washed over me.

Yes. This was the one.

With the VCR cradled in my arms, I made my way to the cashier and stood a few feet back from the current customer so I wouldn't be directly within range of her fury.

"I'm telling you, it was marked three dollars!" she insisted, pointing an accusing finger at the doll in question.

The doll, with its porcelain face cracked and one eye missing, looked like something out of a horror movie. Its remaining eye stared blankly ahead, oblivious to the heated exchange taking place.

The cashier, a young goth woman whose "Bite Me" vampire bat shirt and spiked choker suggested she hadn't enjoyed a single day past Halloween, sighed heavily. "Ma'am, the price tag says four dollars. If you don't want to pay that, then put it back."

The customer's face reddened like a tomato as she sputtered indignantly. "But I saw a sign that said dolls were three dollars! This is false advertising!"

The cashier rolled her eyes behind her black glasses and turned to look at the shelves behind her, where an assortment

of dolls were lined up. Their blank, vaguely smiling faces peered out from behind the glass.

“*Those* dolls are three dollars. *This* one,” the cashier said, pointing at the doll in question, “is a collectible. It’s four dollars. Take it or leave it.”

The woman let out a frustrated huff and shoved her card at the cashier’s hand. “Fine, but I want you to know that I’m not happy about this,” she said.

“That’s fine,” said the cashier, ignoring the card while she slipped the doll into a paper bag.

“Take my card!”

“The card reader is right there,” the cashier said, gesturing to it with pointed silver nails that looked like cat’s claws.

The customer jammed the card into the reader, muttering a stream of expletives under her breath. The reader chirped and she ripped the card back out like she was trying to hurt it.

“Have a nice day,” the cashier said sweetly, handing the bagged doll to the customer.

“Merry Christmas,” the customer shot back before storming out of the store.

“Thanks, but I don’t celebrate it,” she called after the customer, the bells above the door jingling as it swung shut.

The customer spun around and tried to grab the door so she could keep arguing, but another customer pushed past her and swiftly became the new victim of her ire.

I couldn’t help but laugh a little as I stepped up to the counter, placing the VCR player on the counter. “I hope I’m not going to be as much trouble as that last customer.”

The cashier gave me a wry grin as she rang up my purchase.

“Trust me, no one could be as much trouble as she is,” she replied, handing me a paper bag with the VCR player inside.

I paid for the player and thanked her, feeling a sense of triumph as I walked out of the store, my treasure safely in hand.

The sun was now high in the sky, casting a golden glow over the city, and the air was crisp and cool. A few snow flurries swirled through the air, hinting we might get a white Christmas after a couple of disappointing years.

It was a beautiful day, really. The kind of day I always loved back before everything went to hell.

As I walked, I felt the twinges of a renewed sense of hope. Sure, my life had taken a turn for the worse recently, but that didn't mean it had to be over.

Maybe the nostalgia of Mistletoe Hollow would be just the thing to kickstart my creativity and help me write the love story I had been struggling with.

One where the love interest was kind and caring. And not at all like Greg.

When I got back to my apartment, I wasted no time grabbing a bowl of microwave popcorn before untangling the VCR's cords and hooking them up to the adapter in the back of the TV.

Once everything was set up, I grabbed one of the many tubs of ice cream in my freezer, slid the tape into the VCR, grabbed the oversized remote that had come with it, and dropped myself onto the couch.

I rewound the tape all the way to the beginning before hitting the play button on the remote and leaning forward, holding my breath.

The opening scene faded in, panning over the picturesque main street of Mistletoe Hollow. My heart swelled as I took in the familiar storefronts and friendly faces of the townspeople. Even though it was just a movie set, it felt like coming home.

The story was a simple one, but it was perfect in its simplicity. The leading lady was a big city lawyer named Holly who got stranded in Mistletoe Hollow when she wrecked her car in a snowdrift only to be rescued by Ben, who ran Clark Christmas Tree Farm.

When he took her in, he expected it to only be for a night, maybe two at most. But then a snowstorm rolled in, blocking

all the roads out of town.

At first, the lawyer was frustrated to be stuck in such a small, aggressively quaint place. Which was hilarious, considering I would've done *anything* to get stuck with Ben.

Slowly, though, the charm of the town started wearing down her cynical city exterior. The townspeople welcomed her with open arms, and the time spent with Ben began to thaw her lonely heart.

As the days went on, she found herself caring less and less about getting back to the city. Mistletoe Hollow was working its magic, just as it always did. The lawyer was falling in love with the place, and the people.

Especially Ben Clark.

Looking back, the storytelling wasn't even all that great, but as a kid, those sweet, tender moments and over-the-top antics of the townsfolk always trying to get them together had been just the escape I needed from an often tumultuous home life.

I sighed contentedly, ready to watch their romance unfold once again.

Then the tape started glitching, because of course it did.

The tracking lines zigzagged wildly and the picture cut out with a bright flash before fading to black.

"No, no, no," I muttered, leaping up to smack the side of the VCR. The screen flashed back on, but something was off. It was glowing strangely bright.

So bright I couldn't even look directly at it. It was like staring into the sun.

I leaned in to try to figure out what was happening. But as I did, I felt a strange pulling sensation. The glowing intensified, until suddenly I was plunged into blinding light.

Everything went white.

I yelled out in shock, trying to grasp onto something solid as everything morphed and shifted around me.

When my vision finally cleared, I found myself not in my living room, but sprawled out on a snowy road a few feet away from a smoking silver SUV.

It took me a few moments to get my bearings. I slowly stood up, snowflakes settling on my hair and shoulders as I brushed the dirt from my pants and took in my surroundings.

I was on a narrow country road that cut through a sprawling evergreen forest. The trees were dusted with snow and the ones along the side of the road were strung up with twinkling Christmas lights. There was a large painted sign in the near distance, but I couldn't read what it said.

I couldn't see for shit.

Where were my glasses?

I felt around in the snow until my searching fingers found the tip of an earpiece. I lifted my glasses out of the snow and put them on, adjusting them on the bridge of my nose. They were a little bent and lopsided, but otherwise okay.

My mind reeled when I read the sign.

Clark Christmas Tree Farm.

This was the exact opening scene in the movie.

I glanced back at the SUV, which was a dead ringer for the one the main character had broken down in. Tentatively, I tried the driver's side door. It was unlocked. I slid inside and turned the key in the ignition. It let out a few feeble cranks but refused to start.

"This can't be real," I muttered to myself.

Maybe the VCR had electrocuted me and this was some vivid hallucination.

Or maybe someone had stashed all their drugs in it and they'd somehow gone airborne and gotten up my nose. That seemed like something that could happen. I'd always been afraid of taking anything stronger than Advil, so I wouldn't know.

Or maybe that creepy doll wasn't the only haunted artifact in the thrift store.

I used to have nightmares every time I fell asleep, so I'd taught myself at an early age to check my palms to make sure all the lines looked right so I could tell if I was dreaming.

Hesitantly, I looked down at my trembling hands and counted every line right where it should be.

Every line except for my love lines, at least. Those had always foretold an utterly luckless future in long-term romance.

Okay. This was definitely a dream.

These love lines promised me a happily-ever-after.

CHAPTER 3

MATTHEW



I was dreaming.

I *had* to be dreaming.

But that didn't make the icy wind sting any less as it cut through my thin jacket like a knife.

That was the main reason I was entertaining the thought that maybe cursed VCRs were actually a thing and that I had somehow literally been transported to Mistletoe Hollow.

Because the wind freaking *hurt*.

In the distance, I heard the voices of children at play. I moved toward the sound, desperate for any sign of life.

As I crested a hill, I spotted a young boy and girl building a lopsided snowman nearly as tall as they were.

The girl packed snow in her mittened hands while the boy searched for the perfect sticks for arms. Their bright hats and scarves made me ache for my own warm woolens back home.

My heart seized as I recognized them.

Penny and Bobby, the children from the movie brought to life.

Typically, in my dreams, faces were formless, constantly morphing if they weren't outright bloblike. But Penny and Bobby's faces were consistent, just like I was watching them on TV.

Okay, this was *too* surreal.

I had no choice but to approach them, though, or freeze to death out here.

“Excuse m-me!” I called out, my teeth chattering from the cold to the point where it hurt to speak. The children turned, their eyes wide. “Can you go get someone to help me? I’m kind of... l-l-lost.”

The girl stepped in front of her brother with a protective and suspicious glare that was clearly meant to strike terror into my heart. The glare didn’t, but the icy, rock-solid snowball she was aggressively building between her mittens kind of did. Especially since she was clearly sizing me up.

“We’re not supposed to talk to strangers,” she said.

“You’re absolutely right, I’m so sorry,” I said right away, holding up my frozen palms in submission.

“You look weird,” she added matter-of-factly.

I glanced down at my dirty clothes, which were definitely more “chic hipster” than anything from the ‘90s, and groaned.

Great. I had become the Big City Douchebag type I’d always hated in this very movie.

“Could you please go get an adult?”

The two looked at each other, some silent communication passing between them. Then they were off, bounding through the snow.

I sagged against a tree in relief, trying to keep myself from sinking all the way to the ground in sheer exhaustion.

I looked down at my numb fingers, which were beginning to throb and redden.

Well, that wasn’t good.

If haunted VCRs were real—which they weren’t, but *what if*—I was on a fast track to losing my fingers.

Or worse.

What if they got lost?

What if no one believed them?

What if...

Minutes ticked by, each one stretching longer than the last. I stamped my feet in a futile attempt to keep the blood flowing, my gaze constantly shifting between the hill the kids had vanished over and the desolate landscape around me.

The snow, once a picturesque blanket, now felt like an endless frozen wasteland.

Was it true that if you died in a dream, you died in real life? Because the cold setting into my bones felt pretty damn real.

Just as a shiver of fear began to mix with the biting cold, a sound caught my attention—a subtle crunch of snow under the weight of boots.

It was faint at first, like a distant echo across the quiet, snowy landscape. I strained my ears, listening as the crunching grew louder and more purposeful.

I glanced toward the hill, the source of the sound. The winter sun, weak and low in the sky, was casting a soft, golden light that slowly gave way to the evening's twilight.

That was when I saw him.

A figure appearing over the hilltop, silhouetted against the fading light. Backlit by the sun, he was like a shadow come to life, his features hidden but his form surrounded by a gentle glow like he was some kind of angel.

It was a mesmerizing sight, as if he was stepping right out of a dream himself.

As the figure approached, the surreal feeling only deepened.

It was Ben Clark.

The Ben Clark.

He didn't look exactly like he did in the movie, which was kind of a funny detail for a dream to stick in there.

I'd never really considered that if the character were real, he wouldn't be a carbon copy of the actor that had been cast to play him.

I hadn't thought the real Ben would be *hotter*, though.

Real Ben was a god among men, not a pouty-lipped model airbrushed and smoothed into uncanny valley for the front cover of Teen Beat. He looked a few years older than before—bulkier, stronger, with a scrape of stubble.

No, he didn't belong on the cover of Teen Beat.

He belonged on the cover of Bear World Magazine.

Maybe dreams really did come true.

That needling voice in the back of my head whispered that I wasn't actually dreaming, but I shoved it down because dreaming after getting electrocuted into a coma made a hell of a lot more sense than cursed VCRs being a thing.

But this being a dream didn't make my heart flip in my chest any less when Ben Clark himself flashed that blindingly white smile at me.

This time, he wasn't smiling at Holly, Mistletoe Hollow's leading lady. The leading lady who totally did not deserve him and took him for granted all the way up to the final scene, where she realized her heart belonged in Mistletoe Hollow, not "the Big City."

"Are you alright?" His voice broke through my daze. "My niece and nephew said you needed help."

Hearing him speak directly to me robbed me of my ability to reply.

I stood there staring blankly at him, unable to form a coherent sentence or even get a word out beyond a stammered, "Uhhh..."

He walked up to me, the snow crunching beneath his work boots, until he was standing so close that I could feel the heat radiating from his body.

"Were you in that car that crashed on the side of the road?" he asked, his brow furrowed in genuine concern even though he didn't know who the hell I was.

Even though I wasn't Holly.

“Y-yep, that’s m-me,” I managed to get out through chattering teeth, laughing awkwardly.

“You look damn near frozen solid,” he grunted in typical Ben fashion, gruff but kind.

He shrugged out of his brown leather coat, and even though all he had on beneath it was that characteristic plaid shirt, he was so ridiculously huge that the cold couldn’t have bothered him much.

When he held the coat out to me, I just stared at him, bewildered.

“Here. Take this before you catch your death,” he said.

Okay, so I wasn’t Holly, but I was definitely playing her part. This happened in the movie, too.

“Oh no, I couldn’t,” I protested, even as my fingers itched to grab the warm coat.

“Wasn’t a request,” Ben said.

In one smooth motion, he swept the coat around my shoulders.

I sagged into its warmth, the scent of pine and woodsmoke enveloping me. Ben’s hands lingered for a moment, steadying me.

Our eyes met and something crackled in the frozen air between us.

Get it together, I scolded myself, glancing away.

This was insane, even by dream standards.

Maybe coma dreams were more vivid.

“What’s your name, anyway?” he asked, his voice strangely... husky.

“M-Matthew,” I replied breathlessly.

“Matthew,” he echoed. Maybe I was just imagining things, but it was like he was tasting my name on his tongue. “I’m Ben.”

“I know,” I said before I could stop myself.

He cocked an eyebrow. “You know?”

“I-I mean, yeah. You run the farm here, right?”

He continued to look at me funny, but after a few moments, he gave a low chuckle. “I think the cold’s getting to you a bit. Let’s get you up to the house where it’s warm. I’ll send someone out for your car after,” he said gently.

He kept one hand on my back as he guided me down the snowy lane, a solid anchor against the biting wind. Wind that barely touched me, considering his broad back served as a literal human shield against it.

When the house finally came into view, I found myself getting a little excited.

It was just like in the movies—a sprawling log house nestled among snow-covered evergreens. Golden light spilled from the windows and smoke curled in enticing tendrils from the chimney.

Ben led me up the steps to the front door. “Welcome to the Clark family cabin,” he said, giving me another dazzling smile as he opened the door.

I guess technically, it was a cabin. If cabins came in the form of small mansions.

The inside was cozy and lived-in, decorated with handmade furniture and quilts. A fire crackled in the stone hearth, the warmth instantly bringing life to my numb fingers and toes. It kind of hurt, but in a good way. I at least wasn’t going to lose anything important.

Hopefully.

Before I could take it all in, though, the two young kids from earlier came barreling into the room.

“Benny!” the little girl shouted, flinging herself at Ben’s legs. The boy was close behind, latching onto Ben’s side in a tight hug. “You brought the weird guy!”

“Hey kiddos,” Ben said, ruffling the hair on their heads. “This is my new friend Matthew. He’s going to stay with us tonight.”

I wanted to protest, but I didn’t have the chance since the children immediately seized on the announcement.

“Hi Matthew!” Penny waved, far less suspicious now that I had a name. “Wanna help us build a snowman?”

“Maybe tomorrow,” Ben said. “We’ve gotta get this guy thawed out.”

Just then, an older woman emerged from the kitchen, her silver hair glowing in the firelight.

“Well, hello there,” she said, giving me a pleasant smile that made the lines around her dark brown eyes crinkle as she wiped her flour-dusted hands off on the apron clinging to her stout frame. “Ben didn’t tell me we had company.”

“This is Matthew,” he said, kicking off his snowy boots. “He’s from the city. His car broke down on the road into town.”

“Oh, dear,” she said, her eyes widening as she looked me over with renewed concern. “I hope you didn’t have to walk far for help?”

“Not too far,” I said, even though every single step had felt like climbing a mountain.

“Well, we’d better get you warmed up,” she said. “Come into the kitchen. I’ll fix you up something hot to drink.”

I followed her and Ben through the cozy house into a bright, cheerful kitchen. She busied herself filling up a kettle while Ben pulled out a chair for me at a huge wooden table that was clearly built by a talented carpenter.

I had to wonder if Ben himself had made it.

“I’m Ben’s mom, by the way,” she said over her shoulder. “You can call me Carol.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, trying not to act like I already knew exactly who these people were.

The last time I’d gotten the attention of the various characters in my dreams, the dream had transformed into a hellscape and my hands turned into ham sandwiches.

The kids had trailed after us into the kitchen, watching me curiously.

Carol set a steaming mug of hot cocoa in front of me. “This’ll warm you right up.”

I took a tentative sip, the rich chocolatey flavor immediately soothing. “Thank you.”

Ben, who had disappeared for a moment, sat down across from me, his brow furrowed in concern. “I tried calling the tow truck, but there was no answer. Looks like they’re busy, and there’s only one. We’ll have to leave your car out there for now.”

My heart sank until I realized it didn’t make much of a difference whether I had a car or not. There wasn’t exactly a road I could take back to the real world.

Waking world, I reminded myself.

“Is there... a hotel in town I could stay at?” I asked, worried I’d overstay my welcome even if they were just dream people.

Even though I definitely didn’t mind getting stuck with Ben.

Funny. I was even awkward when I was asleep.

Carol and Ben exchanged a look. “I’m afraid Mistletoe Hollow is too small for anything like that,” Carol said. “We don’t even have traffic lights.”

“But you’re more than welcome to stay here with me,” Ben added.

I hesitated. There were worse ways to spend a dream than living out my favorite movie.

“If it’s not too much trouble,” I said.

But Ben just smiled warmly. “No trouble at all. I’ll get the guest room ready for you before I drop my mom and the kids off at her place.”

As he headed upstairs, I took another sip of cocoa, letting the sweet warmth ground me. This whole situation was unbelievable, yet somehow it felt right. Like I was meant to be here.

Carol patted my arm. “You just focus on getting warm. I’ll whip up some dinner for us all.”

The kids chattered excitedly about their snowman as Carol cooked. Despite the freakishly surreal circumstances, I found myself relaxing a little.

There was something comforting about this place, about these people.

For the first time in a long while, I felt like I was home.

And even if I knew it would only last for as long as it took to wake up, my life in the real world was just chaotic enough that I wanted to enjoy it for as long as I could make it last.

Mistletoe Hollow had always been my escape. So why should it be any different in my dreams?

CHAPTER 4

MATTHEW



I wandered the living room of Ben's rustic home now that the hot chocolate had thoroughly warmed me up, feeling both out of place and eerily comfortable all at once.

Everywhere I looked, there were subtle hints of the life Ben led—wooden carvings, family photos, and a pair of well-worn work boots by the door.

The realization dawned on me. Ben was out dropping off Carol, Penny, and Bobby. And here I was, alone in his house.

A small voice of apprehension chirped in the back of my mind. Wasn't it weird for him to leave someone he barely knew, alone in his home?

Then again, this *was* Mistletoe Hollow.

People here trusted easily and lived openly. It was a stark contrast from the protective walls I'd built around myself in the city.

I sank into the cozy armchair next to the fireplace and reached out to the crocheted blanket draped over the back.

I caressed the soft yarn with my fingertips. Like virtually everything else in this house, it was clearly handmade. I hesitated before pulling the blanket around my shoulders and bundling up in it.

It smelled like Ben. It took everything in me to not bury my face in it and inhale like my life depended on it.

Actually...

If this *was* a dream—and it clearly was, however vivid it was, because how the hell wouldn't it be—why not enjoy it?

I turned my face to the side and breathed in a little, my head filling with Ben's woodsmoke scent.

It was the kind of scent you might come across smelling candles in a boutique, the kind you'd swoon over and then shove into your shopping buddy's face until they promised it was definitely the best candle ever.

And, oh, was I *swooning* .

I bit my lip and breathed in again, so entranced I didn't hear the door opening until it was too late.

I jolted and instinctively flung the blanket back over the chair, but the wind blew it open and Ben's tall frame filled the doorway so quickly, I wasn't sure what he'd seen.

I cleared my throat, trying to find my voice. "You know, in the city, leaving a stranger alone in your house would be pretty crazy," I said.

Ben gave a chuckle that didn't sound horrified enough for him to have actually caught me in the act of smelling his blanket.

I hoped.

"Well, this ain't the city. Folks here trust each other. And besides," he added with a crooked smile, "you don't exactly strike me as the burglar type."

Oh, no. Not the burglar type. Just the blanket-sniffing type.

So much worse.

"Care for a glass of wine?" he asked, hanging his coat up on the rack by the door. It was a sturdy rack, but it still wobbled a little beneath the added weight.

The coat probably weighed twenty pounds, considering it had to cover his massive frame.

"That would be great," I said quickly, trying to fix the blanket while his back was turned so he wouldn't suspect anything.

I hoped he wouldn't notice the terror-induced bulge in my pants. His scent was probably at least partially to blame for that, too. "Um. How were the roads?"

"Snowy," he replied, getting a tall bottle of blood-red wine from yet another rack. He was a carpenter, though, so I couldn't exactly be surprised there were so many handmade wooden furnishings. "You know, you're lucky you weren't hurt. These roads can be treacherous to say the least. It might take some time to get you back on the road, but at least you have your life."

"My guardian angel's been working overtime lately, I guess," I said, squeezing my thighs together in hopes crushing my traitorous cock between my legs would soften it before he noticed. The last thing I needed was him thinking I was jerking myself off in his house while he was gone.

Actually, maybe that wasn't as bad as smelling his throw. A throw I was sure his mom made for him, on second thought, because he definitely wasn't the crocheting type.

Okay. That worked. Now I was going soft.

"Well, he's doing a good job," said Ben, coming back over with two wine glasses.

I stared blankly at him. "Who's doing a good job at what?" I asked, my mouth going totally dry.

He gave me a puzzled look. It was adorable. "Your angel."

"Oh. Right." I laughed stiffly.

He set my glass down on the narrow end table beside the armchair and settled into the other. When I saw how huge he was compared to it, I realized immediately that I was curled up in the oversized one that was clearly made for him.

"Do you want to switch?" I asked, motioning to our chairs as my cheeks flushed with heat. I was pretty damn sure this was not a man who switched.

Who was I kidding? He was straight. This was a Christmas movie from the '90s.

“I’m good,” he said, shifting his weight in the chair. The legs looked like they were going to snap off. He had to weigh three-hundred pounds of solid muscle.

My apparently desperate mind immediately came up with a mental image of him lowering that massive frame over me, pinning me against that huge table of his, and my cock went rock-hard all over again.

“So,” Ben began after a long sip of his wine, setting his own glass on the table beside his chair, “what brought you to Mistletoe Hollow? We don’t often see strangers around here.”

I hesitated for a moment, trying to weave together a story that made sense in this world. “Honestly? I thought it might be a good place for a fresh start, and the snowstorm caught me off-guard. I can work remotely, so I planned on just hunkering down and finishing up the project I’m writing.”

“You’re a writer?” he asked, seeming genuinely curious.

“Yeah,” I replied, wondering what kinds of movies they’d even have in movie world. Did they even *have* movies? Come to think of it, I hadn’t seen a TV. I needed to get off the subject. “My... um, my ex and I split recently, and I needed somewhere quiet to regroup. Cities are kind of overwhelming sometimes.”

Ben tilted his head, his eyes searching mine, possibly for any hint of deceit.

Though I couldn’t imagine what he possibly had to fear from a twink like me. Maybe it was just that typical small-town suspicion of outsiders.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. “Breakups are tough.”

“Yeah, especially when you come to the realization that the person you thought you knew wasn’t who he appeared to be,” I replied, recalling the sting of betrayal.

Shit.

I’d meant to say *they* .

Not *he* .

Ben thought about that for a few long moments, the golden flames from the fireplace dancing in his warm eyes, and I waited with bated breath, not sure if he'd caught the pronoun I'd used. Maybe he'd throw me back out in the snow.

"You know, everyone here has a past, stories they'd rather forget," he said at length. "That's the beauty of places like Mistletoe Hollow. They allow for new beginnings. If you get stuck here for a while, you're welcome to stay with me while you start yours. Holidays are always better with new friends and family."

Maybe he hadn't heard me.

"I appreciate that, but aren't you curious about mine? I mean, not everyone's accepting, and this *is* a small town," I said, taking the opportunity to gauge his reaction.

Ben looked me straight in the eyes. "Curious?" he echoed with a low chuckle. "You could say that."

Before I could ask him what he meant, his huge warm hand was on my knee, his thumb caressing my upper thigh through my pants. I stared at him in absolute shock, my mouth hanging open, and he took that as the opportunity to lean in and brush his lips against mine.

I froze, unsure of how to respond, but when Ben started to pull away, panic flared. I reached up, tangling my fingers in his thick hair and pulled him back to me. The kiss deepened, Ben's tongue sweeping against my lips until I parted them with a soft moan.

This was *definitely* not in the movie.

"I thought you were straight," I said breathlessly, breathing him in.

"I thought I was, too," he said in an amused tone, his fingertips finding my belt buckle and deftly undoing it. "Guess tonight's just full of surprises."

Ben lifted me effortlessly, carrying me to the plush furry rug in front of the fireplace. As he laid me down, the heat from the flames warmed my skin. Our clothes came off in a frenzy of need. I'd never wanted someone so badly.

Ben's muscular body hovered over me, his calloused hands exploring every inch of my smooth skin. I arched into his touch, gasping as he took me in his hand. He stroked me slowly at first, his eyes locked on mine, gauging my reaction.

"Please," I begged, writhing beneath him.

When I felt his rough fingers at my entrance, I froze up again, clarity bleeding into my lust. "Wait. I—I need lube. There's no way I can take you dry. *Any* part of you."

He got something out of the end table next to his chair and I caught a glimpse of a small glass bottle. He slicked his fingers, rubbing them together.

I tensed in anticipation as he circled my entrance before pushing one huge digit inside. He took his time prepping me, working me open until I was a panting, whimpering mess.

Whatever he'd put in my hole was burning and tingling slightly, but it was a cool burn.

"What is that?" I asked, writhing as he crooked his finger inside me.

"Oil," he replied, his voice husky. "There's a bit of peppermint in it."

"A bit?" I echoed with a nervous laugh.

Oh well. Too fucking late.

He positioned himself at my entrance, his hard length nudging against me. He locked eyes with me again as he slowly pushed inside, stretching me, filling me deeper than I thought possible. I cried out, the mix of pain and pleasure overwhelming.

Ben held my hips, easing into me with a patience that belied the heat in his gaze. "You okay?" he asked roughly, his muscles trembling with restraint as he slid deeper.

I nodded, beyond words, lost in sensation. He filled me so completely, my body yielding around his thick length. When our hips finally met flush, we stilled, breaths mingling, adjusting to the intimacy.

He began to move slowly, withdrawing halfway before pushing back in, setting a languid pace. I wrapped my legs around his waist, heels digging into the small of his back, urging him deeper. He growled, bracing his forearms on either side of my head and picking up speed.

I arched into him, clawing at his shoulders, his back, desperate for more. Harder, faster he pounded into me, angling his hips until he hit that spot inside that made me see stars. Cries of pleasure spilled from my lips as he relentlessly drove me higher, my swollen cock trapped between us, leaking and throbbing.

“So... fucking... good,” Ben ground out between thrusts.

He shifted, grabbing my knee and hiking my leg over his shoulder. The new position let him penetrate me even deeper. I shuddered, teetering on the brink, pleasure coiling hot and tight in my core.

Sweat slicked our skin as we moved together, the only sounds our ragged breathing and the crackle of logs in the fireplace. Ben’s eyes blazed into mine, his gaze searing. He held me on the edge, relentless in his passion but controlled.

“Come for me,” he commanded roughly.

That was all it took. My climax slammed into me and I cried out, coming hard between us, my inner walls clenching around him. He followed with a low groan, finding his own release deep inside me.

The burning, tingling sensation was filling me now. Was his come peppermint-based? Somehow, that made perfect sense. I started to panic, but it felt as good as it hurt even though it felt like my freaking torso was full of hot ice.

Ben collapsed on top of me, his massive frame enveloping me in warmth despite the chill of his release inside me. I squirmed beneath him, torn between pleasure and mounting fear.

“You okay?” he murmured, brushing his lips against my temple.

“Y-yeah, that was just... just unexpected. But in a good way,” I panted. A very good way, if I was being honest.

Ben pulled out as he leaned down, capturing my lips in a slow, sensual kiss as my hole fluttered where his cock had filled me moments before. I sighed into the kiss, the tingling returning as our tongues danced lazily. He trailed his mouth along my jaw, down my throat, exploring my sensitive skin with lips and teeth until I was squirming beneath him again.

“Ready for round two?” he rumbled against my ear before nipping at the lobe playfully.

Arousal stirred low in my belly at his words, my spent cock already trying to twitch back to life. I shifted beneath his bulk, reveling in the feel of his powerful body against mine.

Ben’s hand slid down my torso, fingers dancing along my hipbone before wrapping around my semi-hard length. I gasped as he stroked me back to fullness, my oversensitive flesh tingling.

“So responsive,” he murmured appreciatively, swiping his thumb over the head and spreading the moisture that had already begun to bead there.

I rocked my hips up into his grip, seeking more friction, but he released me and sat back on his haunches between my splayed thighs. His heated gaze raked over my naked, disheveled form and I flushed under the intensity of it.

“Flip over. Hands and knees,” he commanded gruffly.

I obeyed instantly, my arousal kicking up another notch at the dominant tone in his voice. I got onto all fours, facing the fire, its warmth caressing my bare skin. I heard the pop of a bottle cap opening behind me and glanced over my shoulder to see Ben drizzling more of the oil over his rigid length.

My hole clenched instinctively at the sight.

Large, calloused hands gripped my hips as the blunt head of his cock nudged my entrance. I tensed in anticipation, letting out a shuddering breath.

In one smooth motion he slammed home, burying himself to the hilt inside me. I cried out, fingers scrabbling at the plush fur rug for purchase as he immediately set a pounding pace. He wasn’t going so slow this time.

“Fuck, you feel incredible,” Ben groaned above me, his fingers digging into my hips hard enough to leave bruises. That thought sent a spike of arousal through me and I pushed back to meet his powerful thrusts.

The sound of slapping flesh and our harsh breaths filled the room, underscored by the crackling fire. He adjusted his angle, nailing my sweet spot with every plunge of his cock. I mewled and writhed beneath him, pressure building once more at the base of my spine.

“Touch yourself,” he ordered roughly.

I balanced on one forearm and reached down to stroke my leaking erection in time with his relentless rhythm. The dual stimulation quickly pushed me to the brink again.

“Ben, I’m close,” I panted out in warning.

He growled in response, his thrusts becoming erratic as he too chased his peak. Suddenly his large hand wrapped around the back of my neck in a firm but gentle grip, holding me in place as he pistoned into me.

I came with a broken cry, my release pulsing over my fingers and onto the rug below. Ben followed seconds after with a guttural shout, his cock swelling and spurting within me until I felt like I was going to explode with whatever magical peppermint come he’d stuffed me with.

Like I was his own personal Christmas pastry.

I collapsed forward onto the rug, Ben’s weight settling heavily over me, his cock still buried deep as the last tremors of his climax shuddered through him. We laid there, panting and spent, skin slick with sweat.

After a few moments, Ben gently withdrew from me with a grunt, his release trickling out and down my thighs. I winced at the cold, tingling sensation.

Yep. Definitely peppermint.

He rolled onto his back beside me with a satisfied sigh, muscular arm curling around my shoulders and pulling me against his broad chest. I breathed him in, nuzzling into the

crook of his neck. His earthy scent mingled with the remnants of our lovemaking.

“Well... I didn't think that was going to happen,” I murmured, still trying to catch my breath.

Ben chuckled, the sound rumbling beneath my ear. “Really? I've had my eye on you since I first saw you.”

I lifted my head to look at him in surprise. “What? Really?”

He grinned. “Oh yeah. City boy like you? Definitely got my attention.” His large hand came up to cup my jaw, thumb stroking over my bottom lip. “Didn't know if you'd be interested, though. Glad I was wrong.”

I leaned into the touch, heart fluttering. “Very wrong,” I agreed, a smile tugging at my lips.

We laid together for a while, just holding each other close as the fire slowly died down. The adrenaline was fading, leaving me pleasantly worn out. My eyes drifted shut.

“Hey now, don't fall asleep on me yet,” Ben said, jostling me gently. “Let's get you to bed.”

With a groan, I let him pull me to my feet. He kept an arm around my waist, supporting part of my weight as he led me upstairs to the bedroom. My legs felt like they were made of jelly and I was practically stumbling.

“Easy now,” he murmured as we reached the top landing. I glanced around the room, taking in the slanted ceilings, exposed beams, and large window overlooking the snowy woods behind the house. A wrought iron framed bed dominated the space, covered in a handmade quilt and plush pillows.

Ben gently lowered me onto the edge of the bed and covered me with the quilt. I sank into the soft mattress with a contented sigh. He climbed under the covers next to me and wrapped his huge arm around my waist, pulling me against his strong body.

Sleepiness tugged heavily at me, my body pleasantly spent. I nuzzled against Ben's chest with a contented murmur. His

arms tightened around me and I let my eyes drift shut, lulled by the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

This Christmas was shaping up to be very different than I'd imagined, but as I laid there enveloped in Ben's embrace, I decided different wasn't so bad after all.

CHAPTER 5

MATTHEW



I awoke with a start, momentarily confused by the unfamiliar room.

Sunlight streamed in through the curtains—dark green-and-gold plaid, because of course they were plaid—and the previous day came flooding back.

I was still in Mistletoe Hollow.

Literally still in Mistletoe Hollow.

And Ben Clark had *fucked me in the ass*.

With a groan, I dragged myself from the warm nest of blankets and limped to the master bathroom. The towels and shower curtain were all festive, with little embroidered holly clusters that would've been especially cute to me if my name were Holly.

Considering I'd taken her place, I was kind of surprised they weren't little embroidered Matthews instead.

That would be a little *too* wild.

I wasn't letting myself think about how I was still in the freaking movie. I'd been afraid to fall asleep because it would probably mean the dream would be over, but I'd just woken up in Ben's bed and my mind was not ready to accept the implications.

People had long dreams all the time, right? That was a thing that could happen. Especially if they really were in comas, probably.

Okay, maybe it would be better if getting sucked into Mistletoe Hollow via cursed VCR was something that actually happened as opposed to me being in a coma in the hospital.

Not better for my sanity, but... better.

I turned on the shower, which was the kind for normal people with a showerhead that stuck out of the wall instead of a giant stainless steel hexagon that made you feel like you were caught in the rain.

The showerhead was way higher than usual, though, and I realized it was probably because Ben was so freaking huge that he'd hit his head on it if it were positioned at an average height.

He was huge, alright—and in every regard. I was surprised I could even walk after that.

The hot water soothed my aching muscles even though it was practically scalding. I was never satisfied with a shower's temperature unless it was turning my skin lobster red, and this was satisfying to say the least.

I wished he had a bathtub so I could soothe my ass, too. Maybe even a hot tub.

A guy could literally dream, right?

I kind of wondered if I could just manifest shit like that. Why couldn't Holly have been a powerful witch? Sure, it was a Christmas movie, but that never stopped Tim Burton.

I picked up the dark amber shampoo bottle on the corner of the shower stall since Ben had told me to make myself at home. I could barely get my hand around it. Like everything else about Ben and his house, it was aggressively masculine, but in a charming way. The logo was the silhouette of an enormous Godzilla-sized Viking with an ax slung over his shoulder, one booted foot on a mountain peak that looked like a normal stone in comparison to his size. I might not have noticed it was supposed to be a mountain at all if it weren't for the tiny pine trees.

Was the Viking wearing a Santa hat?

Oh my God.

He was.

I wasn't sure I wanted to put shampoo from "MOUNT THOR BATH COMPANY" on my hair, but I didn't see any other options. He didn't even have shaving cream. It was shave butter, and it was in a bottle with a freaking bear on it.

No thanks.

It was kind of hilarious how fitting all the plaid and bear stuff was, but he couldn't have known he was such a classic bear. He'd said he'd never been with a guy before.

It crossed my mind that I'd woken up alone.

What if he wanted nothing to do with me now?

What if he wanted to kick me out as soon as I left the bedroom?

Knowing my luck, I'd get rejected even in my dreams.

Maybe this was the last time I'd be taking a shower for a while if I ended up on the streets.

Mount Thor's Bath Company it was, then.

I popped the top open and sniffed at it for good measure, hoping it wouldn't smell as strong as it looked like it did. But by the time I realized that was a huge fucking mistake, my eyes, nose, and throat were burning like I'd inhaled peppermint oil.

Peppermint oil *on fire*.

My hands shot up to my face and I dropped the bottle. It bounced off my foot and I yelped in surprise and pain, almost falling flat on my face.

Shower death statistics danced in my head as I groped the air for something to hold onto and grabbed a handful of shower curtain. I hung off it like a monkey, sure it was going to collapse any minute beneath my weight, but like everything else in Ben's house, it was sturdy.

The sound of knuckles rapping on the door made me jump and I almost finished falling.

“Are you alright?” Ben called through the door.

“Y-yeah, I’m fine,” I called back, scrambling to my feet. The shower floor was slippery now that the force of the bottle’s fall had squirted Thor Juice or whatever it was called all over the place, but I managed to get upright anyway just in time for the door to creak open.

I was just glad Ben couldn’t see the mess I’d made through the shower curtain.

“It sounded like you fell,” he said, sounding too concerned to want to throw me out in the snow.

That was a good sign.

“Nope, just your shampoo,” I replied with a nervous laugh. “Speaking of which, do you have anything else?”

“Anything else?” he echoed, sounding genuinely confused.

“You know, shampoo that isn’t... made for lumberjacks.”

He chuckled. Fuck, I loved that sound. “Afraid not, unless you want mayonnaise. I’ve heard that works in a pinch.”

“No thanks,” I squeaked out. “Too precious.”

“Mayonnaise is precious where you come from?” he asked, sounding legitimately concerned about my welfare.

“Not the mayonnaise. Me. The ‘big city’ isn’t *that* bad. We probably have more mayonnaise than you do,” I muttered.

“I’m sure you don’t have Joan’s Artisan White Truffle Mayonnaise. You can only get that here.”

“No, probably not,” I admitted.

I heard him moving around on the other side of the shower curtain and poked my head out. He was in the middle of placing a pair of black sweatpants and a white-and-gray flannel shirt on the bathroom counter. He grinned when he caught me watching him.

“They’re probably too big, but I’m still taking care of your laundry,” he said. “Your clothes had some dirt on them from your accident. Figured you’d want something new.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, surprised he was so considerate. And I shouldn’t have been, knowing what he was like in the movie, but I just wasn’t used to that kind of treatment.

“If you don’t need anything else, I’ll let you finish up while I get breakfast on the table,” he said.

“N-no, I’m good,” I replied.

He gave me an appreciative once-over before closing the door. I looked down and realized I’d been holding the shower curtain in a way that bared everything to the world.

Okay. So he *didn’t* regret everything.

Maybe he didn’t regret anything at all.

I replaced the fallen shampoo bottle, finished rinsing off, and climbed out of the shower.

I dried off with one of the plush holly-embroidered towels and draped it over the shower curtain rod to dry before pulling on the clothes Ben had left. He’d left my glasses there, too. Thoughtful. I was swimming in the oversized flannel and sweats, but they were so comfy, I hardly cared about looking silly.

To be honest, I kind of liked the reminder that Ben was so much larger than me, anyway.

I wandered out of the bathroom and was immediately hit by the smell and sound of sizzling bacon. I hadn’t been that hungry until now, just from the sheer weirdness of everything happening, but the moment those smells hit me, my stomach twisted with what felt like acute starvation.

I followed the aroma like a cartoon character floating through the air, guided by the invisible fingers of a delicious smell. When I reached the kitchen, I found the equally huge table was already covered in plates of food.

Not just bacon, either—there was sausage, scrambled eggs, toast, pancakes, cheesy hash browns...

And Ben was a feast for the eyes, looming over the gas stove in his usual red flannel shirt and flipping the last of the pancakes with the ease of a circus performer. The sight of the mountain of a man cooking such an elaborate breakfast was so incongruous, it was like watching a bear crochet.

“Good morning,” he said as if we hadn’t just spoken a few minutes earlier after I almost died in his shower.

“Morning,” I replied, still a bit dazed.

It wasn’t just the smell of breakfast that was intoxicating. It was the sight of Ben, his hair tousled like he’d wrestled a few trees before breakfast and won.

“I hope you’re a fan of pancakes,” he said, with a grin that could’ve melted butter faster than the hot skillet.

“Are you kidding? Pancakes are my love language,” I quipped, leaning against the door frame.

Actually, my love language was probably more awkward silences and nervous rambling, but pancakes were a close second.

Ben chuckled, the rumbling sound filling the kitchen. “Well, I hope you like them with extra syrup and butter.”

“Hell. Yes.”

He motioned to the table with his spatula. “Have a seat. I’ll be right over.”

I sank into the chair closest to the head of the table, which was marked by an oversized chair that was clearly made for Ben.

He’d probably built it himself, too.

He joined me a moment later, setting the rest of the pancakes on top of the existing stack before dropping into his own chair.

“This looks amazing,” I said as he handed me a plate.

“Thanks,” he said, smiling. “Anything for my favorite guest.”

I felt my cheeks warm up and I was sure I was beet red, but he was focused on loading up his plate now, so he didn’t seem to notice.

I usually felt awkward filling my plate at someone else's table, but the awkwardness didn't last long when I realized just how much food *he* thought was reasonable to put on a plate.

"Your favorite guest, huh?" I squeaked out. I took a little bit of everything, then some extra bacon and another pancake just for good measure even though I was sure I wasn't going to be able to eat it all.

"By far," he replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

He handed me a little glass pitcher full of maple syrup and I hastily poured it all over my pancakes, trying to distract myself. I stuffed a forkful in my mouth and melted.

This wasn't the kind of maple syrup you could just buy in a big box store. It was heavenly.

"Where did you learn to cook like this?" I asked, gesturing to my plate with my fork before taking another incredible bite. I'd never had such decadent breakfast food in my life.

The nervous little voice in the back of my head piped up to tell me dream food didn't taste this real.

I shoved it down because I didn't need to think about that right now. I deserved to just enjoy myself.

"My grandma," Ben said, his gaze softening. "She was a whiz in the kitchen. Taught me everything I know."

"Mine, too," I replied, even though our relationship hadn't been as solid as I would've liked.

None of my relationships were, apparently.

It wasn't even because I was gay. They didn't care about that. It was because I wasn't doing what *they* wanted me to do.

Greg was only part of it.

The final straw that broke the camel's back of their support.

It all started with the fact that I didn't grow out of my childhood dream to get into the film industry. They wanted me to go into a "practical" career. One they could be proud of when they went to their fancy parties, where they would all be

talking about what their grown children were up to, where they could one-up all their colleagues by saying, “Sure, Xerxes might be a brain surgeon, but Matthew walked on the moon.”

And that wasn’t me.

Maybe I thought marrying a filthy rich and successful guy would get them off my back, but nope. That wasn’t good enough.

Nothing was ever good enough.

“You alright?” Ben asked.

I looked up from the breakfast feast, realizing I’d been mangling a sausage with my fork. “Yeah, why?”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “You just seemed sad for a moment there. Distant. What were you thinking about?”

What was I thinking about?

Nobody had ever asked me that.

I stared at him for a moment, not sure what to say or even how to respond at all.

“Just thinking about my family, I guess,” I replied, poking at the remains of my sausage. “You know, the usual spiraling thoughts about expectations. And not living up to them. Like, at all.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I cringed.

Oversharing was one of my love languages, too.

“You know, sometimes the best thing you can do is toss the blueprint out the window and just build your own thing, plank by plank,” he said. “There’s no rule saying you have to live up to anyone’s expectations but your own.”

His insight surprised me. Beneath the rugged exterior of a man who looked like he could single-handedly tame a forest—and considering he ran a Christmas tree farm, he technically *had*—there was a depth and understanding that caught me off guard.

“Thanks. It’s just... hard, you know? To let go of those expectations, especially when they’ve been a part of you for so long,” I murmured.

“Life is hard,” he said matter-of-factly. “Even here in Mistletoe Hollow.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “And how is it hard here?”

“For one thing, it never stops snowing,” he said, taking another bite.

I blinked. “Never? Um... ‘never’ as in you have a short summer, or ‘never’ as in it’s literally a winter wonderland twenty-four-seven?”

He finished chewing before answering me. “We don’t have a summer at all. It’s December all year round.”

I laughed again, at least until I realized he was dead serious. “So you have Christmas... every month?” I asked, my voice cracking as that started to set in. “*Why?*”

“Of course we do,” he said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Santa decrees it. This is a Christmas town.”

It took me a minute to process that.

A Christmas town.

A *Santa-decreed* Christmas town.

The idea of a never-ending Christmas clung to my brain like the relentless refrain of Jingle Bells on a loop.

It was one of those ideas that sounds delightful in theory. Endless holiday cheer, a constant supply of gingerbread cookies, and twinkling lights as far as the eye could see...

But the more I chewed on it, the more it seemed less like a dream and more like a nightmare.

And my overthinking screenwriter brain was going full steam ahead with the implications of this.

“If Santa ‘decrees’ it,” I said slowly, “is he some kind of king?”

He snorted. “That would be the understatement of the month.”

Not the year.

The month.

Because it was eternal December here.

Oh. My. God.

Or should it be oh my *Santa* ?

My mind instantly conjured up images of a towering Zeus-like figure in red velvet, eagles nesting in a cascading white beard the size of Niagara Falls. I imagined his sleigh like a titanic chariot pulled by mammoth-sized reindeer, kicking up hurricanes in its wake as his booming “HO-HO-HO” shook the very earth.

Were elves the local bureaucrats?

Did they have a surveillance system where they went undercover masquerading as ordinary townsfolk, keeping tabs on everyone’s level of Christmas spirit?

Was Krampus their version of the devil? Did he actually *eat* people?

Then there were the logistics.

Holy shit.

What were their calendars like? Did they number the Decembers or did they have a one-month-long year? How did they handle birthdays—were they just absorbed into Christmas?

Did everyone just give each other extra presents, or was there a separate, non-Christmassy celebration section in the stores? What did they do about birthday cards?

And what about the *music* ?

“You look white as a sheet,” Ben pointed out, snapping me out of it.

It took me a moment to find my voice. “I mean... yeah, of course I do. You’re telling me it’s always Christmas here. *Always* always.”

Ben nodded, entirely too nonchalant for someone living in what was essentially a Yuletide Groundhog Day.

Ironically, that had been the exact opposite of a comfort movie for me growing up. It scared me to the point where my family used to prank me into thinking I was living it. Vivid childhood memories danced in my head, memories of crying my eyes out at the table while the rest of the family pretended I'd gone crazy and convinced me Monday was going to repeat itself forever.

Shit. No wonder I never walked on the moon.

“Yep. Christmas lights, snow, the whole shebang. All year round,” he said, sipping his coffee.

Or was it freaking eggnog?

Maybe even eggnog mixed with coffee?

My head was spinning.

I took a sip myself and was glad it was just plain coffee, though it was on the sweet side and I was pretty sure it was gingerbread flavored.

I leaned back in my chair, trying to wrap my head around the concept. I pictured myself old and gray, still waking up to the same cheerful holiday tunes, the same unchanging snowy landscape.

It was like being stuck in a cheery, jolly limbo.

An existential horror if there ever was one.

Then again, my dream guy was here.

Literally .

I'd never experienced anything like what happened the previous night. After what Greg did to me, I'd hoped to the point of desperation I would find love again—and if I couldn't have love, maybe I could at least have connection.

Maybe this was the universe's way of giving it to me.

Knowing my luck, an endless Christmas coma dream certainly seemed on brand.

“And people are... *okay* with this? No one ever gets... I don't know, Christmas fatigue?” I asked warily.

Ben shrugged, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “You get used to it, and there's something nice about the consistency. It's like living in a never-ending holiday movie.”

If only he knew.

I laughed in spite of myself as I accepted the absurdity of the situation and started to come down from the edge of a huge panic attack.

Considering I clearly hadn't brought my Ativan prescription to dream world, that would've been extra unfun.

“I'll make it worth your while,” he added, his gaze darkening in a way I wasn't aware was possible considering Mistletoe Hollow wasn't exactly a steamy movie.

“You will, huh?” I mumbled, feeling my cheeks heat up. “You don't regret last night?”

“Regret it?” he echoed, raising his eyebrows. “It was the best night of my life—and I plan on having more nights like that, if you'll stay once your car gets fixed and the snow lets up. You mentioned last night you can work remotely and you wanted to stay in town for a bit anyway.”

I poked at my food, suddenly unable to meet his gaze. Because if I was being honest with myself, it was the best night of *my* life, too.

And it wasn't just that he didn't regret it.

He wanted me to *stay*.

Maybe it was possible for me to let go of the expectations of a normal world with normal seasons and just... exist in this festive, snowy bubble.

Or was it more like a snow globe than a bubble?

Huh.

“Maybe you can convince me,” I said in my best coy tone.

And judging from the way his smile turned into a grin that could surely melt every inch of snow on the ground, maybe he could.

“I’ll show you around town,” he said. “Take you on a proper date. First, though, we’ll have to do something about your clothes. I don’t think we’re the same size.”

A proper date?

I looked down at the baggy flannel and sweats hanging off my body and laughed again. “Yeah, I’d love that, but I can’t go out like this.”

“I’ll have my brother bring you an outfit you can wear until we get to the mall,” he replied.

“A mall?” I echoed, hoping my relief wasn’t too obvious. If there was a mall, I might actually survive. “That’d be great. Um, can you ask Jake to bring something slightly less lumberjack- or Christmas-themed? Red and green are *not* my colors.”

His brow furrowed slightly. “How did you know my brother’s name?”

I froze, not sure what to say.

He didn’t know Mistletoe Hollow was a movie I’d spent Christmas upon Christmas—and the occasional Easter and Halloween—watching on repeat. I shouldn’t have known his brother’s name. I shouldn’t have known he had a brother at *all*.

“Carol mentioned him,” I squeaked out, hoping she had when I’d been freezing my balls off and I just didn’t remember.

He shrugged those big shoulders and went back to his food.

Phew.

“What’s your size?” he asked.

“I’m a medium in tops and I have a thirty-two-inch waist,” I replied. “And I’m allergic to denim,” I added for good measure. “So slacks would be best.”

He blew a puff of air through his nostrils. “You don’t wear jeans?”

“I don’t have the ass for jeans.”

He gave me an appreciative once-over. “I disagree. I certainly enjoyed the view last night.”

I stuffed another forkful of heavenly pancakes into my mouth before I could say something to humiliate myself. Being around Ben made me act like a teenager seeing his idol crush in concert for the first time, apparently.

Maybe there was something to be said for being stuck in Mistletoe Hollow.

After all, it *was* always my dream.

CHAPTER 6

MATTHEW



It didn't take long for Ben's almost equally handsome brother to show up at the house, arms loaded with what looked like half a wardrobe.

He was a veterinarian, so I was pretty sure the pet hair that followed him like Pig Pen's dust cloud in Charlie Brown was going to be all over the clothes, but maybe Ben had a lint roller or something.

"Ben said you were picky about clothes," Jake said pointedly, dropping the pile of clothes onto the kitchen table with a dramatic wheeze.

"Did he now?" I said, raising my eyebrows at Ben.

He just grinned at me from across the kitchen, where he was cleaning up the dishes and food from the breakfast feast.

He'd insisted I stay off my feet when he noticed I was limping a little from last night's... events.

I just hoped Jake didn't notice.

"Thank you," I said to Jake, who looked like he wanted to put his foot in his mouth. "I really appreciate it. I don't exactly fit in Ben's clothes."

Jake gave a trademark Clark chuckle, looking me over. "You can say that again. Ben really puts the 'big' in 'big brother.'"

"You have no idea," I said before I could stop myself.

Jake stared at me, blinking, then blinked at Ben.

Now *I* was the one who wanted to put my foot in my mouth.

“You, uh... had a good time with the stranger last night?” Jake asked Ben, his voice squeaking.

I was sure Ben was going to be furious with me for letting that leak, but he didn't even seem embarrassed. “Jake, I'm a grown man,” he said, tossing a dish towel over his shoulder and flashing me a reassuring wink.

I watched as the color drained from Jake's face, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. “You mean... you and him?” He gestured wildly between Ben and me, as if the concept was too baffling to put into words.

“Yep,” Ben replied nonchalantly, as if he were confirming the weather rather than our budding romance.

“But he's...” Jake stuttered, his gaze flicking to me with a bewildered expression. “He's from the *city* !”

I almost choked on my laughter.

Was that what had him so shocked?

Not that I was a guy, but that I wasn't a townie?

“Guilty,” I said, grinning at Jake's flabbergasted expression. “And let me tell you, we city folks know how to have a good time.”

Ben laughed heartily at that. “To say the least.”

Jake seemed to regain some of his composure then, eyeing us both warily. “Well... just don't break my brother's heart,” he warned me, pointing a stern finger in my direction. “He's not the type to have one-night stands. Especially not with strangers he drags in from the snow.” He gave Ben a sharp look. “Strangers from *out of town* .”

I held up my hands in surrender. “Wouldn't dream of it.”

Ben chuckled again, sauntering over to clap a reassuring hand on Jake's shoulder. Jake fell forward like his back had snapped in half. “Don't worry about me, little brother,” he said with an easy grin. “I think I can handle myself.”

And as I watched the two brothers, I felt a pang of longing in my chest. This was the kind of familial bond I'd always

yearned for, the kind of connection I'd seen on screen in Mistletoe Hollow.

And now, somehow, I was a part of it.

Jake gave me one last scrutinizing look before turning back to Ben. "Let me know if he bites and I'll give you a rabies shot," he said.

"You'll be the first to know," said Ben, herding him out the door before coming back over to me. "Ignore him," he said with a heavy sigh. "He's better with animals than he is with people."

"Oh, no, it's fine," I said, going over to the pile of clothes on the table. "It's nice to see you two so close."

Ben hummed in agreement. "Family's important."

"Yeah," I murmured, feeling another pang.

He tilted his head, watching me. "You know, family isn't just the people we're related to by blood," he said at length. "It's the people we find along the way, too. People we choose to spend our lives with."

"I'd agree if it wouldn't make me sound even more pathetic," I said with a quiet laugh. "I don't exactly have a found family back in... um... the city, either. I think people are allergic to me or something."

Ben's blue eyes softened, the corners crinkling warmly. "Don't be so hard on yourself," he said, his voice steady and soothing as he squeezed my shoulder. "Sometimes it takes time to find your people."

Ow.

This man seriously did not know his strength.

I let out a sigh. "Yeah, I guess."

"No guessing about it," he countered. "And who knows? Maybe if you stay in Mistletoe Hollow, I'll be the first member in that found family."

I felt my cheeks heat up for what had to be the millionth time in the past twelve hours.

Logically, I knew he was moving way too quickly, but then again, this was a world where every month of the year was December. Maybe one day was equal to a year or something. I certainly wasn't going to complain about someone actually seeming to want me for a change.

A soft smile tugged at my lips as I looked up at him. "Maybe."

"Jake likes you," he added with a playful grin. "He's just a little... rough around the edges."

I laughed at that, shaking my head. "He's not bad. I like him."

"Wait until you get to know him," Ben warned me. He moved to the pile of clothes on the table, sorting through them with an amused expression. "I see he brought you everything in his closet that doesn't have cats and dogs on it."

I plucked a tuft of pet hair from the fibers of a cream-colored sweater. "Are you sure about that?" I asked.

He winced. "Hope you're not allergic."

"Nah. I just wasn't allowed to have pets."

"Ever?" he asked in a surprised tone. "Who didn't let you?"

"My parents hated animals," I replied.

So did Greg, but I didn't want to start talking about him again. His name felt like an oversized cough drop whenever I uttered it, especially now that I was getting a taste of something—*someone*—so much better.

Peppermint, to be exact.

"You don't have any pets, either, do you?" I asked.

"Nah," he replied. "Jake's been trying to get me to adopt one forever, but I'm too busy. Maybe one day, though. I'd love a dog."

"I could see you with a dog," I agreed. "A big one."

"Always did like St. Bernards," he said.

I wondered if he realized he was basically the human version.

We spent the next few minutes going through the clothes together, Ben helping me sort them into two piles—one for

possible outfits and another for things that needed to go back to Jake immediately.

I'd expected an avalanche of flannel and ugly Christmas sweaters, but much to my relief and surprise, there were a few gems in there.

When I found a black turtleneck sweater that was just the right kind of snug, I knew I'd found the winner.

"Is this one a keeper?" I asked, stretching the sweater across my chest.

Ben's eyes roved over me, a slow grin spreading across his face. "That's the one," he confirmed, his gaze lingering on me.

With an approving nod, I folded the turtleneck and set it atop the 'yes' pile. A pair of black slacks followed, along with a charcoal-gray peacoat that felt surprisingly heavy for its size.

"I didn't realize Jake had such good taste," I admitted, running my hands over the soft wool of the coat.

"He likes to look good," Ben admitted. "Even if he spends most of his time in scrubs covered in fur."

"You sure these clothes won't be too city-boy for Mistletoe Hollow?" I asked, half-teasing.

"I think Mistletoe Hollow could use a bit of city-boy style," he mused.

Giddy like I was going on the first date of my life, I disappeared into the bathroom to change into my new outfit.

As I dressed, I found myself surprisingly nervous about Ben's reaction. This was me presenting myself not as an unexpected guest, but as a potential... something more.

I took a deep breath and opened the bathroom door. Ben was leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. His gaze immediately flicked over to me, and I felt my face heat up under his intense scrutiny.

He didn't say anything for what felt like an eternity. Then he broke out into a slow smile.

"*Wow*," he finally said.

I laughed, relieved. “Thanks.”

“Ready to see everything Mistletoe Hollow has to offer, starting with the farm?” he asked, grabbing his keys from the rack by the door.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

He opened the door for me. As I stepped outside, I was hit with a gust of icy wind that stole my breath.

The snow was still falling, soft and silent, blanketing the world in a layer of white.

Ben’s hand was warm and solid on my arm, steadying me as I took in the scene.

The Clark Christmas Tree Farm stretched out before us, rows upon rows of evergreens dusted with snow. The scent of pine was sharp and refreshing in the cold air, a stark contrast to the city smells I was used to.

A shiver ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the temperature.

“You okay?” Ben asked, concern creasing his handsome features.

“Yeah,” I said, my voice sounding far away. “It’s just... beautiful.”

He grinned at me. “Wait till you see the rest of it.”

We started our tour of the Clark Christmas Tree Farm, Ben leading the way.

His heavy boots crunched in the fresh snow, leaving a clear path for me to follow. As we moved further into the forest of evergreens, he started to explain the process of running a Christmas tree farm.

“These trees,” he said, gesturing to a row of towering firs on our right, “are some of our oldest. We’ve been tending to them for over a decade.”

“Over a decade?” I echoed, staring up at the massive trees. They towered over us, their branches heavy with snow.

Ben nodded. “It takes about seven years for a Christmas tree to reach an average height of six feet,” he explained. “But we let some of them grow taller. Some folks like their trees really big.”

Like I liked my men, apparently.

“And you do all this work yourself?” I asked, looking around at the endless rows of trees.

He chuckled. “Not all by myself. We hire some extra hands during the busy season, and Jake helps when he can, too.”

We continued walking, Ben pointing out different types of trees that all looked the same to my untrained eyes and explaining how they each required different levels of care.

“You must really love Christmas,” I remarked after a while.

He laughed at that, rubbing the back of his neck in that charmingly bashful way he had. As if he had anything to be bashful about. “Well, it’s not just about Christmas,” he said. “It’s about providing families with something that’ll bring them joy.”

His words warmed me more than any coat could have.

“Speaking of which,” he said. “We should pick out our tree. We’re not cutting it down yet because we’ll be setting it up on Christmas eve, but that’s coming up fast.”

“*We* ?” I echoed, not sure I’d heard him correctly. The thought of us picking out a Christmas tree together sent a flurry of butterflies through my stomach.

“Of course,” Ben replied. “You’re staying with me, aren’t you?”

“I... yeah. Sounds good,” I said, managing to keep my voice steady. “Let’s do it.”

We spent the next hour or so traipsing through the snow-covered farm, looking for the perfect tree. Ben was picky, inspecting each potential candidate with a critical eye before shaking his head and moving on.

Eventually, we found it. A towering Douglas fir that stood tall and proud amidst its peers, its branches lush and full. We looked at each other as we stood before it, knowing this was the one without either of us having to say a word.

“What do you think?” Ben asked.

I studied the tree, feeling an odd sense of pressure. What did I know about picking out Christmas trees?

“It’s perfect,” I finally declared, my breath forming clouds in the cold air. “Absolutely perfect.”

Ben’s grin could’ve outshone the brightest of Christmas lights. “Great. We’ll bring it in tomorrow, then. Don’t worry, I’m not gonna let you get sap, dirt, and God knows what else all over your new favorite outfit.”

“Smart man,” I said with a grin of my own.

We trudged through the snow back toward his house. When we reached the driveway, he led me to the passenger’s side door of his crimson pick-up truck and got it for me.

I practically had to climb to get inside, but he offered me a hand to help me into the padded leather seat. I buckled myself in before he could embarrass me by doing that, too.

Chivalry may not be dead in Mistletoe Hollow, where twinks apparently got the princess treatment too, but I didn’t need him to be *that* chivalrous.

Our first stop was Mistletoe Hollow’s small downtown area, decked out in full holiday regalia. Red and green garlands hung from lampposts, twinkling fairy lights adorned every shop front and doorways, and a towering Christmas tree dominated the town square.

“This is amazing,” I said as we parked on the main street. Each store window displayed an array of holiday-themed items—ornaments, baked goods, toys—all begging to be explored.

We popped into a bakery where I was introduced to Mistletoe Hollow’s famous gingerbread cookies. Ben bought a dozen and insisted I try one right there on the spot. Warm and soft

with just the right amount of spice, it was possibly the best cookie I'd ever tasted.

As the day wore on, I found myself laughing more than I had in a long time. Ben was a natural storyteller, spinning tales of Mistletoe Hollow's quirky residents and traditions. His laughter was infectious, and before I knew it, I was swept up in the charm of it all.

With each new revelation, though, I felt a pang of guilt. Here was this kind, genuine man sharing his life with me, totally unaware that I already knew his story from the movie.

He seemed so real to me now, not just some character.

It figured I would overthink things even in my fantasy.

"Getting hungry yet?" Ben asked, jarring me out of my thoughts.

I looked up, realizing we were in front of a retro-style diner. Or was it technically not retro in Mistletoe Hollow?

"I didn't think I would ever be hungry again after this morning, but yeah, I'm getting there," I admitted.

"They have the best burgers here," he said, holding the door open for me. "And before you ask, no, they're not reindeer burgers."

I felt the color drain from my face. "I wasn't considering that, no."

As we stepped into the diner, a blast of warm air and the smell of frying bacon hit me. It was busy, filled with locals chattering away over steaming mugs of coffee and towering stacks of pancakes.

A thoroughly pierced and tattooed server who looked more like a green-haired biker chick than a typical Mistletoe Hollow townie looked up from behind the counter.

"Hey there, Ben," she said in a rough voice. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Matthew. Matthew, this is Jackie."

“Nice to meet you, Matthew,” Jackie said with a nod. “Where do you boys wanna sit?”

“Nice to meet you, too,” I said. “Maybe by the window?”

“I know just the spot,” said Jackie, leading us to a booth overlooking the street in all its festive glory. She handed us each a laminated menu as we settled down at the table. “What can I get you boys to drink?”

“Do you have strawberry milkshakes?” I asked hopefully.

“We have everything, honey,” she replied in a dry tone that suggested she wasn’t at all exaggerating. Maybe this diner was just as magical as the rest of Mistletoe Hollow. “And to eat?”

I looked down at the menu I hadn’t had a chance to glance over yet. “What would you suggest?”

“I’m not a genie,” she said flatly.

“Two cheeseburgers with fries,” Ben said quickly. “And a vanilla milkshake for me, please.”

She jotted down our orders and headed back toward the counter just as the shrill sound of a car alarm echoed through the diner.

“Sorry, that’s mine,” Ben said, getting up. “I’ll be right back.”

He hurried out of the diner, leaving me alone at the booth and at Jackie’s mercy, though she seemed to be busy for the moment.

I watched him through the window as he fumbled with his keys before finally silencing the alarm.

With a sigh, I leaned back in my seat and let my gaze wander.

The hustle and bustle of Mistletoe Hollow was so different from the chaos of New York City. Here, everyone seemed to know each other. There were no skyscrapers or traffic jams or smoggy air. Just cozy little shops and smiling faces everywhere I looked.

I found myself wondering what it would be like to live here permanently, if the dream didn’t end. I was starting to think

this wasn't a coma dream at all. That I'd died and gone to heaven.

A group of kids passed by the window, their laughter piercing the silence of the snowy evening. They were bundled up in brightly colored coats, their cheeks rosy from the cold. One of them waved at me and I found myself smiling back.

I didn't even notice someone creeping up on me until she was standing right beside the table.

I jolted as I found myself looking up at an older woman with a familiar face, wrinkled from years of laughter and bedazzled in sparkling blue eyeshadow that matched her flowing patchwork skirt.

I knew who she was right away, even though she reminded me a hell of a lot of Evie in "reality."

Or maybe it was the other way around.

She was Dot Thompson, the town's resident matchmaker and psychic. Both titles were self-proclaimed, but the folks of Mistletoe Hollow weren't exactly skeptics.

Of course, the main character had challenged Dot's assertion that she and Ben were soulmates the first day she ended up in Mistletoe Creek, but in the end, Dot had been proven right about that.

"Well, hello," she said in a pleasant tone, smiling at me with painted red lips. "Always nice to see a new face around here. Especially so close to Christmas."

"Hello," I said awkwardly, trying not to let on that I knew exactly who she was. I fidgeted with my napkin, avoiding eye contact, but Dot's gaze seemed to pierce right through me.

Dot took a seat across from me, mischief twinkling in her sharp green eyes. "You know," she began, folding her hands on the table, "Mistletoe Hollow is a special place. It has a way of calling people to it."

I nodded, trying to keep my face neutral.

Of course, I knew about Mistletoe Hollow's magic. I'd seen it unfold in the movie countless times. "I guess you could say it

called me,” I offered, playing along.

Dot smiled knowingly. “Oh, I don’t think there’s any guessing about it.”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Was she reading my mind? Could she see my confusion, my doubts about whether this was all a dream or not?

“But it’s not just that,” she continued, leaning in a little closer. “This world doesn’t just call people. It also gives them what they need.”

I swallowed hard. “What they need?”

“Yes,” she affirmed with a nod. “A change of scenery, a fresh start... sometimes even love.”

The word hung in the air between us. I realized too late I’d shredded the napkin in my hands.

“I’m not sure...” I began, struggling to find the right words.

She cut me off with a chuckle, patting my hand across the table. “You’re not sure if you’re dreaming, right?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

My eyes widened at her words.

How did she know?

The only explanation was that this dream was allowing her to read my mind.

“I...” I began again, but she raised a hand to stop me.

“Darling, you’re not dreaming,” she said, her eyes sparkling with certainty. “And you’ll see that for yourself soon enough. Sooner than you might realize.”

“But... how?” I stammered. My mind was reeling, trying to make sense of it all.

Dot chuckled softly, her painted red lips curving into a knowing smile. “Did you want a miracle or not?”

“Wait,” I said slowly. “What are you saying?”

Dot shrugged nonchalantly, as if we were discussing the weather instead of magical electronics and alternate realities.

“Like I said before,” she said, tucking a loose strand of her coiffed white-blonde hair behind her ear, “this world gives people what they need. People like you... and people like Ben Clark.”

As if on cue, Ben walked back into the diner just then, brushing the snow off his coat. He paused when he saw Dot sitting across from me.

“Hi, Dot,” he said, his brow furrowed in confusion. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

Dot’s eyes twinkled as she looked up at him. “Ben,” she replied, her voice warm. “Just the man I was hoping to see.”

Ben raised an eyebrow at that. “I am?”

Dot was watching us closely, a satisfied smile playing on her lips. It felt like she knew something we didn’t, and it made me uneasy. “Of course. You’re always a sight for sore eyes,” she said flirtatiously, getting up from the booth. “Enjoy your meal, boys.”

With a last knowing smile at us—me in particular—she left the diner, leaving Ben and me staring after her.

“What was that about?” Ben asked as he slid into the booth across from me.

“I have no idea,” I lied as Dot’s words echoed in my head.

Jackie returned to the table, rescuing me just in time with our milkshakes and two plates of towering cheeseburgers nestled in crispy golden fries.

I thanked her and picked up my milkshake, using the cold glass to ground myself. I took a long sip, the sweetness of the strawberry milk soothing my nerves. It was easily the best milkshake I’d ever had in my entire life, and for a moment, I forgot everything that was weighing on my mind.

“So, Dot,” Ben began, drawing my attention back to him. He was watching me with a curious look on his face. “She’s quite a character, huh?”

“Yeah,” I agreed, chuckling weakly. Seemed like we were going to talk about her after all. “Quite a character.”

Ben took a bite of his burger, his eyes never leaving mine. “She has this way of showing up when you least expect her,” he said, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “Did she give you one of her predictions?”

“You could say that.”

“Was it about me?” he asked.

After Dot had dropped that bombshell on me, I wasn’t quite as hungry as I had been before, but I still took a bite from my burger to buy me a minute to think about what to say.

He waited expectantly for me to finish chewing. Sometimes I wished he wasn’t quite the gentleman he was.

“It was,” I admitted when I swallowed the bite, unable to meet his gaze. “She said Mistletoe Hollow gives people what they need. And it was kind of in the... romantic context.”

I dared a glance at Ben, half-expecting him to laugh it off even though I knew logically he wasn’t like that.

But he didn’t laugh. He didn’t even smile.

Instead, he sat there in silence, his blue eyes searching mine for something I wasn’t sure I could give him. He chewed his bottom lip thoughtfully, a crease forming between his brows.

“And what do you think about that?” he asked finally, his voice low.

I shrugged, fiddling with the straw of my milkshake. “I don’t know what to think,” I admitted. “I mean, it’s a nice thought, but...”

“But what?” Ben pressed when I didn’t finish my sentence.

“But it’s complicated,” I blurted out, unable to look him in the eyes.

The words hung in the air between us, and for a moment, the only sound was the low hum of the diner and the occasional clink of cutlery against plates. Ben didn’t say anything for what felt like an eternity. When he finally spoke, his voice was softer than before.

“I’ve found the best things in life are complicated.”

I glanced up, meeting his gaze.

The earnestness in his eyes caught me off guard. It wasn't the look of a man who was merely trying to make a guest feel welcome. It was something more, something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"Ben," I began, unsure of what to say next. I wanted to tell him everything, about the movie, about my heartbreak, about how surreal it felt to be here with him.

But I didn't know where to start.

Before I could continue, he reached across the table and gently covered my hand with his. His touch was warm and reassuring, a comfort in this strange world that was quickly becoming more real than my old life.

"You don't have to explain anything," he said softly, his thumb tracing gentle circles on the back of my hand.

I let out a shaky breath I hadn't realized I was holding in, relief washing over me at his understanding even though it was mingled with guilt that I couldn't tell him everything. "But I want to," I insisted. "I want you to understand why this is... difficult for me."

Ben squeezed my hand gently in response. "When you're ready," he assured me. "There's no rush."

I nodded gratefully.

As we finished our meal in comfortable silence, I couldn't help but marvel at how normal it all felt.

If someone had told me just a few days ago that I'd be having dinner with Ben Clark in Mistletoe Hollow—hell, that Mistletoe Hollow even existed—I would've laughed it off as an absurd fantasy.

Yet here I was, living an impossible dream.

An impossible dream Dot Thompson herself said was real.

I felt crazy just entertaining the idea, but this felt more real than anything ever had in my life.

And I wanted it to be real.

I wanted it more than anything. I'd only known Ben for twenty-four hours according to the clock on the wall, but it felt like I'd known him my entire life.

And in a weird way, I kind of had.

CHAPTER 7

MATTHEW



After dinner, Ben drove me to the edge of town and parked by a serene lake that reflected the soft white light from the rising moon.

As I'd feared, beyond the lake, it seemed the snow stretched on forever until it disappeared into the fog-laden evergreens at the base of the distant mountains.

There was no sign of anything beyond Mistletoe Hollow.

But for some reason, it didn't bother me like it should have.

"I know it's a lot to take in," Ben said as we sat in his truck, the engine rumbling as it idled. "But what do you think of Mistletoe Hollow?"

I looked out over the lake, its icy surface shimmering as if it were made from billions of crystals. "It's beautiful," I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper. "More than I could've ever imagined."

He was quiet for a moment before he finally spoke, his voice low and filled with something I couldn't quite decipher. "I'm glad you think so."

A comfortable silence fell between us as we sat there in his truck, the warmth from the heater a stark contrast to the cold outside. I was glad he didn't turn the truck off even though I knew he had to be uncomfortably warm.

He was used to eternal winter, after all.

"You know," he began, breaking the silence, "I never really thought about it before. But having you here... it's made me

see this place in a new light.”

His words caught me off guard. I turned to look at him, his profile illuminated by the faint glow of the dashboard lights. “How so?”

He shrugged, his gaze still fixed on the lake ahead. “I guess I just took it all for granted,” he admitted. “But seeing you react to everything... it’s like seeing it all for the first time again.”

My heart fluttered at his words. It was hard to believe I was having this kind of effect on him.

“That’s... that’s nice of you to say,” I said, my voice sounding far more confident than I felt.

He turned to look at me, and for a moment, we just sat there in silence, staring at each other.

“You’re pretty easy to talk to, Matthew,” he said after a while. His words were simple, but they meant more to me than he could’ve known.

I felt a blush creep up my cheeks as I quickly looked away. “Well, you’re not so bad yourself,” I replied with a chuckle.

We fell into another comfortable silence after that, simply enjoying each other’s company as we watched the moon rise above the mountains.

Occasionally, a shooting star graced the sky, and I found myself wishing with all my heart that Dot was right.

That this was real.

After a while, Ben cleared his throat, pulling me out of my thoughts. “We should probably head back,” he said. “It’s getting late, and the roads will ice over.”

I nodded, not quite ready to end the night but knowing he had a point. “Yeah. We should.”

Ben’s truck roared to life as we pulled back onto the road, the snow crunching beneath the tires. I watched the snow-covered landscape pass by in a blur of white and silver under the moonlight.

It felt like we were only on the road for a few minutes before we reached his house, but that made sense, considering how small the town was.

When he stopped the truck and cut the engine, Ben turned to me. “Matthew,” he began, his voice low and steady, “I want to thank you for today. It’s been a while since I’ve enjoyed Christmas like this.”

His words left me breathless. I swallowed hard, struggling to find my voice. “I should be thanking you,” I managed to say. “I haven’t enjoyed it in... I can’t even remember.”

Ben’s eyes softened as he reached over and gently squeezed my hand. His touch sent sparks up my arm, making me shiver despite the warmth inside the truck.

Before I knew what was happening, Ben leaned over, closing the distance between us. His lips met mine in a soft kiss that left me breathless.

It was sweet and slow, and the world outside ceased to exist as we lost ourselves in each other.

It was just us, here in this truck. We’d done so much more than kiss last night, but this chaste moment under the stars was somehow even more intimate.

When he finally pulled away, I found myself gasping for air. My heart pounded in my chest as if it were trying to break free. Ben’s face was flushed under the faint glow of the dashboard lights, his eyes shining with an intensity that took my breath away.

“Matthew,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper, “I...”

But I didn’t let him finish. Instead, I leaned in, capturing his lips with mine once again.

This time, the kiss was more urgent, fueled by the passion that had been simmering between us all day.

When we finally broke apart, we were both panting, our breaths mingling in the chilly air. Ben rested his forehead against mine, his eyes closed as he took a moment to catch his breath.

“That was...” He trailed off, struggling to find the right words.

“Unexpected?” I offered, my voice shaky. He chuckled at that, a soft sound that made my heart flutter in my chest.

“No,” he said after a moment. “Not unexpected. Just... incredible.”

Incredible .

Ben Clark thought kissing me was incredible.

“Come on,” Ben said after a moment, pulling away and opening the truck door. “Let’s get inside before we freeze.”

I nodded, still breathless as I stepped out of the truck and followed Ben up the snow-covered path to his front door. What else was the night going to bring us?

As we stepped inside, the smell of freshly baked cookies hit me, and when I heard Carol singing a rendition of Deck the Halls that went way harder than it needed to, I realized we weren’t going to be enjoying any romantic activities anytime soon.

Ben and I shared a glance before he gestured for me to follow him into the heart of the noise. His mother was in the kitchen, her back to us as she busily moved around, mixing batter and sliding trays into the oven.

“Oh, you’re back!” she exclaimed when she finally noticed us. Her face lit up as she wiped her hands on her apron before rushing over to give me a squeeze. Ben was next. I had to admit her overt hospitality was sweet despite being a little bit overwhelming. “How was dinner?”

“Good,” Ben replied with a nod, glancing at me for confirmation.

I gave him a small smile, my mind still spinning from our kiss. “Yeah, it was really good.”

Carol clapped her hands together in delight, flour puffing up from them in little white clouds. “Wonderful! I was just working on my part for the Mistletoe Hollow Jubilee Jamboree. I’m in charge of making sure everyone brings

enough food, so if I don't have every oven at my disposal going around the clock, I'll look like a big hypocrite."

My heart skipped a beat. Other than the happily-ever-after at the end of the movie, the Jubilee Jamboree on Christmas Eve was always my favorite part.

It was a scene straight out of a storybook—families and friends coming together, exchanging gifts, singing carols, and enjoying the finest holiday feast followed by a dance beneath twinkling strings of golden fairy lights.

"Wait, when is the Jubilee Jamboree?" I asked. The realization that I was going to experience one of my favorite scenes from the movie was almost too much to handle.

"In three days," she replied. "Did you forget it's almost Christmas Eve?"

"Are you serious?" I couldn't help but grin.

Ben turned to me, his brows furrowed in confusion. "You knew about it?"

"Everyone knows about it," Carol interjected, swatting his arm playfully. "Even people from out of town."

Ben didn't look so sure.

"Oh," I stammered, trying to come up with a plausible explanation. "I... uh... overheard some people talking about it in the diner earlier, too."

I let out a sigh of relief when Ben's surprised expression faded and he went over to the rack by the door to hang up his coat.

My explanation was flimsy, but it was all I had. The last thing I needed was to admit I knew so much about his world because it was a movie.

Not even because I thought it would freak him out, but because I knew he wouldn't believe me.

"Well, you picked the perfect time to visit," Carol continued, oblivious to my near slip-up as Ben went into the kitchen. "The Jubilee Jamboree is the highlight of the season here in Mistletoe Hollow."

“Do you celebrate it every month?” I asked, unable to help myself.

“Of course!” she said cheerily.

“And that doesn’t get... exhausting?”

She looked at me like I’d grown two heads. “Honey, we have Santa’s magic on our side. We never run out of steam.”

I laughed nervously. “You mean that literally, don’t you?”

“What else would I mean?” she asked incredulously before giving me a worried look. She glanced toward the kitchen like she was making sure Ben wasn’t listening, then turned back to me, dropping her voice to a whisper. “Don’t tell me you don’t believe in Santa.”

“Why are we whispering?” I whispered back.

Carol leaned in close. “Because not everyone believes,” she whispered, looking pointedly toward the kitchen.

“Ben doesn’t?” I asked, genuinely surprised. Was that even possible here?

Carol’s expression turned grave. “No. My son is a—” Her voice cracked and she raised her floury fingertips to her lips, looking away as she blinked back the tears welling in her eyes.

“A what?” I pressed, leaning in, too.

“A nonbeliever,” she squeaked out before the tears really started.

I stared at her, not sure what to say to that. “Like a... Santa atheist? Or Santatheist?” I echoed.

She nodded, fanning herself like that might keep her from bursting into tears. “I wish you could’ve met him when he wasn’t such a...” Her voice trailed off and she hiccupped. “A *grinch*.”

“He doesn’t seem like a grinch to me. I’ve never met anyone with so much Christmas spirit,” I said carefully, hoping she wasn’t about to start sobbing.

I was never good with crying people.

It didn't help that I was usually the one crying.

"Christmas spirit?" she whimpered. "What Christmas spirit? It evaporated when he lost..." She paused, biting her knuckle to ground herself. She took a deep breath and gave me a misty-eyed smile. "I'm sorry, Matthew. It's not my story to tell. Guess I've had one too many sugar cookie cocktails..."

My mind raced, trying to connect the dots. What could have happened to make Ben lose his Christmas spirit in a place like Mistletoe Hollow? The Ben from the movie was an eternal optimist who hadn't faced much, if any, hardship at all in his relentlessly cozy life.

What—or who—did he lose?

"What are you two whispering about?" Ben asked, and Carol whirled around like she'd been jabbed with an electric cattle prod.

I looked up to see him leaning against the wall at the edge of the kitchen, his beefy arms crossed over his broad chest as he regarded us with open suspicion.

"Oh, nothing!" Carol said quickly, letting out a nervous laugh as she waved her hand dismissively, still hiccuping. "Just making small talk, that's all."

Ben raised an eyebrow, clearly not buying it. His gaze shifted to me, and I could feel my cheeks flush under his scrutiny.

"We were just talking about the Jubilee Jamboree," I offered, hoping he wouldn't press for more details. Technically, it wasn't a lie. "Your mom was telling me how excited everyone is for it."

I shifted nervously under Ben's gaze, waiting for him to press me for more details. But after what felt like an eternity, his expression softened and he uncrossed his arms with a sigh.

"Well, it is the highlight of the season," he said, glancing between me and his mother. "I know how much the town looks forward to it."

His words were light, but there was an edge of something in his voice I couldn't quite place.

Wistfulness?

Sadness?

Whatever it was, it made my heart ache for reasons I didn't fully understand.

Carol bustled back into the kitchen and busied herself gathering up discarded baking trays, pointedly avoiding eye contact with her son. The air was thick with unspoken words and secrets, and I felt like an intruder trespassing on intimate family matters.

"I should probably turn in," I said, eager for an escape. "I'm kind of tired after today, and I know you want to finish cooking."

Ben studied me for a moment before nodding, an unreadable look in his eyes. "Of course. Let me walk you up."

I bid Carol goodnight as Ben led me from the room. We climbed the stairs in silence, the old wood creaking under our feet.

When we reached the door, Ben paused and turned to face me.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Why?" I asked, not sure what he had to be sorry about.

"For making things weird. I shouldn't have asked what you were talking about. None of my business." He sighed again, averting his gaze. "My relationship with this town is just... complicated."

I shook my head. "You have nothing to apologize for. Really."

Ben smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Get some rest," he said. "Tomorrow will be a big day."

He started to turn away, then stopped.

Before I could react, he stepped forward and enveloped me in a gentle hug. I sank into his warmth, his flannel shirt soft against my cheek.

"Can I kiss you again?" Ben asked, his voice soft and husky.

I answered him by leaning in and bringing my lips to his. We stayed like that for a blissful moment, lost in each other as the rest of the world faded away.

I wished it could last forever, but before I'd had anywhere near my fill, he pulled back, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear. The rough pad of his fingertip brushed against my earlobe and trailed down my neck as he watched me, his expression just as unreadable as it had been before.

"I'll come to bed soon," he promised. "We won't have so much company once the Jubilee Jamboree is over. Things just get hectic around here the closer it gets to Christmas. You picked a rough time to get stranded on the side of the road."

"Even though it's every December?" I asked teasingly, playing with the buttons on his flannel.

"*Especially* because it's every December," he clarified. "Everyone in town is in a constant competition to outdo the previous one, and my mother is no different. She's won the Jubilee Crown six times in a row, and she's going for lucky number seven this time."

I laughed a little, stifling a yawn as I took a step back. "Well, I should let you get back to it. Don't want to be responsible for Carol losing the crown."

Ben smiled, though his eyes still held that hint of sadness I couldn't quite place.

"Get some rest," he said again. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Ben," I murmured.

He leaned in and kissed me one last time, soft and sweet.

When we pulled away from each other, his eyes were closed, his lips still slightly parted. He let out a slow breath before opening those blue eyes again, searching my gaze with an intensity that made my heart flutter the way only he could.

"Goodnight, Matthew," he said quietly.

Then, with what looked like great effort, he turned and headed back down the stairs.

I watched him go, my lips still tingling.

With a happy sigh, I stepped into the cozy guest room and got ready for bed.

As I settled beneath the heavy quilts in the oversized flannel and sweats Ben had brought me that morning, my mind spun with new questions about Ben.

What tragedy had dampened his spirit? And was there any way I could help bring light back into his life?

I could hear him and Carol speaking quietly downstairs, but I somehow resisted the urge to eavesdrop as I usually would.

It was torture, especially since I had so many questions now, but I knew whatever they were talking about wasn't meant for my ears.

As I drifted off to sleep, I found myself wishing more than ever that Dot Thompson was right. That this place was real. That I wasn't just a visitor blowing through for a few days, but someone who could make a real difference here.

Someone who could make Ben Clark believe in magic again.

CHAPTER 8

BEN



I woke up before dawn, just like always. Matthew was still fast asleep next to me, looking so peaceful—so beautiful—with his head resting on my chest, his long lashes fluttering as he murmured in his dreams.

How long had he been here?

It had to be a week at this point. His car was still nowhere near being fixed since it took so long for the mechanic to get parts in, but he didn't seem to mind.

And neither did I. It had been the best week of my life.

I just hoped he was genuinely enjoying Mistletoe Hollow. He seemed to be, and he was by far the most genuine person I had ever known, but I had trust issues to say the least.

He didn't even seem to mind that my mother had been over every night leading up to the Jubilee Jamboree.

It had thrown a wrench in our more romantic plans a few times, but he was so good-natured about it. And he'd been helping, too, which was obviously earning him major points.

Last night had been particularly intense.

She had been stressing out about “her” crown and had helped herself to the pitcher of rum eggnog in my fridge. She was barely able to keep herself together after that, but Matthew had taken the reins and finished the baked goods they were working on.

Sure, some of the gingerbread men looked as drunk as she did, and a couple had upside-down faces, but I was sure she'd brag

that she had help from an out-of-towner, and that was guaranteed to go over exceptionally well with the good people of Mistletoe Hollow.

They loved a good Christmas story.

Still, though, I was worried she was going to chase him off with her over-the-top antics. She always got a little wacky in the days leading up to Christmas, and sometimes the day after if she was in a particularly weird state. It was always for the same reason, so why would now be any different?

It was because my Christmas spirit had died out.

You'd think *I'd* been the one who died.

Now that I had an attractive stranger staying in my house and sleeping in my bed—though she didn't know that part—of course she was more manic than ever. She thought Matthew was going to reignite my Christmas spirit like it was a tangible thing that existed, a dim flame inside a lantern that just needed a drop of lamp oil to roar back to life.

I carefully slid out from under him, doing my best not to disturb his slumber.

He mumbled something softly that sounded suspiciously obscene, but he didn't wake up.

I smiled down at his sleeping form as I pulled on my boots and slipped out the bedroom door. Even after just a short time with him, I couldn't imagine not having Matthew here. He just seemed to fit so perfectly, like he belonged here all along.

Of course, the last time I'd believed that about a stranger, things hadn't gone so well.

I couldn't deny the bizarre similarities between how they'd blown in my life, either. They even had the same vehicle all the way down to the immaculate silver paint job.

When the mechanic had brought that up, I almost didn't believe him. Not until I'd seen it for myself.

Sometimes truth could be stranger than fiction.

Dot Thompson's prediction from so many Decembers ago echoed in my mind. She'd been so specific that my soulmate wasn't from Mistletoe Hollow. They would come when I least expected it from the big city, and they'd wreck their silver SUV on the side of the road right before Christmas, trapping them in town. Our soul connection would be immediate and impossible to ignore.

I hadn't had that connection with Holly. But I'd still thought it had to be her. How could it not have been?

So I'd fallen in love, and when she left, I stopped believing in predictions and magic.

Even Christmas magic.

But now that Matthew arrived in the exact same way, and I *did* feel inexplicably drawn to him even though I'd always assumed I was straight, I was having twinges of doubt in the opposite direction.

The frigid morning air hit my face as I stepped outside into the blue darkness.

I took a deep breath, savoring the crisp pine scent wafting from our tree fields.

Dawn was my favorite time of day. The world was calm and quiet before the town stirred to life.

I'd already delivered most of the month's Christmas trees, but today was the day Jake would get his.

I'd always set my tree up on Christmas Eve because that was the way the Clarks had done it for generations, waiting until the very stroke of midnight to place the star on the tree's crown.

Jake had been adopted as my brother when he was fifteen, so waiting until Christmas Eve had been a strange tradition to him at first, but now that he had a house full of rescue pets, he was grateful.

The less time the tree was subject to his nine cats and counting, the better.

I hooked my tool-laden sled to the back of my snowmobile before driving out into the burgeoning forest of trees.

It didn't take long for me to find the one Jake had picked out. I knew it by sight, I didn't need to mark it. Trees all looked different to me, even if they were the same general shape and color.

Each uniquely beautiful.

When I was a boy, I'd felt bad about cutting the trees down—and so had Jake, which was why he was a vet now and a self-proclaimed tree hugger, much to our father's half-hearted annoyance.

I had to admit it was hard to watch our father fell tree after tree with his chainsaw, leaving stumps dotted across our beautiful land. But he'd taught that with proper management, cutting down trees would be beneficial to our little slice of nature.

The remaining trees would have more space and nutrients to grow stronger, and for every tree harvested, we would always plant two seedlings in its place.

Over the years, I came to see the beauty in the cycle. The older trees fulfilling their purpose, making way for the next generation. The seedlings sprouting up each spring, reaching for the sky. And, of course, the boundless joy the Christmas trees brought to the townsfolk month after month.

Running my hand over the soft needles, I breathed in that fresh pine scent. Jake's fir would soon be decorated with memories. I knew which ornament he'd put up first. It would be the sparkling red globe with "CLARK" embossed in gold script. Every Clark had one. He'd received his the first Christmas morning following his adoption.

The first Christmas we spent as brothers.

Sometimes people from out of town weren't all that good, but they weren't all like Holly. Sometimes you got a Jake.

Sometimes you got a Matthew.

I lifted the chainsaw off the sled by my feet and pulled the cord. The air was so frigid, it took a few tries before it roared

to life, but before long, I had the chain pressed against the trunk of Jake's tree and it was cutting through the wood like butter, filling the air with the sweet and familiar scent of sap.

The fir fell into the snow with a muffled sound somewhere between a thump and a crash, its full branches rustling from the force of the impact.

As I hauled the fir onto the sled and secured it with chains, the first rays of sunlight filtered through the green needles. The soft golden glow was creeping along the snowy ground now, making the endless sea of white sparkle and glisten in a way that put any diamond to shame.

I hauled the sled holding Jake's tree behind my snowmobile, the chains jangling as I made my way down the snow-covered road leading into town.

Jake lived in the apartment above his clinic right off Main Street, where he could be easily accessible to everyone in town who might need his help. I was glad I'd chosen to keep running the farm. I preferred having a little bit of elbow room between me and the townsfolk.

When I reached Jake's place, he was already waiting on the porch, a steaming mug of eggnog coffee clutched in his gloved hands. His hair was sticking up every which way like he'd just rolled out of bed.

And knowing my brother, he probably had. The guy loved his sleep. It was a wonder why he chose a profession where he might be needed in the middle of the night.

"Morning, little bro," I called out as I parked the snowmobile and sled in front of his clinic. "I come bearing Christmas cheer."

"Thanks," Jake said with a wide grin, abandoning his mug on the porch railing to help me unload his tree. It wasn't too heavy for me, but I was like a bull in a china shop even when I *wasn't* carrying a six-foot fir on my shoulder.

We hauled the tree up the stairs that led to his apartment door, my boots and his slippers crunching on the salt he'd scattered to melt the ice.

I didn't know why he was allergic to a good pair of work boots, but I knew better than to try to change his ways. That was a battle nobody would ever win.

When we reached his living room, the cats mobbed us, and I had to resort to shuffling so I wouldn't step on a furry tail. We set the tree in the stand and secured it before standing back to admire our work.

Jake's ornery white Persian batted at the lower branches with marvel in his round green eyes as a gray tabby kitten I didn't recognize popped out near the crown.

I chuckled and shook my head. Leave it to Jake's furry crew to already be climbing the tree before we'd even finished setting it up.

"Well, looks like you've got some helpers ready to decorate," I said.

Jake smiled and gently extracted the tabby from the branches. "More like troublemakers ready to knock off every ornament they can get their paws on."

He set the squirming kitten down and it immediately scampered off, swatting at tinsel dangling from a stocking hung by the fireplace.

I glanced around at the cozy space. Jake had really made it feel like home over the years. The dark wood floors and rustic log walls gave it a warm, cabin-like feel. Twinkling lights framed the windows and garlands were draped along the bookshelves and mantel.

It was the perfect backdrop for Christmas, though I knew Jake celebrated more for the festive and nostalgic spirit than any real attachment to the "magical" aspects of the season.

Not like virtually everyone else in this town did.

My gaze landed on the empty space beneath the tree. We celebrated Christmas at the farm cabin, but that was where he typically kept his presents for the rest of the family. "No presents yet? Cutting it kinda close there, aren't you? You know Penny and Bobby are going to be expecting you to outdo yourself after those robotic toy reindeer."

“They’re in the closet. The new addition was tearing the paper off,” he said pointedly.

I nodded toward the tabby kitten I hadn’t recognized before. It was busy mauling a ball of crumpled wrapping paper, biting and bunny-kicking it with its hind paws. “Is that the new addition?”

“Yep. Named him Peppermint,” Jake replied. “Since he’s sweet and spicy and showed up on my doorstep the first day of December.”

“Which one?” I asked.

“Three Decembers ago. They all kind of blend together, you know.”

“Fitting,” I mused. “Goes right along with Snowbell, Noelle, Nutmeg, Mittens, Frosty, Chestnut, Jingle, Ginger, and Coal. You know, if you’d named them after Santa’s reindeer, you could’ve had the whole set.”

“He has nine reindeer. I have ten cats,” Jake said dryly.

I snorted a laugh. “Right. Guess you had the right idea all along.”

Jake turned toward me, his eyes boring holes into my head. “What about you? Are you procrastinating again when it comes to picking out your own tree?”

I hesitated. “No, Matthew and I picked one out together.”

A smirk tugged at the corners of Jake’s lips. “Oh, really? And how’s that going?”

I was rescued by an indignant meow from Peppermint, who was now scaling Jake’s leg with tiny claws. Jake winced, but he picked up the kitten with gentle hands and cuddled him against his chest. “Well, I better feed these monsters before they start seeing the tree as a food source. It’s bad enough it’s their new scratching post.”

I nodded. “I should get back too. Still have a few things to finish up at the farm before the Jubilee Jamboree, and Matthew will be waking up soon.”

“Did you have another ‘long night’ with him?”

“No,” I muttered. “We had a certain guest in the house when we got back from our day out on the town.”

“Oh,” Jake said knowingly. “Is he going to be your date at the Jubilee Jamboree?”

“I haven’t asked him yet,” I admitted. “Why do you think it’s that serious?”

Jake gave me a look I didn’t like at all. “Come on, Ben. Don’t pretend like I don’t notice that look in your eye when you talk about him.”

“What look?” I muttered.

“That lovestruck look,” said Jake. “I haven’t seen you look at anyone like that since...”

His voice trailed off, but I knew what he meant.

Who he meant.

“Once his car is fixed, he’ll be on his way, too,” I said flatly.

Jake sighed. “Look, I know you’ve been hurt before. But don’t let the past keep you from opening yourself up again. Sometimes you’ve gotta take a leap of faith. And don’t forget... you were the one who taught me how to open up back when I was a stranger in town, too. I hope you’re not completely closed off.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled since I didn’t know what else I could say. “Although you seemed pretty suspicious of him when you came over with his clothes.”

“That was when I hadn’t seen the effect he was having on you,” he replied pointedly. “You’re different now. Almost like the old Ben.”

“Almost, huh?”

“Yeah. Makes me think I should try dating again, too.”

“You have your eye on someone?” I asked, surprised.

“Not yet, but maybe your bravery’s inspired me to look outside of town myself,” he said, smirking. “Maybe I’ll check

out Pumpkin Point. Goths are cute, and they love cats.”

“I can see that. But I thought the good people of Bunny Bluffs drilled it into your head that Halloween was a scary holiday?” I mused.

“Oh, they did. But they said Christmas was boring and it clearly isn’t. So I have to wonder what else they got wrong, you know? And Dot Thompson’s a nice lady.” He paused. “I kind of like the scary factor, anyway. Bet the sex would be wild.”

“Fair enough, but I’d rather not picture that.”

He gave me a wry grin. “Hey, you and Matthew traumatized me first. It’s only fair.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, holding up my palms in surrender. “You’re right. Just... uh, spare me the details when you bring home whatever you find out there. I don’t need to know the intricacies of mummy anatomy.”

“Dry,” he said without missing a beat.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “JAKE.”

He just laughed. “Okay, okay. You’d better get going anyway. You have a long day ahead of you.”

“I do,” I agreed, grateful for an escape. “It was nice seeing you. And the cats.” I bent over to pet the sleek black cat winding around my ankles, but it abruptly lost interest and walked away with its tail sticking straight up.

“Thanks for the tree,” he said earnestly. “It looks awesome.”

“Anytime, brother.”

We said our goodbyes before I headed back out into the brisk morning. As I drove my snowmobile down the snowy streets toward home, I mulled over everything Jake had said.

Maybe he was right. Ever since Matthew had shown up, I’d felt something in me coming back to life that I thought was long dead. A warmth and light I hadn’t realized just how much I’d missed until it returned.

Matthew made me feel hopeful in a way I hadn't in a long time. Made me look forward to each new day instead of just going through the motions.

But I also knew hope could be dangerous. It could lift you up only to dash you back down in the cruelest way. I'd learned that lesson the hard way once before.

I'd sworn off love. Sworn off believing someone could truly want me for me. Sworn off ever opening myself up to that kind of hurt again.

Yet here I was, falling for a man who'd literally appeared out of thin air. A man who would leave just as suddenly as he'd arrived, because history always repeated itself in Mistletoe Hollow.

It didn't matter how perfectly our hands fit together or how sweetly he kissed me back. This thing between us could only be temporary.

Christmas magic wasn't real.

I felt crazy for even considering it, but maybe it was worth the risk, though.

Maybe *he* was worth it.

The snowmobile's rumble cut off as I pulled up to the house. Matthew was probably awake by now, shuffling around inside in the baggy clothes I'd lent him. The mental image made me smile.

I still didn't know if pursuing this—pursuing *him*—was wise. But the heart wants what it wants.

And I hadn't wanted anything like this in a long, long time.

I didn't know what the future held. But I knew I wanted Matthew to be a part of it.

And tonight, I would make sure he knew it too.

CHAPTER 9

MATTHEW



I stared at my reflection in the mirror, fidgeting with the collar of the green flannel shirt Jake had given me earlier. The fabric was soft against my skin, though the shirt was a little loose in some places since it wasn't fitted like my usual outfits were.

I wanted to look the part at the Jubilee Jamboree, though.

I didn't want to stand out as an outsider.

Of course, I *was* an outsider, but still.

My hair was still a mess, damp and disheveled from the shower. I ran my fingers through the dark strands, trying in vain to style it.

With a sigh, I gave up and moved on to finishing shaving the stubble I'd grown since coming to Mistletoe Hollow. I winced as the razor nicked my jaw. A dot of blood appeared on my skin and I dabbed at it with a tissue, watching my reflection the whole time.

This was all so familiar, yet so different.

Getting ready for a big date, being nervous about how I looked. But this time, I was prepping for a huge event in a perfect Christmas movie town, trying to impress a lumberjack instead of a finance bro.

I shook my head and laughed under my breath. My old life already felt strangely distant, like a half-remembered dream.

Like this was reality.

I took a deep breath as I headed downstairs, my nerves mounting with each step. Ben was waiting for me by the front door, looking unfairly handsome in his leather coat, a dark gray flannel shirt, and jeans. His hair was combed back, a few strands falling forward over his face.

“These are for you,” he said, his voice low and gentle. It took me a moment to realize he was holding out a vibrant bouquet of poinsettias and white roses. “Thought they might help make tonight feel a little more special.”

“You didn’t have to do this... they’re beautiful,” I managed, taking the bouquet carefully. Nobody had ever gotten me flowers before.

“And so are you,” he murmured.

I shuffled my feet, feeling suddenly self-conscious under Ben’s admiring stare. “Thanks. You look great, too. I mean, you always do...”

I trailed off as he reached out and adjusted my collar. His fingers grazed my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. Our eyes met, but I couldn’t read the expression in his gaze. Only that whatever it was, it was almost... sad.

I cleared my throat. “We should get going. Don’t want to be late for the big event, right?” I said, trying to sound casual. Then I remembered the bouquet in my hands. “Oh... and I should do something with these flowers first so they don’t freeze. Do you have a vase I could use?”

Ben nodded, dropping his hand. “You can use one of my pitchers,” he said, leading me into the kitchen. He opened a cupboard and pulled down a huge glass pitcher that had to weigh at least twenty pounds.

Of course, to him, it didn’t seem to weigh anything at all.

“Thanks,” I said, handing the bouquet to him.

He filled the pitcher to the halfway point with water, then set it on the counter and lowered the flowers into it. “That should do,” he said, turning to me with a soft smile. “Do you need anything else before we head out?”

“Nah, I’m ready as long as I don’t still have fur stuck to my clothes,” I replied, brushing my shirt off with my hands for good measure. I’d found a few more stragglers courtesy of Jake’s place when I was getting ready in the bathroom.

He gave me a once-over, his gaze still lingering on me like he was committing the sight to memory. It was like he thought I might leave.

Or maybe I was just paying closer attention now that I knew he’d been through some shit. I certainly had abandonment issues, especially now.

“No, you’re fine,” he said. “Let’s get going, then.”

I pulled on my pea coat and followed Ben outside into the crisp, cold evening air. It wasn’t that late in the day, but everything was already cloaked in the deep, dusky hues of twilight.

His truck was already running, the headlights cutting through the darkness. He got the door for me. I took his hand and hopped in.

Was I ever going to get over how my hand felt in his?

Completely enveloped.

Like holding a bear’s paw.

As we climbed inside, Christmas music was playing softly on the radio. I was pretty sure nothing else was on the radio at all here. So far, it was all Christmas, all the way down.

But I wasn’t complaining.

Not with Ben by my side.

“You’re going to love the Jubilee Jamboree,” Ben said, pulling out onto the road. “Everyone goes all out with the decorations and food. It ends around nine o’clock, so we’ll have plenty of time to get back and get our tree set up.”

“You really wait until the last minute, huh?” I asked.

“It’s Clark tradition,” he said. “Always been that way. Clarks decorate our respective trees a couple of hours before midnight on Christmas Eve, but we wait until the first moment of

Christmas to place our stars on top. It's been that way since the first Clark came to Mistletoe Hollow."

That piqued my interest, but I decided against asking what else was out there. What was beyond those snowy mountain peaks...

If he was already worried I wouldn't want to stick around, it felt like a bad idea to ask him questions that might make him wonder if I was already bored just a few days into eternal Christmas.

Because I definitely wasn't.

I couldn't be bored.

I was literally living the dream.

"I guess I just assumed everyone who lived here was born here," I mused.

Ben didn't say anything for a long minute. Maybe two.

Then, "Hm."

It had felt like a safe thing to say. But now that I was thinking about it—overthinking, really—I wondered if he took that wrong. If he took that as me saying no one would ever want to move here. Not if they had other options.

If only he knew...

I watched the snowy landscape pass by, and Ben said nothing. The silence didn't bother me. The other men I'd let into my life always knew how to fill silence with mindless jabbering.

It had become a habit of mine, too. This was nice, though. Sitting in silence and just being present.

Being here.

It didn't take long for us to reach the town square. It had been transformed into a winter wonderland that blew the fictional version I'd seen so many times out of the water.

And that was saying something.

The entire square had been utterly transformed from the cobblestones to the rooftops for the Jubilee Jamboree. Every

surface was draped in garlands of fresh pine boughs, red velvet bows, and strings of twinkling white lights. Intricate ice sculptures of reindeer, snowmen, and nutcrackers lined the walkways, along with oversized candy canes and enormous gingerbread houses large enough to walk through.

An enormous Christmas tree towered over the square, decorated with handmade glass ornaments, candy canes, and delicate glass snowflakes that sparkled in the surrounding light. I knew it had to come from the Clark Christmas Tree Farm.

Who else could provide the town with such a glorious Christmas tree?

An ice rink lined with hay bales encircled the magnificent tree. It seemed like every child in Mistletoe Hollow was out there on the ice, darting along on colorful skates and shrieking as they chased each other with reckless abandon.

Couples skated together, too, holding hands as they glided effortlessly. Christmas carols echoed softly through the evening air from loudspeakers that appeared to be hidden in the tree.

“This is incredible,” I breathed.

Ben chuckled as we climbed out of the truck. “I told you they go all out.”

I let him lead me toward the main event tent. We passed carolers dressed in old-fashioned attire, stilt-walkers on impossibly tall candy-striped stilts, and vendors selling every seasonal treat I’d ever heard of and then some.

Inside the tent, long tables draped in red and green linens were laden with platters of honey-glazed ham, roast turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, cranberry sauce, and more. An entire table held nothing but pies and other desserts. In the center of the space, the people of Mistletoe Hollow were already dancing to a small orchestra playing upbeat Christmas tunes.

It was incredible, alright.

More than incredible.

“Geez,” I murmured, feeling overwhelmed in the best possible way. “How does the town pull this all together every December?”

“It’s a labor of love,” Ben replied. “Everyone chips in to make it happen. The local businesses sponsor it, and there are always volunteers stepping up to help with setup and planning.”

“Like Carol?” I asked.

As if on cue, she came rushing over, cheeks flushed from the cold and exertion. She was wearing an elaborate Mrs. Claus outfit complete with glittering snowflakes embroidered on the hem of her full red skirt.

I was just relieved their version of Mrs. Claus was a regular human and not some kind of divine eldritch being.

“There you boys are!” she exclaimed, pulling Ben and I both into tight hugs. “Oh Matthew, don’t you look so handsome! That shirt brings out your eyes. And Ben, you cleaned yourself up so nicely!”

Ben rolled his eyes good-naturedly as she fussed over him. “Thanks, Ma. The place looks great as always.”

“Well, I can’t take all the credit,” Carol said with poorly feigned humility. “Dot and the ladies from the historical society have been working nonstop on the decorations. And the ice sculptures this year are just magnificent, aren’t they?”

As if on cue, Dot sidled up to us, decked out in a shimmering blue gown with a furry white shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Her eyes immediately locked onto mine.

She seriously reminded me of Evie.

“Well, hello again Matthew,” she said, her gaze knowing. Too knowing. “Enjoying our little winter wonderland?”

I shifted on my feet, still unsure how to respond to Dot’s uncanny perception. “It’s amazing. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Oh, I think you have,” Dot replied lightly. Before I could puzzle out her meaning, she grabbed my arm. “Come along,

dears, let's get you some refreshments.”

Ben shot me an apologetic look as Dot steered us toward the food and Carol trailed behind, already chattering about the upcoming festivities. I tried to focus on the sensations assaulting me—the savory aromas wafting from the buffet, the lively music and laughter enveloping the tent, Ben's huge arm brushing mine as we walked.

Dot pressed mugs of hot apple cider into our hands as Carol piled our plates high with slices of honey-baked ham, buttery mashed potatoes, tangy cranberry sauce, and fixings I'd never even seen before but definitely wanted to try. My mouth watered just looking at it. We found a small table off to the side and sat down to eat.

I took a sip of the hot cider, letting the sweet warmth spread through me. Across from me, Ben was already digging into his food with gusto. Whatever had been bothering him earlier seemed to have faded away since we arrived.

Probably because of the food.

How did this guy have rock-hard abs?

Oh, right. He worked out constantly.

Maybe he didn't have a home gym, but who needed that when you could lift Christmas trees instead of dumbbells?

“This is the best food I've ever had,” I said after swallowing a bite of the perfectly glazed ham. “I literally don't think I've ever eaten like this. Even in the ‘big city.’”

Ben grinned. “Just wait until Christmas dinner. Prime rib, creamed spinach, roasted Brussels sprouts with bacon...”

He trailed off, a shadow passing over his face.

Was he thinking about past Christmases from before he'd lost his Christmas spirit? How much had changed since then?

“Well, I can't wait,” I said, hoping to steer the conversation to lighter ground. “You'll have to roll me out the door when it's all over.”

Ben blew a puff of air through his nose. “Don’t worry, I can carry you if I need to.”

I laughed. “I’m sure. I weigh as much as one of your arms.”

We continued eating, making small talk about the decorations and the upcoming dance portion of the evening. My nerves started creeping in again at the thought of dancing with Ben, being held close against his solid frame.

Would I even come up to his shoulder?

Or maybe he wasn’t going to ask me to dance at all.

Maybe that was why he was being weird.

Maybe—

“Don’t worry, I won’t step on your toes out there,” he said.

My head snapped up. Had he read my mind or had I muttered my insecurities out loud?

“Sorry, what?” I asked once I regained my composure.

“The dance,” he clarified.

I hesitated. “Are you asking me to be your official date at the Jubilee Jamboree?” I asked, deciding to cover up my total lack of confidence and self-esteem with a little playful banter. “There aren’t any pretty Christmas elves you’d rather dance with?”

“Rather than you? Of course not,” he said, giving me a genuinely baffled stare. “Wait, you didn’t know this was a date?”

I laughed nervously. “Oh, no, I did. I was just... uh... checking.”

He arched an eyebrow. “So you didn’t know.”

“I’m sorry. I’m a mess,” I muttered. “A mess with abandonment issues.”

He reached for my hand and took it in his, wrapping his thick fingers around mine and running his thumb over my knuckles. That small touch was all I needed to forget everything I was worried about.

“That makes two of us,” he admitted with a snort.

“It does?” I asked, glancing up again. When had I started staring at my ham? When he nodded, I sighed. “I don’t know how anyone could abandon you. Me, on the other hand...”

“Stop.”

I gulped. “Sorry,” I said again.

“No. Stop that, too. Stop apologizing and stop doubting yourself.”

“It’s easy,” I admitted before I could stop myself.

Fuck. I really was bad.

“It is *not* easy,” he said in a low tone.

I stared down at my plate, once more unable to meet Ben’s intense gaze. His thumb continued stroking my hand and I focused on that sensation, letting it ground me.

“Matthew,” Ben said gently. When I still didn’t look up, he gave my hand a little squeeze. “Hey. Look at me.”

I slowly raised my eyes. His blue eyes were soft and warm, filled with a tenderness I wasn’t used to seeing directed at me.

Maybe it was even the first time.

“I know it’s not easy,” Ben continued. “Believe me, I understand. But you can’t keep doubting your worth and putting yourself down like this.”

He paused, seeming to consider his next words carefully. “You’re one of the kindest, most interesting people I’ve ever met. From the moment I first saw you out there in the snow, I could tell there was something special about you.”

I scoffed lightly, shaking my head. “Come on, you’re just saying that.”

“No, I’m not,” Ben said firmly. “When I look at you, I see a man with passion, talent, intelligence, compassion. You light up any room you walk into. You make me feel...”

He trailed off, his mouth slightly open. I found myself leaning forward, hanging on his every word.

“You make me feel things I never thought I’d feel again,” Ben continued quietly. “Good things. Happy things.”

I stared at him, at a loss for words.

He gave a self-conscious little laugh. “I’m not explaining this very well. I just mean... you’re incredible, Matthew. Truly. And I wish you could see yourself the way I see you.”

I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat, blinking back the sting of tears. “That’s... I don’t even know what to say. No one’s ever talked about me like that before.”

Ben squeezed my hand again. “Then everyone else was a damn fool,” he said in a low voice. “Because you deserve to be cherished and appreciated every single day for exactly who you are.”

A tear slipped down my cheek before I could stop it. Ben reached up and gently brushed it away with his thumb, the roughness of his skin contrasting with the unexpected tenderness of the gesture.

“Thank you,” I managed, my voice cracking. “I’ll try to remember that.”

“You better,” Ben said with a crooked smile. “Because I plan on reminding you as often as you need to hear it.”

I let out a watery laugh. “Careful, you might create a monster that demands endless compliments. You have no idea how hard I latch onto shit.” I paused. That sounded unnecessarily profane considering our surroundings. “I mean... I mean things.”

Ben chuckled, the sound rumbling through his broad chest.

God, I loved that sound.

“I think I can handle that,” he said.

The music swelled and changed to a slower, romantic melody. Ben tilted his head toward the dance floor where couples were now swaying together.

“What do you say we get out there and show them how it’s done?” he asked, a playful glint in his eyes.

I grinned, feeling lighter than I had in ages. “I’d love nothing more.”

Hand in hand, we got up and joined the other dancers.

I felt the weight of countless eyes on us as Ben led me onto the dance floor. The townsfolk were clearly intrigued to see the handsome but aloof town icon dancing with someone new.

Especially another man.

I caught snippets of hushed conversations and poorly concealed glances in our direction. The attention wasn’t negative, but it still made me nervous in a butterflies sort of way.

“Is that Ben Clark? With a date?”

“I haven’t seen him dance in ages...”

“Who’s that with Ben?”

“Ben looks huge next to him, doesn’t he?”

“They make such a nice-looking couple!”

If Ben noticed the attention we were garnering, he didn’t show it. His focus was entirely on me as he drew me close and we began to sway gently in time with the music.

I was hyperaware of every point of contact between us—his broad hand resting lightly on my back, our joined hands, my other hand on his muscular shoulder.

We didn’t speak at first. We just danced, letting our bodies communicate wordlessly. Somehow, our size difference didn’t even seem to matter.

I found myself getting lost in his azure eyes, so vivid and expressive in the twinkling lights that surrounded us. In his gaze, I could see his walls coming down brick by brick. Past hurts fading away. A glimmer of hope taking their place.

My heart swelled knowing that somehow, I was helping this gentle soul begin to heal. That just by being here with him, I was bringing light back into his world.

“Everyone is staring at us,” I eventually murmured, more to break the silence than anything.

Ben smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “Let them stare. I only have eyes for you.”

I couldn’t help the giddy laugh that escaped my lips. “That was so cheesy. But also kind of sweet.”

“What can I say? You bring out my romantic side,” Ben replied, his voice a low rumble. He pulled me infinitesimally closer.

Over his shoulder, I caught Carol beaming at us, clasping her hands together in delight. Beside her, Dot wore a knowing smile, as if she could see the invisible threads tying Ben and I together. I wondered again just how much the mysterious psychic knew about me, about why I was here.

But I pushed the thought from my mind, focusing on the bliss of simply being here in this moment with Ben. Dancing with him felt as natural as breathing. We moved in effortless harmony, like we’d done this a thousand times before in a thousand different worlds.

“You’re a wonderful dancer,” I murmured.

“Only because I have the perfect partner,” Ben countered smoothly.

I chuckled again. “Seriously, the cheesiness. Where has this side of you been hiding?”

Ben grew thoughtful, his eyes clouding for a moment. “I think it went into hibernation for awhile,” he admitted. “But you’ve brought it out of me.”

“Well, I’m honored,” I said sincerely.

Ben’s lips quirked upward. “Truth is, I haven’t felt much like dancing these past few years. Hasn’t felt right. But with you...” His voice grew husky with emotion. “With you, it feels right again. More than right.”

My breath caught at the vulnerability in his words, the implication that I was healing something in him too.

“I know what you mean,” I said softly. “Dancing with you feels special. Magical, even.”

The corners of Ben’s eyes crinkled again. “Magic, huh?”

“Must be,” I echoed, transfixed by the way he was looking at me.

Like I was the only person in the entire world.

We danced song after song, neither one of us inclined to let go. The jaunty Christmas melodies faded away and it was like we were the only two people in the whole town square.

Hell, in the whole *town* .

I didn’t want this night to end. I wanted to stay here, swaying in Ben’s strong arms, forever.

Was that too much to ask?

It felt like it. But I was gonna ask anyway.

I barely noticed when the music drifted to a stop. I was so caught up in our dance that it took the sound of applause penetrating the haze around us to jolt me back to awareness that we weren’t alone. Ben and I slowly drew apart, though his hand lingered at my waist. I glanced around to see the other couples and townsfolk clapping and smiling at us.

“Looks like we put on quite the show,” Ben remarked, looking mildly sheepish for the first time since we’d met.

I, on the other hand, felt my face flame. I wasn’t used to being the center of attention, especially not for something so intimate. I chose to be a screenwriter for a reason instead of going into acting. But the delight on the faces of the people of Mistletoe Hollow seemed genuine. I spotted Carol dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief while Dot nodded approvingly.

This had happened in the movie, too, didn’t it?

Weird. I hadn’t thought about the movie in a while.

Had I forgotten...?

Then his lips were on mine again, and the rest of the world fell away. When we finally broke apart, he rested his forehead

against mine, his eyes closing as he breathed.

“Stay,” he whispered.

My heart stuttered in my chest.

“Always,” I whispered back.

And I sealed my promise with another kiss.

The crowd went wild again, and a moment later, a whistling sound pierced the air. We both looked up just as the night sky exploded with bursts of colorful light. Fireworks in all the colors of Christmas—red, green, gold, white—lit up the square, reflecting in shimmering rainbows off the distant snowy mountains.

“The fireworks are starting!” someone yelled excitedly.

I gazed up at the dazzling fireworks display, utterly mesmerized. The bright bursts of color reflected in Ben’s eyes as he looked down at me, his expression soft.

He seemed to be enjoying watching me more than the fireworks.

Maybe he was just used to them. But nobody else seemed to be.

“This is incredible,” I managed to say.

Ben slid his arm around my waist, holding me close against his side. “Just wait until the finale,” he said. “It’s really something.”

I leaned into him, savoring his solid warmth.

We stayed huddled together as the show continued, the crowd oohing and ahing at the biggest and brightest explosions that seemed to shake the very ground. The fireworks built steadily toward a crescendo, each one somehow more impressive than the last.

“Here it comes,” Ben said, as if there might have been a chance I wasn’t paying attention.

The grand finale was everything he promised and more. Fireworks of every color and variety overlapped in a truly

spectacular aerial display. Shimmering trails rained down through the darkness. The cheers and applause of the crowd grew deafening.

When it finally ended, I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. "That was amazing," I gushed, turning to Ben with an exhilarated grin.

He was already looking down at me. "It sure was," he agreed. But something in his voice made me realize he wasn't just talking about the fireworks.

Heat rushed to my cheeks. No one had ever looked at me the way Ben did, like I was the most wondrous thing in the universe.

And it turned my insides into jelly every time.

When the show ended, I expected people to start heading home to get some rest before Christmas officially arrived at midnight. But to my surprise, the party kept going. More food and drinks were brought out, the band struck up another lively tune, and the dancing resumed with even more enthusiasm than before.

"Don't these people ever run out of energy?" I asked Ben incredulously.

He chuckled. "Not really, no. But we'll be heading home soon. We still have to put up our tree."

My heart latched on to the way he said that.

Like his home was mine, too.

"That's dedication," I remarked. Though I had to admit, I was pretty wired on adrenaline and emotion myself.

And sugar.

And whatever they put in the apple cider that made me keep going back for more. If Mistletoe Hollow were a very different kind of movie, I might have wondered if it was crack.

We danced some more, ate entirely too many sweets, and mingled with the townsfolk. I met what felt like every single

resident of Mistletoe Hollow and tried to memorize names and faces.

But there were just so many, and they all already knew who I was. The mysterious outsider who appeared out of nowhere and captured the heart of Ben Clark.

Apparently, that alone was enough to make me a celebrity here.

They were soon distracted by the Jubilee crown ceremony, though. It turned out everyone who officially contributed won some kind of trophy, but Carol got the actual crown again while her considerably less fiercely competitive “rivals” clapped and cheered.

I stifled a yawn as Ben and I headed out of the town square just before nine o'clock after we reassured Carol for what had to be the tenth time that, yes, everything was perfect and she definitely deserved to win again. The Jubilee Jamboree was still in full swing, with no sign of the party slowing down anytime soon even though it was supposed to be winding down.

I didn't mind. As exciting as the Jamboree was, I was starting to feel the effects of the long day catching up with me.

And the thought of spending some quiet time alone with Ben on Christmas Eve sounded pretty perfect.

CHAPTER 10

MATTHEW



We climbed into his truck and set off down the snowy backroads to the Christmas tree farm, the radio playing classic carols. This time, he didn't have the volume so low. I leaned against the passenger door, watching the winter landscape roll by. The snow glowed blue in the moonlight and stars twinkled brightly overhead in the cold, clear sky.

This time, I noticed we had the same constellations.

The same North Star.

I wondered what Dot Thompson would say about that. Probably something super fucking weird and cryptic.

"Long day, huh?" Ben said, glancing over at me.

"The longest and the best," I replied through another yawn.

He chuckled, reaching over to give my thigh an affectionate squeeze. "Don't fall asleep on me yet. We've got an important job to do."

"Don't worry, I'm awake," I said, sitting up straighter. "I wouldn't miss this for anything."

We turned down a narrow lane flanked by towering evergreens, and even though the windows of the truck were rolled up to keep the heat in—no doubt for my comfort, not his—I caught the distinct, comforting scent of pine.

Ben pulled up in front of his cozy cabin and parked next to the porch steps. As soon as he cut the engine, I hopped out, eager to get our Christmas Eve started. The cold night air was crisp and bracing after the stuffy warmth of the truck.

It woke me up a bit, too.

“Want to ride the sled?” Ben asked, pulling it out from under the porch. It was loaded with tools, but there was still space to sit.

As long as the chainsaw couldn’t roar to life on its own.

“I can? Are you sure?” I asked, unable to hide my excitement.

He blew a puff of air through his nose. “If I can’t pull a pretty boy on a sleigh ride, what do I even have these muscles for?” He flexed his biceps dramatically and they strained against his leather coat.

Laughing, I plopped down onto the sled, wriggling a little to get comfortable—and put a few extra inches between my crotch and the chainsaw’s teeth, just for good measure.

“Onward, Clark!” I proclaimed in my best queenly voice, pointing toward the snowy hills behind the house.

Laughing, Ben grabbed the rope and started pulling me along the trail leading to the Christmas tree grove. I held on tight as we bumped over the uneven ground, gazing up at the starry sky overhead. The cold air stung my cheeks and nipped at my exposed fingers, but I didn’t care. I was having too much fun.

We stopped in front of the tree we’d selected the day before. Ben lifted the chainsaw and I scooted further away, drawing my legs up like it might bite me.

“Is this still the one you want?” he asked, nodding toward it.

I tilted my head back, regarding the perfectly symmetrical fir tree standing tall before us. It was the quintessential Christmas tree, the kind you’d expect to see on a greeting card or in a department store display.

Full.

Flawless.

Uniformly green.

Before, it had seemed like the obvious choice. But now...

“You know what?” I said to Ben. “I think I want something a little different after all.”

Ben lowered the chainsaw and quirked an eyebrow. “Different how?”

I glanced around the grove, thinking. “Just... not so perfect and polished, I guess. More natural. Unique.” I met Ben’s curious gaze. “Like us.”

Understanding dawned in his eyes, followed by a smile. “I like the way you think.”

He set the chainsaw aside and offered me his hand, pulling me up off the sled. Together, we wandered through the rows of trees, searching for the imperfectly perfect one.

“What about this one?” Ben suggested after a few minutes, stopping before a tall, slender fir. It was a bit sparse in places, with some branches shorter than others.

I circled it critically. “Hmm... I dunno. It’s cute in a quirky way, but I’m not sure it’s the one.”

We continued on. I brushed my fingers over the needles as we walked, inhaling their fresh, woodsy scent. It was peaceful here under the starry sky, wandering among the sleeping trees. A light snow began to fall, the fat flakes drifting down silently to coat our shoulders.

“Oh wow,” I breathed when I caught sight of a tree tucked against the back edge of the grove. I hurried over to it, a grin spreading across my face. “Look at this one, Ben!”

He followed me, chuckling when he saw what had caught my attention. It was a short, stout fir tree, only about five feet tall. But what it lacked in height, it made up for in character. It was full and bushy, its branches growing every which way in a charmingly chaotic manner.

“Well would you look at that,” Ben said, bending down to examine it. “It’s like a little tree with an attitude. Reminds me of you.”

I blinked at him. “*Excuse me?*”

He just laughed. “I love it.”

I rolled my eyes. “And one more thing.”

“What is it?” he asked warily.

“Can we use a regular saw? The chainsaw’s kind of... overkill. It doesn’t feel magical. It feels violent.”

“But a hand saw’s better?” he asked, curious.

“Hey. I’m the outsider. You’re jaded. I make the rules,” I said, grinning.

He shrugged his big shoulders. “Fair enough.”

Together, we carefully sawed our unconventional tree down. Or, more accurately, Ben sawed it down while I held it steady by keeping my hand wrapped around the tall, uncomfortably pokey branch sticking straight up out of the tree’s crown.

When we finished, Ben lashed it to the sled with chains and we made our way back to the house with our treasure, the snow continuing to dust our shoulders and hair.

Back inside the cozy cabin, Ben got a fire going while I prepared mugs of hot cocoa, complete with mini marshmallows and whipped cream. Soon, we were cuddled up on the couch together, warming our hands around the mugs.

“This is nice,” I murmured contentedly, leaning into Ben’s solid frame.

He pressed a kiss to my temple. “The best part is still to come.”

I perked up. “Decorating the tree?”

He just grinned at me. “After that.”

Heat rushed straight to my cock, but did I even have the energy for that tonight? I hadn’t really had much—if any—alcohol, but I still felt hungover just from the food and excitement.

Actually, no. Scratch that.

I’d done crazier things in college than fuck after a holiday party.

When we finished our cocoa, Ben carried the tree inside and set it up in the corner of the living room. There were already boxes and bins of decorations scattered across the floor, so while Ben arranged gift boxes in neat piles beneath the tree—most of them for Penny and Bobby—I started digging through boxes of decorations.

I was quickly overwhelmed by the options. Strings of lights, glass balls, candy canes, tinsel garland... he had everything.

Back in the city, I never bothered putting up more than a tiny two-foot plastic tree on my kitchen counter. Even that had been met with resistance because Christmas trees and evil villain lair décor didn't exactly go hand-in-hand.

And now I was decorating a tree with Ben Clark.

I pulled out ornament after ornament and showed them to Ben. He patiently told me the story behind each one—the clay gingerbread man he'd made in kindergarten, the glass cardinal his grandmother had given him when he was ten, the carved wooden snowflake from his first trip up north to cut down his first wild Christmas tree with his father.

"I haven't put up most of these in years," he admitted as he untangled a string of lights. "Just haven't felt like it, I guess. Things are different with you."

I paused in hanging a glittery pinecone on a branch to meet his gaze. "I'm glad I could help bring some of that spirit back."

He rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. "You sound like my mother."

"Good."

We continued decorating, occasionally bumping shoulders or brushing hands as we draped garlands and hung ornaments. The tree may have been technically imperfect, but when we were finished with it, it was the most beautiful tree I'd ever seen in my life.

The tree in the town square had nothing on ours.

"I think there's just one thing missing," Ben said, rummaging in a box. He pulled out a beautiful glass star. "For the topper."

Would you do the honors? In a couple of minutes, it'll be Christmas.”

My breath hitched as I took the star carefully in my hands, staring at the iridescent rainbow lights reflecting along the edges and points. I was humbled that Ben was trusting me with something so special and symbolic. This star had topped his family's tree every Christmas for as long as he could remember.

And now he was passing that honor on to me.

“Really?” I asked, unable to keep the emotion from my voice.

“Really.”

I approached the tree reverently, knowing this was a solemn moment. Ben stood back, watching me with a pensive look in those azure eyes.

Slowly, afraid I'd move too quickly and ruin the moment, I reached up and placed the star on the very top branch. It fit just right, as if it had been made just for this tree. I adjusted it to make sure it was centered, then took a small step back to admire it. The star seemed to glow from within, shimmering beautifully in the firelight.

“It's perfect,” I breathed.

Ben stepped up beside me. “Not just yet,” he said.

Before I could ask what he meant, he flipped the switch on the cord snaking beneath the tree.

The little fir lit up with twinkling rainbow lights, utterly transforming it. The lights reflected off the glass ornaments and garlands, making it seem as if a thousand tiny fairies had taken up residence within the branches. I drew in a sharp breath, enchanted by the magical sight.

“*Now* it's perfect,” Ben said softly.

Unable to resist, I threw my arms around his broad shoulders in a spontaneous hug. “Thank you for sharing this with me.”

Ben's strong arms came around me, enveloping me in his warmth. “There's no one else I'd rather share it with,” he

murmured against my hair.

We stood there together for a moment, just looking at our tree.

The one we'd chosen together.

The one we'd decorated together.

The evergreen symbol of our blossoming connection.

The old grandfather clock in the hall chimed suddenly, making me jump. Ben chuckled, giving me a little squeeze.

"It's midnight," he said. "Merry Christmas, Matthew."

My heart fluttered wildly in my chest. "Merry Christmas, Ben."

I turned in his arms to face him. His bright blue eyes gazed down at me, full of warmth and tenderness. He brushed a stray lock of hair back from my forehead, his touch impossibly gentle.

"This is our first Christmas together," he said. "The first of many, I hope."

"Me too," I whispered. And I meant it with my whole heart.

Ben cupped my face in his big, calloused hands, growing serious all of a sudden, and I found myself entranced in his gaze again.

"I know it's fast," he began. "And I know we still have a lot to figure out. But you... you feel like home to me, Matthew. Like family." His voice grew husky. "I've never felt this way before. About anyone. I... think I'm falling in love with you."

Love.

He was falling in love... with *me*.

My vision blurred with tears. "I am, too," I managed.

"You'll stay, then?" he murmured, searching my eyes.

"If you'll have me."

And then his lips captured mine, and everything else faded away.

The kiss was slow and sweet and filled with promise. His stubble tickled my face, his hands gentle as they cradled my head. I melted against him, my own hands coming up to grip his muscular shoulders, feeling the strength coiled under his flannel shirt.

His hands slid down to grip my hips, pulling me hard against him. I could feel his growing arousal even through our layers of clothes. The kiss deepened, our tongues tangling together heatedly. I moaned into his mouth, raking my fingers through his thick, dark hair.

Ben broke the kiss just long enough to pull my sweater up over my head. His hot mouth found my neck, nipping and sucking at the sensitive skin. I gasped, arching into him. My hands fumbled with the buttons of his flannel shirt, desperate to feel his bare skin.

We shed the rest of our clothes in a heated frenzy. The flickering firelight played over Ben's muscular body as he gently lowered me down onto the plush furry rug in front of the hearth. I drew him down on top of me, spreading my legs so he could settle between them.

Ben's mouth left a burning trail down my throat and chest. When his lips closed around one of my nipples, sucking firmly, I cried out and bucked up against him. His big hand wrapped around both our cocks, stroking firmly. Precome slickened his grip, adding to the delicious friction.

"Need you... now," I panted, reaching down to grasp his thick length.

He got that oil out of the end table and I started squirming earnestly for it as I watched him slicking his fingers. My hole ached for him, and when he rubbed the tip of his index finger against it in slow circles, I couldn't help but whimper.

"Please," I begged, trying to press back against his hand as he teased me.

A low chuckle rumbled in Ben's chest. "Eager, are we?"

Before I could respond, he slid his thick, oiled finger inside me. I moaned loudly, arching off the rug. Ben pumped his

finger slowly, stretching me open. My body eagerly accepted the intrusion, hungry for more.

I threaded my fingers into Ben's hair and crashed our mouths together in a searing kiss. Our tongues tangled as he worked a second finger into me, scissoring them to stretch my hole wide. The burn of peppermint only heightened my arousal.

"Fuck me," I gasped against his lips when I couldn't take the teasing any longer.

Ben withdrew his fingers, leaving me empty and aching. He grabbed the oil again and slicked up his rigid cock. The head nudged at my slick entrance and I wrapped my legs around his waist, trying to draw him in.

With one powerful thrust, he buried himself to the hilt inside me. We both cried out, overwhelmed by the intense pleasure. Ben gave me a moment to adjust before drawing back and snapping his hips forward. He set a steady pace, fucking me deep and hard.

The only sounds were our harsh panting, the crackle of the fire, and the lewd slap of skin on skin. I clawed at Ben's muscular back, moaning shamelessly. He angled his hips and his cock rammed against my prostate on every stroke.

"So good," Ben grunted, quickening his pace as his thrusts grew more forceful.

The rug abraded my back but I didn't care. All I could focus on was the mind-melting ecstasy of Ben pounding into me. I clenched around him, spurring him on.

"Gonna come," I choked out. The pressure building inside me was unbearable.

Ben wrapped a big hand around my aching cock, stroking in time with his powerful snaps of his hips. The dual sensations pushed me over the edge. With a strangled cry, I came hard between us.

My orgasm set off Ben's. He slammed deep one last time before finding his own release, spilling hot and wet inside me, pumping me full like his cock was a fire hose. That crazy cold, burning sensation filled my belly and chest again as if it was

getting into every available space inside me, and I shook and quivered and jolted on his cock, convulsing with pleasure.

Ben collapsed on top of me, both of us heaving and spent. I held him close, nuzzling into his sweat-damp hair and inhaling his masculine, woody scent. I could feel his come trickling out of my thoroughly used hole even though his cock was still stuffed inside me, and I clenched around him, moaning.

“You’re so amazing,” Ben murmured, pressing lazy kisses along my jaw and throat.

I gazed up at him adoringly as we caught our breath in front of the softly glowing Christmas tree. The fire crackled nearby, warming our bare skin. I stroked his broad, muscular back as he nuzzled into my neck, his stubble tickling me.

“That was incredible,” I murmured, still feeling the euphoric high.

Ben lifted his head to grin down at me. “I’m not done with you yet.”

Before I could ask what he meant, he shifted down my body and took my sensitive cock into his hot mouth. I gasped and threaded my fingers into his dark hair as he swirled his tongue over the head. I was still oversensitive from my intense orgasm, but I quickly started to harden again under his skillful attention.

Just when I felt myself getting close, Ben pulled off with an obscene pop. I whined in protest, trying to buck my hips up, but he just chuckled and pinned my thighs down.

“Patience,” he rumbled. His eyes landed on something and lit up mischievously.

I followed his gaze to one of the oversized candy canes we’d used to decorate the tree earlier. It had to be a foot long. My eyes went wide as I realized what he intended to do with it.

“Ben, I don’t know if that’s a good idea...” I said uncertainly. The thing was beyond huge.

“Do you trust me?” Ben asked, meeting my eyes.

I hesitated only a moment before nodding. I did trust him. Completely.

Ben grabbed the candy cane and popped it into his mouth, slicking it up with his saliva. Watching his lips wrap around the sweet treat sent a spike of arousal through me. He pulled it out with a wet pop, the curved end glistening.

“Flip over and relax for me,” he soothed.

I rolled over onto my elbows and knees and bit my lip anxiously as he grabbed my hips, adjusting my ass so it was in the air, supported by my knees in the most vulnerable position, his for the taking.

Ben rubbed the slick tip of the huge candy cane against my wet, leaking hole. I shivered at the cool, hard feeling. Slowly, he eased just the tip inside me, grasping the curved end like a handle. I tensed slightly at the unfamiliar stretch, but willed myself to relax.

With exquisite care, Ben pushed the candy cane deeper, giving me time to adjust around the thickness until the curved part rested against the cleft of my ass.

“Ohhh fuck,” I moaned once it was fully seated.

“You look so pretty stuffed full for me,” he growled, his pupils blown wide with lust. Before I could respond, he slid the candy cane out halfway, then pushed it hard back into me, twisting it at the same time.

I cried out, arching off the floor and babbling his name helplessly, clenching frantically as my spent cock sprang back to life.

“Please,” I begged shamelessly. “Please!”

Ben’s eyes flashed wickedly at my pleas. He kept working the massive candy cane in and out of me, pumping it faster and twisting it on every thrust. The peppermint tingled and burned deliciously.

“You should see yourself right now,” Ben growled. “Stuffed so full and begging for more.”

He gave the candy cane a particularly hard twist that dragged right over my prostate. I shouted wordlessly, fingers scrabbling at the furry rug beneath me as I buried my face in it. Precome was leaking steadily from my bobbing cock to the point where the crown was sticking to my stomach. When I glanced back in a daze, the sight of the thick tip of the candy cane bulging through my belly was too much.

“I can’t,” I breathed. “I’m going to...”

Ben grabbed my cock just then and gave it a hard, milking squeeze, and I sprayed all over the rug with a sharp cry.

He kept fucking and milking me ruthlessly, long after my dick had gone soft in his hand. He was relentless, pushing the thick candy shaft against my spot with each deep thrust until I was screaming and thrashing, clawing for purchase.

“You take it so well,” Ben rasped, giving the candy cane a sharp twist that had me seeing stars. “Such a good boy for me.”

He released his hold of my cock to plant his hand on the small of my back, holding me down as he angled the tip of the candy cane against my prostate and pushed hard, sending me to the fucking moon as my cock sputtered with the last drops of come I had in me.

Ben carefully withdrew the candy cane and tossed it aside. Before I could collapse completely, he flipped me onto my back and buried his face between my legs, licking and sucking my sensitive hole. I wailed, clutching his hair tightly as he cleaned his spend and the remains of the peppermint oil from my thoroughly used hole.

I went limp beneath Ben, utterly spent and overwhelmed. My legs fell open bonelessly as he continued to lap and suck at my tender hole. I was lost, floating in a haze of euphoria.

Finally, Ben lifted his head, gazing down at me with an expression of pure satisfaction that was surprisingly gentle considering he’d just railed me with a giant fucking candy cane.

“You did so good,” he praised, smoothing my sweat-damp hair back from my forehead. I managed a dazed smile, still trying to catch my breath.

Ben shifted up and gathered me close, tucking my head under his chin. I melted against his broad chest, nuzzling into his warmth. Strong arms held me tight as I drifted, anchored only by his steady heartbeat under my ear.

I must have dozed off briefly, because the next thing I knew, Ben was scooping me up into his arms. I made a small sound of protest, not wanting to move just yet.

“Shh, I’ve got you,” he soothed.

He carried me effortlessly to the bedroom and laid me down on the plush blankets. I sighed blissfully, stretching out my pleasantly sore muscles. The cool sheets felt amazing against my heated skin.

Ben slid into bed behind me, molding his hard body along my back and wrapping me in his arms once more. I laced my fingers with his, hugging his arms close as he kissed my neck.

I let my heavy eyelids drift shut. As I hovered on the edge of sleep, I had one last fleeting thought.

This was exactly where I belonged.

CHAPTER 11

MATTHEW



I awoke from the most restful sleep of my life to a tickling sensation on my cheek. Slowly cracking one eye open, I was greeted by the sight of Ben leaning over me, brushing the tips of an evergreen branch lightly across my face.

“Rise and shine, sleepyhead,” he said with a crooked grin. “It’s Christmas morning.”

I groaned and pulled the quilt up over my head. “Ten more minutes.”

“Nah.”

“Five...?”

He whisked the covers off me with no warning whatsoever.

I yelped as the chilly morning air hit my bare skin. “Hey!”

“I let you sleep in, but it’s nearly nine o’clock,” Ben said unapologetically. He was already fully dressed in jeans and a red-and-black buffalo check flannel shirt. Meanwhile, I was buck naked.

I felt my face flush as the memories of last night came flooding back. My hair no doubt resembled a bird’s nest. I could feel it pulling on my scalp a little. “Alright, alright, I’m up,” I grumbled, stretching gingerly and wincing at the pleasurable ache in my ass as I sat up.

Or tried to, anyway.

Ben’s grin turned positively devilish. “Sore after last night?”

“Sore is an understatement,” I said pointedly.

He leaned down to press a tender kiss to my lips. “Merry Christmas.”

My grumpiness evaporated instantly, and I sleepily returned the kiss. “Merry Christmas, Ben.”

He bent over and picked up a gift box from beneath the tree. It was a medium-sized box wrapped in shiny red paper patterned with white snowflakes. A big green velvet bow sat on top.

“This one’s for you,” Ben said, holding it out to me.

My heart did an excited little flip. “You got me a present?”

I sat up straighter against the pillows, pulling the quilt around myself for warmth and modesty because having my dick hanging out while I opened a gift seemed like a weird choice.

Ben raised an eyebrow. “Of course I got you a present. It’s Christmas.”

“I know, I just...” I trailed off, unsure how to explain.

Greg and I had never really bothered with gifts, not even on birthdays. We’d just do dinner or something. He hated anything “commercialized.” It was his way of trying to seem like a more authentic person when in reality, he was just a stuck-up snob.

I shook my head. Why was I letting myself dwell on that asshole? Especially when I wasn’t even sad anymore. It wasn’t just that the sting of his betrayal had faded. It was like none of that had happened at all. Like it was all just a bad dream.

Which was delusional, but I’d give myself some slack as a treat.

I sure as hell deserved it.

“Never mind,” I said, smiling up at Ben. “Thank you.”

“Open it,” he urged, settling onto the couch beside me.

I began peeling back the paper, revealing a plain white box with a lid. I lifted the lid, moved aside the tissue paper, and froze.

Nestled inside was a beautiful hand-carved wooden figurine of a reindeer. I recognized Ben's craftsmanship immediately. The level of skill and artistry that had gone into carving it was incredible. It must have taken him ages to make.

I ran my thumb over the textured coat flecked with white paint to simulate snow, marveling at how Ben had managed to make something so lifelike and detailed from a simple block of wood. It even had a spot of red on its nose.

Rudolph had always been my favorite reindeer. Maybe it was silly and cliché, but we were both misfits who just wanted to be accepted for who we were. To belong. To be loved.

I felt like I had a shot at that in Mistletoe Hollow.

My vision blurred with tears as I lifted it from the box, turning it over gently in my hands. I didn't know what to say. It was the most thoughtful, meaningful gift I had ever received.

"Ben, I... it's perfect," I finally managed. "You made this?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah. Been working on it for a while now in my spare time. I know how much you love Christmas stuff, so I wanted to make you something special."

"I love it," I said fiercely. I set the figurine safely aside and threw my arms around Ben's neck. "Thank you," I whispered against his skin.

He held me close, one big hand cradling the back of my head. "You're welcome."

I drew back slightly to look up at Ben. "I wish I had something to give you too," I said guiltily. "But I didn't exactly have time to prepare."

Ben brushed his knuckles along my jaw. "You being here is the only gift I need," he said softly.

My heart performed a series of clumsy somersaults in my chest. Before I could get too choked up, I cleared my throat and tried to lighten the mood. "That's, uh...really cheesy, you know."

Ben barked out a laugh. "Yeah, it was pretty corny, huh?"

I grinned. “The corniest.”

His expression turned more serious again. “I mean it, though. Just having you here with me makes it the best Christmas I’ve had in a long time.”

“Me too,” I admitted.

That annoying little voice in the back of my head piped up again. This time, it was nagging me to tell him the truth. The truth about how I’d come to Mistletoe Hollow in the first place.

I opened my mouth, suddenly ready to confess everything.

But the words died on my lips.

This was Christmas morning. We were cuddled next to a tree we’d decorated together, exchanging sweet kisses and opening gifts. Did I really want to shatter the magic of the moment by dropping a weird revelation like that on him?

“Hey Ben, funny story, I’m actually from another dimension and got here through a cursed video tape. What’s a video tape, you ask? Oh, it just plays movies on a television screen. Which is also something you’ve never heard of before because whoever made the movie you’re from decided having a TV in your house in the ’90s wasn’t believable for some reason. Oh? You didn’t know you’re from a movie? Huh. That’s weird.”

Yeah, no. That would go over great.

I sighed, my shoulders slumping.

The last thing I wanted was to start our relationship off with a lie. But the truth was just too unbelievable.

I was going to have to find a way to prove it to him. And that was going to be interesting, considering I still wasn’t a hundred percent sure what I believed about it all myself.

Maybe some things were better left unsaid, at least for now. I needed to tell him, but it could wait. Couldn’t it?

It occurred to me briefly that if some weird magic shit was going on after all, something might happen at midnight. The movie ended on Christmas night under the mistletoe in Ben’s

living room. What if when Christmas was officially over, the magic wore off and I got zapped back home like Cinderella fleeing the ball?

I felt nauseous all of a sudden.

Ben gave me a concerned look, so my abrupt nausea must've been obvious. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Just overthinking. As usual."

Ben reached over and took my chin in his hand, turning my face toward his, and his lips found mine in a tender kiss. His arms wrapped around me, melting away my worries as always.

I lost myself in the kiss as the chaotic thoughts and doubts swirling through my mind quieted to a whisper, then faded entirely.

Ben broke off the kiss and pulled back just enough to meet my gaze, his brilliant blue eyes searching mine. "Better?" he asked. voice low and gravelly.

I managed a small smile. "Much."

His thumb traced my cheekbone and I leaned into his touch. "Good," he said. "No more frowning on Christmas."

A huff of laughter escaped me. "Yes sir."

His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled back at me. We stayed like that for a few heartbeats, just looking at each other, before Ben pressed one more quick kiss to my lips and pulled away.

"C'mon, let's go start some coffee and breakfast," he said. "The rest of the family will be here soon to open presents. They're gonna love you."

"Will I, uh... need to put on some pants for that?" I asked wryly, plucking at the quilt still wrapped around my body like a toga.

"That's probably a good idea," Ben agreed. "Might want to... uh... rinse off the peppermint, too."

I snorted.

He headed toward the kitchen and I went upstairs to the bedroom to shower and get dressed, bringing the reindeer figurine he'd so lovingly crafted along with me. I set it on the dresser in just the right spot alongside some other carvings of Ben's so it would have company. I'd always been relentlessly sentimental.

Especially on Christmas.

I washed up, got dressed, and combed my wet hair while humming Christmas tunes with no shame whatsoever for the first time. My holiday spirit had always driven everyone nuts, but they weren't here to harass me about it, so I was going to do whatever the hell I wanted.

Ben sure wouldn't mind. Maybe Carol thought Ben was a "grinch," but compared to the people in my world, he was a fanatic.

When I finished getting ready, I headed back downstairs and joined Ben in the cozy kitchen. He already had coffee brewing and was cracking eggs into a bowl.

"Need any help?" I asked.

"You can start the bacon if you want," he said, nodding toward the package on the counter. It wasn't plastic-wrapped bacon like I was used to, either. It was fancy bacon, wrapped in white wax paper fresh from the butcher with a gold foil reindeer sticker holding it all together.

"It's not reindeer bacon, is it?" I asked jokingly.

He gave me a haunted look.

My heart dropped.

Then he laughed, and I laughed, too, though mine was more of a nervous cackle. "No, Matthew," he said, still chuckling. "It's not reindeer. Where are you from that eating reindeer is even legal? They're sacred."

I felt the color drain from my face and I let out an even more maniacally nervous laugh. "Um... I'm just from outside of Santa's... uh... jurisdiction."

“Jurisdiction?” he echoed, seeming to think about that for a minute. “Huh. You know, the people of Mistletoe Hollow believe Santa is in charge of the whole world, but I figured that wasn’t the case.”

“Right,” I said slowly.

He was quiet for a painfully long time, but it couldn’t have been more than a minute. “You’re not a believer, then?” he asked at length.

“A believer in Santa?” I managed to squeak out. “I don’t know.”

He blew a puff of air through his nostrils. “Don’t tell my mother. She’ll think you’re a bad influence.”

“Yeah, she, um... she said something about you not being a... believer,” I said carefully.

He flashed me a crooked grin before returning his attention to the eggs. “I’m not. But don’t tell anyone. I’d be a pariah.”

I studied Ben’s handsome profile as he whisked the eggs. His dark hair was mussed and falling across his forehead in that casual yet sexy way he seemed to pull off without even trying.

“Why don’t you believe in magic like everyone else does?” I asked. “What happened?”

Ben’s whisking slowed. He was silent for a moment before answering.

“It’s complicated,” he finally said. “*I’m* complicated.”

I placed my hand on his huge forearm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Didn’t you say the best things in life are complicated?”

“It’s not complicated in a good way.” He resumed whisking the eggs, his gaze focused on the swirling yellow mixture.

“My dad died when I was younger. I was nineteen,” he continued after another pause. “Car accident. It was Christmas morning. That’s not something that’s supposed to result in a fatality—not in Mistletoe Hollow.”

I nodded slowly, trying to process this new information. “I’m so sorry, Ben. That must have been devastating.”

He gave a small shrug, but his jaw was tense. “Yeah. It was rough on all of us, especially my mom. She’s never been the same since.”

“I can imagine,” I said softly. An awkward silence fell between us for a moment before I ventured another question. “So... that made you stop believing in Christmas magic?”

Ben let out a heavy sigh, setting down the whisk and bracing his hands on the counter. “I know it probably sounds silly, but yeah. My dad was the one who always made Christmas so magical for us as kids. He loved the holiday more than anyone. After he was gone, it just wasn’t Christmas anymore. For years after Dad died, I just went through the motions at Christmas. Decorating, putting up a tree, gifts for the family... But my heart wasn’t in it. The magic was gone.”

He was quiet for a moment, a faraway look in his eyes.

“Then this woman named Holly blew into town not long before Christmas. She was from ‘the big city,’ as they say. Some nameless civilization beyond our mountains, I guess.”

It took me a minute to process that.

Holly had been here?

So I hadn’t just replaced her...?

“You remember Dot Thompson?” he asked, jarring me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah,” I replied carefully.

“She predicted I would meet a stranger from outside Mistletoe Hollow. And not just any stranger—a stranger who would wreck their silver SUV on the road leading into town. We would share an immediate and irrevocable connection. We would be... well, soulmates.”

I tried not to let my smile falter, even as I felt an irrational flare of jealousy in my gut at the mention of this other interloper.

So I wasn't the first outsider to stumble into this magical snow globe world. And apparently Dot had predicted her arrival, too. Was I just a placeholder for the role of "heartwarming holiday love interest" in Ben's story?

I tamped the petty feelings down quickly, annoyed with myself. Ben was just telling me something from his past, not making a comparison. And it wasn't like I had any claim over him anyway. We'd only known each other for, what, a week?

I was being ridiculous.

As usual.

"That's... quite a prediction," I managed evenly. "Did she turn out to be your soulmate then?"

Ben let out a rueful laugh, turning back to the eggs. "Nah. I mean, I cared about her, but it was never anything serious between us. She wasn't in town for long before moving on. She vanished right after Christmas, and from what I've heard from the mailman, she's back in the big city. Got herself a big shot guy in 'finance,' too, whatever that means."

"Big shot finance guys are the fucking worst," I muttered.

"Tell me about it," he said pointedly. Then his eyes crinkled at the corners. "Although if it weren't for big shot finance guys, maybe I wouldn't have met you."

I gulped. "You have no idea."

Ben snorted. "You're jealous, aren't you?"

"Jealous? Me?" I scoffed.

Okay, it was obvious I wasn't hiding the green-eyed monster very well. Sue me. I was out of practice after being in a relationship for so long.

I busied myself cooking the bacon, trying not to let my feelings show too much. The sizzling strips provided a welcome distraction.

So did angrily prodding them with the edge of the spatula.

Ben put the eggs aside and came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. "You're cute when you're irrationally

jealous, you know that?” he murmured in my ear.

I huffed, even as I felt myself relaxing back against his broad chest. “I’m not irrationally jealous. I’m completely rational.”

“Mmhmm. Keep telling yourself that.” His lips brushed the side of my neck.

Despite myself, I felt a smile tugging at my lips. “Fine. I’m a tiny bit jealous. But can you blame me? You’re...” I gestured vaguely with the greasy spatula. “*You* .”

Ben let out a low chuckle that reverberated pleasantly through me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I twisted in his arms to face him. “Oh come on. You have to know what you look like. With the whole...” I copied his usual look, pushing my hair back and giving him an exaggerated smolder.

He threw his head back and laughed. “I do not look like that.”

I laughed along with Ben, unable to keep a grin off my face. Hearing that full, hearty laugh of his never failed to lift my spirits.

“Okay, okay, so maybe I was exaggerating a little,” I admitted. “But you can’t deny that you’re...” I trailed off, searching for the right word.

Handsome seemed like an understatement.

Gorgeous was too feminine.

Hot made him sound like a piece of meat.

“Dreamy,” I finally said.

Ben arched an eyebrow. “Dreamy?” he echoed.

I felt my face grow warm. “You know what I mean,” I mumbled, focusing intently on flipping the sizzling bacon strips.

Strong arms wrapped around me from behind again as Ben pulled me against his firm chest. “I’m dreamy, huh?” he murmured, his warm breath tickling my ear.

My blush deepened. “You’re just fishing for compliments now.”

“Maybe.” One of his hands slid under the front of my sweater, fingers splaying over my stomach. “But I like hearing what you have to say about me.”

I shivered at the touch, leaning back into him. “Fishing for compliments and being a tease won’t get you on Santa’s nice list, you know.”

Ben nipped at my ear playfully. “Then I guess it’s a good thing I don’t believe in Santa.”

I swatted his hand away with the spatula. “Down, boy. Your family will be here any minute. I don’t need your mom seeing this.”

He sighed dramatically. “Fine, fine. But don’t think this conversation is over, city boy.” With a final nuzzle against my neck that made me weak in the knees, Ben released me and returned to whisking the eggs.

I shot him a wry smile over my shoulder. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

We continued cooking breakfast companionably, swapping occasional touches and flirtatious looks. The domesticity of it all made my heart swell.

I could get used to this.

CHAPTER 12

MATTHEW



*B*efore long, the eggs were scrambled, the bacon was crispy, the biscuits were in the oven, and the coffee was ready. As if on cue, the front door burst open and Ben's family came pouring in, all bundled up against the cold and laden with colorfully-wrapped gifts.

"Merry Christmas!" Carol sang out, sweeping Ben and I both into exuberant hugs.

Jake gave me a nod and clapped Ben on the shoulder. "Merry Christmas, bro."

Penny and Bobby made a beeline for the glittering tree, ooh-ing and aah-ing over the presents tucked beneath. Their sweaters were covered in reindeer, snowmen, Christmas trees, and enough glitter to supply a craft store. It was already getting everywhere.

"Breakfast is just about ready," Ben told them. "Go wash up. Don't touch your presents yet."

I watched as Ben greeted his family with warm hugs and smiles, feeling a twinge of that same old envy at their easy affection. My own family had never been like this. My parents were polite strangers at best who sent a gift card every year out of obligation more than anything else.

It wasn't even because they were busy or time got away from them. They just didn't care. Like everything else, the holidays with them had always been stiff and formal, not full of laughter and teasing and lighthearted bickering like the Clarks.

But I didn't have time to brood.

Suddenly, all eyes were on me.

I felt my cheeks flush. Ben slipped an arm around my waist and I had to resist the urge to melt against him.

“Everyone, this is Matthew,” Ben said, giving me a little squeeze. “My boyfriend.”

Boyfriend .

That one little word solidified what had been unspoken between us up until now. Hearing Ben say it out loud made my heart skip several beats.

I actually felt a little lightheaded.

I took a deep breath to steady myself and plastered a smile on my face, trying not to let my nerves show. “Hi,” I said only to immediately start overthinking that, too. “It’s so nice to meet you all officially. Ben’s told me great things. Um... Merry Christmas.”

Before I could have a panic attack, Carol enveloped me in another warm, enthusiastic hug. “So wonderful to see you again, dear,” she said, patting my cheek maternally after giving it a peck.

“It’s good to see you, too,” I said, returning the peck.

The others introduced themselves one by one, all hugs and handshakes, but my nerves made all the names blend together. I just smiled and nodded, trying my absolute best to commit their names to memory as Ben steered me toward the kitchen.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get to know everyone soon enough,” he said reassuringly, giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze.

My nerves must have been obvious. I was usually pretty good with names, but my brain felt as scrambled as the eggs Ben had made for the breakfast feast. Meeting the family officially as Ben’s boyfriend had me all screwed up.

I busied myself helping Ben bring the food to the table while the others brought their presents into the living room. The spread of eggs, bacon, biscuits, fruit, cinnamon rolls, and various pastries I didn’t even recognize was impressive.

I slid into the seat next to Ben. Penny and Bobby were already digging into the cinnamon rolls, getting icing and sprinkles everywhere. Apparently, on Christmas morning, they could eat whatever they wanted. That was probably the only reason they weren't rioting about having to wait to open presents. As it was, they were shoving food down their throats in a huge rush.

I piled my plate high with eggs, bacon, and biscuits, trying not to feel self-conscious as Ben's family chatted and laughed around me. The cinnamon rolls looked amazing, but I figured I should pace myself—at least until I realized they were vanishing at an alarming rate. I reached for the plate like I was reaching into a shark tank and managed to grab one.

"Don't worry, I made plenty," their mother, Sarah, said with a laugh. She was Ben's aunt. Wait, was it Sarah? Or Samantha?

Shit. Now I was second-guessing myself.

"Thanks," I said, but she didn't hear me. She was already sucked into a conversation with Carol about how big the kids were getting.

"So, Matthew," Ben's cousin said brightly, turning to me.

Her name was... shit... that was gone, too.

Wait.

No.

It was Colleen.

Definitely Colleen.

"Earth to Matthew," she said with a melodic giggle.

I froze. Did I miss something?

"Sorry," I said, trying not to totally freak out. "I didn't hear you."

"Oh, it's fine," she said, waving me off. "I can't hear anything, either. We all talk too much. I was just asking what you write. Ben tells me you're a writer?"

I nearly choked on my bacon.

Write?

Here?

With my limited knowledge of how anything in this world actually worked?

“Oh, uh... nothing too exciting,” I hedged.

“Don’t be modest,” Ben said, bumping my shoulder affectionately. “I’m sure your writing is great.”

I gave him a small smile, hoping I wasn’t blushing too obviously. “Thanks.”

“We’ll have to get a copy of your work to look over,” Carol continued enthusiastically. “I just love reading new authors.”

“Yeah, totally,” I said weakly. “I’ll, uh... see what I can dig up.” Like a convincing sample of ’90s-style scriptwriting for a world that had apparently never discovered television or movies.

No problem.

Jake snorted into his orange juice at my obvious discomfort but said nothing. I got the sense he still wasn’t totally sold on me for some reason.

“What about you?” I asked, since I wasn’t sure what else to say and I wanted the conversation off me ASAP.

“I’m a cornhole referee,” she replied, smiling at her husband, who was stuffing his face with food and not remotely paying attention to the conversation at hand. “And Joe here is a certified VCR repairman.”

I hesitated.

VCR repairman?

Okay. So movies and TV were a thing in Mistletoe Hollow after all. Ben just didn’t have one because, well... Ben. Or maybe the movie was set in a time where household TVs weren’t all that common, but they existed. No, wait, that wouldn’t make sense, why would there be that much demand for VCRs?

Existential dread started chirping away in the back of my head. I pushed it down. Way, way down. It was like trying to keep an

angry cat in a pet carrier, though. An angry cat yowling that maybe I could get sucked into another cursed VCR and end up in my world with no direct way back to Ben.

What if Mistletoe Hollow had movies about my world?

What if *I* was a character in a movie made *here* ?

Actually, no. They would never watch something that depressing—at least, not what my life was like before I came to Mistletoe Hollow. These were relentlessly optimistic people.

I laughed nervously and Colleen and Joe looked at each other, confused.

Ben gave me a worried glance. “You alright?”

“Yeah, sorry,” I said, blanching. Oh, no. Did they think I was laughing about their job titles? It did sound like the kinds of jobs people had on House Hunters, but they made perfect sense in Mistletoe Hollow. “Um. I was just having a... a cornhole memory.”

Colleen brightened. “You’ve played? Have you competed?”

“Nah, nothing like that,” I said, gulping and trying to wash down my anxiety with a long sip of eggnog.

What the hell was cornhole? I knew vaguely it was some kind of outdoor game people played, but my family had been way too snooty to lower themselves to party games. Was it the one where you threw hard balls at other hard balls and knocked them around the lawn like a giant game of pool? No, that didn’t sound right.

Shit .

She was still staring expectantly at me, and I was getting more and more lightheaded. That wasn’t alcoholic eggnog, was it?

“It was a cornhole accident,” I blurted out.

All eyes turned to me, wide with shock and concern.

Oh my god. That sounded so wrong.

Why had I even said that?

“A cornhole accident?” Colleen gasped, her hand flying to her chest in shock. “How dreadful! What on earth happened?”

I racked my brain trying to think of something—anything—to explain my fake cornhole trauma. “Well, uh... you see, I was at this cornhole tournament a while back,” I began slowly. God, I hoped I was getting these details right. “My, um, friend was up to play and he threw the... the corn into the hole. But he didn’t notice his shoelace was untied and when he stepped forward to throw, he tripped! Sent the corn flying right into the crowd. Hit a poor woman right in the eye.”

“Good gracious!” Carol exclaimed. “That’s terrible! Where on earth are you from that they don’t take precautions?”

“Some people have no business playing cornhole if they can’t even tie their shoes properly,” Colleen huffed, rescuing me. “Amateurs shouldn’t be allowed at tournaments. It’s a safety hazard.”

“Now, now, accidents happen sometimes,” Carol said reasonably. “I’m sure his friend felt just awful about it.”

“I should say so!” Colleen shook her head. “Although he really should have been paying more attention to the court. You have to keep your eye on the hole at all times!”

I bit my lip to keep from laughing at the unintentional innuendo. “Yeah, she, uh, definitely learned her lesson about cornhole safety that day,” I said, hoping they’d move on already. I didn’t think I could keep spinning this web of lies much longer.

“Well, at least no one was seriously injured,” Joe said. “Just shaken up a bit it seems.”

I nodded emphatically. “Oh yeah, everyone was fine.”

Please let that be the end of it.

Thankfully, the conversation quickly shifted to everyone sharing their own minor Christmas disasters from years past. I breathed a quiet sigh of relief that my bizarre fake story had been accepted and moved on from. Although I caught Ben giving me a few curious glances, like he was trying to figure

out if I'd really witnessed some random woman get clobbered in the face at a cornhole tournament.

I avoided his gaze, shoving a huge bite of cinnamon roll in my mouth so I couldn't dig myself into an even deeper hole.

A cornhole hole.

By the time breakfast was over and everyone else was gathering in the living room to open presents, I'd managed to convince them I was just a slightly eccentric writer from the 'big city' who wasn't a total lunatic. Although the looks Ben kept giving me suggested he planned on asking me more questions later, especially after I skirted yet another question about whether or not I'd written anything they would know about.

I'd have to figure out some way to explain my weirdness that didn't involve telling him I was actually from another dimension entirely.

Oh god. There was the existential dread again.

"Everything okay?" he asked, rinsing off a pan in the sink as I helped him clear the dishes.

"Yeah, sorry about that," I said, forcing a laugh. "I think the eggnog might've gone to my head a little. Made me act kinda kooky."

Ben raised an eyebrow. "There's no alcohol in that eggnog."

Damn. Foiled again.

"Oh. Right," I said weakly, deciding to go with honesty instead since it was becoming abundantly clear I was just as incapable of lying as ever. "Well... I guess I'm just nervous about meeting your whole family officially. You know, wanting to make a good impression and all that."

Ben studied me for a moment before nodding slowly. "I get that. Just try to relax, okay? For your own sake. They already love you."

He pulled me in for a kiss, his large hands framing my face. I melted into it for a second before pulling back self-consciously.

“Your family’s in the other room,” I protested even as my lips tingled.

Ben just grinned. “So? They know we’re together. No need to hide it.”

Before I could overthink it any further, Bobby came bounding into the kitchen. “C’mon, you guys! Presents!” he screamed.

Laughing, Ben ruffled his hair. “Alright, alright, we’re coming.”

We followed Bobby into the cozy living room, where the rest of the family was gathered around the glittering Christmas tree. The two kids wasted no time tearing into their gifts with feverish excitement.

I watched with amusement as wrapping paper and ribbons went flying. Bobby let out a whoop at the sight of a huge remote control monster truck, immediately trying to drive it up over a discarded box. Meanwhile, Penny gasped as she opened up a baby doll that looked spookily lifelike, complete with fluttering eyelids and coos when she rocked it.

“It’s just like I always wanted!” she exclaimed, hugging it close.

The thing let out a disturbingly real sounding gurgle. I shuddered. It reminded me of the freaky dolls from the thrift store I’d gotten the VCR from. But Penny was utterly enchanted, making the doll wave its pudgy little hand at everyone.

I watched as the family continued opening gifts, each one more unusual than the last. A squishy fruitcake stress ball, beard oil with glitter in it, a calendar full of festive Christmas corgis where every month was December... were they running out of ideas considering it was literally always Christmas here?

If so, they certainly didn’t seem to care.

I kind of loved it.

“This is coffee, not spiked eggnog! Promise!” Carol read out loud, holding up the glittery pink tumbler Colleen had given

her. She burst into laughter.

Ben nudged me with his elbow. “Here. This one’s for you.”

He handed me a brightly wrapped gift with my name scrawled on the tag in his messy yet charming handwriting.

I blinked down at the brightly wrapped present in surprise. “You already gave me that beautiful reindeer,” I said, touched that he’d gotten me something else but also feeling a little awkward and undeserving.

“You thought I was only getting you one thing?” Ben asked.

“I don’t know...”

“Open it,” he urged.

I swallowed hard and carefully peeled back the paper, not wanting to tear Ben’s thoughtful wrapping job. Inside was a simple black leather journal with an “M” embossed on the cover in an elegant silver script. I brushed my fingers over the buttery soft leather in awe.

“Ben, this is...” I trailed off, at a loss for words.

He gave me a crooked smile. “Do you like it? I thought you could use it for your writing.”

“I love it,” I said sincerely. I had to resist the urge to kiss him right then and there. I settled for squeezing his hand. “Thank you.”

Ben pulled me in for a quick, chaste kiss on the temple that still made my pulse race.

“Alright, you two. Save it for the mistletoe,” Jake called out teasingly.

I felt my cheeks flush, but I couldn’t keep the giddy smile off my face.

Carol handed me an expertly wrapped gift next. I stared down at it, completely dumbfounded. She’d gotten me a present?

“I’m sorry,” I said nervously. “I didn’t get you guys anything. I didn’t really have... well... it’s complicated, I...”

“Yes, you have!” Carol said, playfully swatting my arm. “You helped me win my Jubilee Crown! I couldn’t have pulled that off without your help in the kitchen. And besides, you’re on the fast track to being family.”

Me?

Family?

It was the last thing I had expected when I woke up this morning, nervous about making it through breakfast without making a total fool of myself. Which, of course, I had failed at spectacularly with my bullshit cornhole story.

But somehow, by some Christmas miracle, Ben’s family had not only accepted my bumbling awkwardness, they’d embraced it.

“Go on, open it!” Carol urged, her eyes twinkling.

I peeled back the paper to reveal a hand-knitted scarf in a beautiful emerald green. My fingers brushed over the soft, intricate stitches as I took in the gift.

“Wow,” I murmured sincerely.

“I made it by hand,” she said, beaming and preening. “I wanted you to have something special for your first Clark family Christmas. Put it on!”

“Thank you, Carol,” I said, my voice thick with emotion.

Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry...

“Put it on,” Carol said, already taking the scarf out of my hands. She pulled it around my neck and wrapped it up before leaning back to admire her handiwork. “Oh, yes. Green is definitely your color.”

Impulsively, I stood and wrapped her in a warm hug. She let out a delighted laugh and hugged me back just as fiercely, doing a little dance that almost snapped my spine.

Over her shoulder, I caught Ben’s gaze. He was watching us with a soft smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners like they always did when he was truly happy.

When Carol finally released me, I sat back down beside Ben on the sofa. His arm came up automatically to drape across my shoulders, pulling me in close.

“Told you they love you,” he murmured in my ear.

I nestled against Ben’s broad chest, still overwhelmed by the whirlwind of emotions I was feeling. Here in the warmth of his cabin, surrounded by the sounds of his family’s laughter and joy, I felt the broken shards of my heart begin to knit themselves back together.

Basking in the glow of the twinkling tree lights and Ben’s strong embrace, I made a silent wish—maybe not to Santa, but to the universe itself—that this would never end.

That midnight would come and go without a hitch.

After all the gifts were opened, we helped ourselves to extra cinnamon rolls and refilled mugs of coffee and hot chocolate. The kids immediately tore off to play with their new toys while the rest of us chatted amiably.

Every now and then, Ben’s hand would find mine, giving it a small squeeze or running his thumb over my knuckles. Each time, my heart fluttered and I felt little thrills of joy buzzing through my body.

I still couldn’t believe this was real. That someone as incredible as Ben could want me, broken pieces and all. But the warmth of his palm against mine kept me tethered to the moment.

Later, as I helped Ben tidy up the torn wrapping paper and empty mugs, he pulled me in for a lingering kiss beneath the mistletoe dangling above the stairs leading to the second floor. To the room that felt like both of ours now.

This was where the movie had ended. Right here, in this very place. But it was hard to worry when I felt like I was floating on a cloud as Ben’s lips moved slowly against mine. His big hands cupped my face so gently, his thumbs tracing along my cheekbones. My own hands curled into the soft flannel of his shirt, pulling him closer. I didn’t want the kiss to end, but eventually, we had to come up for air.

Ben rested his forehead against mine. "I've been wanting to do that all morning."

"What took you so long, then?" I teased.

"Didn't want to scandalize my family too much," he said with a wink. "Just a little."

I wrinkled my nose playfully. "Oh, please. I think your mom is ready to start planning the wedding after this morning."

Ben just laughed. "You're probably right about that." Then his expression turned unusually serious. "That doesn't scare you, does it?"

I considered the question. It was true things were moving fast, almost unbelievably so considering we'd only known each other a short time. But somehow, it didn't scare me the way it logically should have.

Maybe it was the Christmas magic, but it just felt... right.

Like I might actually get that happily-ever-after.

"Honestly? No," I said finally. "I know it's crazy, but I feel like I've been waiting for you my whole life." I felt my cheeks flush. Again.

When had I gotten so sappy?

But Ben's answering smile dazzled me. "I feel the same way," he said softly. "I'm still not a 'believer,' but maybe I'm a little more open to the idea of magic than I used to be."

I couldn't stop the goofy grin spreading across my face.

"I'm glad," I said, reaching up to brush a stray pine needle out of his tousled brown hair. "Because you definitely make me believe in magic, Ben Clark."

CHAPTER 13

MATTHEW



*M*y heart skipped a beat as Ben gazed down at me, his blue eyes darkening with desire. Slowly, he leaned in and captured my lips in another searing kiss that left me breathless. I slid my hands up his broad chest and around his neck, pulling him even closer.

When we finally broke apart, Ben took my hand. “Come with me,” he murmured, a playful grin tugging at his mouth.

Without waiting for an answer, he led me up the stairs and I followed him into the bedroom. The cozy space was lit only by the warm glow of Christmas lights strung up along the walls and the fading daylight peeking around the edges of the curtains. Ben pulled me into his arms again, his hands tangling in my hair as he kissed me deeply. I clung to him, feeling like I was drowning in everything I felt for this incredible man.

Piece by piece, our clothes fell away until it was just skin against skin. Ben lay me back against the plush blankets and I shivered at the hungry look in his eyes as he took in every inch of my bare body.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, his fingers trailing reverently down my chest and stomach. I flushed at the compliment, the vulnerability of being completely exposed somehow thrilling.

Ben kissed his way down my body, worshiping every sensitive spot he discovered until I was writhing beneath him. When I couldn’t take it anymore, I pulled him back up to me.

“I need you,” I pleaded.

He captured my mouth in his as he prepared me with that cool, minty oil until I was writhing all over again, begging him to stop tormenting me. To fill me. He settled himself between my thighs and I gasped at the sensation, arching into him.

We moved together slowly at first, then faster, clutching each other close. His strong body enveloped me, his hands seeming to touch me everywhere at once. I ran my own hands over every inch of him I could reach, marveling at the play of muscles under smooth skin.

Our bodies found an exquisite rhythm together as we lost ourselves in each other completely. The rest of the world fell away and nothing existed except Ben and I and the ecstasy building between us. I moaned his name over and over, unable to form any other coherent thoughts.

When release finally crashed over us, I clung to Ben like he was the only real thing left in the universe. I dimly registered his own muffled growls against my neck as he shook in my arms.

We stayed tangled together long after, both catching our breath, hearts hammering against each other. Ben lifted his head to look at me, his gorgeous eyes soft and warm. He brushed a damp lock of hair back from my forehead before leaning in to kiss me deeply.

“I love you, Matthew,” he murmured.

“I... I love you, too, Ben,” I whispered back.

He shifted us so he was on his back and I was curled against his broad chest. His arms came around me, enveloping me in his warmth and strength. I'd never felt so safe or wanted in my entire life.

Loved .

I was *loved* .

As he drifted off to sleep, I lay awake, watching the clock across the room as the hands ticked closer to midnight. As tired as I was, I was afraid to close my eyes.

Afraid the dream would end.

Ben's chest rose and fell steadily beneath my cheek, his heartbeat strong and reassuring against my skin. His arms were wrapped protectively around me, holding me close even in sleep. I just wanted to freeze this moment and live in it forever.

What would happen when the clock struck twelve?

Would everything fade to black like Cinderella's ball?

Would I wake up alone in my apartment, my heart shattered all over again?

Just one more minute now. I clutched Ben tighter, squeezing my eyes shut, bracing myself for the worst.

But the only thing I felt was Ben's lips pressing softly against my hair as he stirred awake. "Hey," he murmured, voice husky with sleep. "Why are you still up?"

I lifted my head to meet his gaze, those kind blue eyes searching mine with concern. "I was afraid if I fell asleep, this would all disappear," I admitted.

Ben's expression softened. He reached up to cup my face gently. "I'm real, Matthew. This is real. I promise."

As he spoke, the clock chimed midnight in a soft yet cheerful holiday melody. I held my breath, waiting in fear for something terrible to happen.

Relief washed over me in a dizzying rush as the clock finished chiming. Ben was right. Nothing happened. The cozy bedroom stayed the same, the Christmas lights still glowing softly along the walls. Ben stayed real and solid beneath me, his arms wrapped securely around my body. Whatever force had brought me here wasn't planning on snatching it all away.

Not yet, at least.

"You're right," I murmured, nestling back against Ben's broad chest. "I guess I'm just used to good things not lasting."

Ben pressed a kiss to my hair. "You don't have to worry about that with me."

I bit my lip. “I want to believe that,” I said quietly. “It’s just... back in my world, I always ended up getting hurt. The guy I dated before... he really did a number on me before I came here. I put everything into that relationship, but he still left, like everyone else. It broke me.”

“Tell me about him,” Ben said after a few moments of comfortable silence. His voice was a low rumble against my cheek.

I tensed against Ben’s warm chest, not sure if I really wanted to dredge up all those painful memories now. Here, wrapped safely in his strong arms, it was so easy to forget about my old life and the heartbreak I’d left behind.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you’re not ready,” Ben added gently, his breath tickling my hair.

I let out a shaky sigh. “No, it’s okay. I want you to know.”

As hard as it would be to revisit that time, Ben deserved to understand where I was coming from. Why I still struggled to believe that someone as wonderful as him could truly want me.

“His name was Greg,” I began slowly. His name was bitter on my tongue, but the sting wasn’t there anymore. His touch felt so far away now. “We met at a friend’s party. I remember thinking he was easily the most handsome guy there. He was charming, funny, smart... or at least he seemed that way at first.”

I shifted against Ben, taking comfort from the steady rise and fall of his chest beneath me. His arm tightened around my waist reassuringly.

“Things moved really fast between us. Within a few weeks, he’d asked me to move in with him. I was so crazy about him that I didn’t even hesitate. All my friends told me it was too soon, but I was too blinded by love to listen.” I let out a bitter laugh. “I guess they saw what I couldn’t.”

Ben’s hand came up to stroke my hair gently. The simple gesture gave me the courage to continue.

“For a while, things were really great. But then Greg started getting possessive, jealous over every little thing. He’d accuse me of flirting if I so much as talked to another guy. He hated when I went out without him, even just to see friends. Eventually, he started trying to control everything I did.”

My voice broke a little on the last word. Ben made a low noise, almost a growl, deep in his chest.

“He didn’t... hurt you, did he?” His tone had an undercurrent of anger now.

“No, never physically,” I assured him quickly. “Just emotionally. He had this way of twisting everything around to make it seem like it was my fault. Like I was the one being unreasonable or crazy.”

I swiped at a stray tear that had escaped down my cheek.

“By the end, I hardly recognized myself anymore. But he was the only person left in my life. He was all I had, and I felt like that was just proof he was right. That he was the only person who could ever love me. Once someone makes you feel worthless, it’s hard not to assume everyone else will eventually see you that way, too.”

Ben shifted then, gently rolling me onto my back so he could look down at me. Even in the dim light, I could see the sadness in his eyes.

“That’s not true,” he said hoarsely.

I gave him a tremulous smile. “I know that now. But even when he cheated on me, I found ways to blame myself. He turned it around on me, said it was my fault for neglecting him. I was destroyed at first. I really thought he was the love of my life, pathetic as that sounds now.”

I let out a long, shaky breath. It felt cathartic to finally open up about it all.

“I’m still trying to put the pieces of myself back together,” I admitted softly. “But being here with you... it’s the first time in a long time I’ve felt whole. And I don’t just mean since my ex and I broke up.”

Ben was quiet for a long moment, his expression unreadable in the dim light. His hand came up to cup my cheek, his thumb gently wiping away the remnants of my tears. I leaned into his touch, craving the comfort of it.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Ben said, his voice firm yet kind.

“I know,” I said softly.

And I did know that now, even if I was still healing.

Ben gently brushed a tear from my cheek with his thumb, his rough skin catching slightly on my stubble. “I won’t let anyone hurt you like that again,” he murmured, kissing me again.

And I believed him.

CHAPTER 14

MATTHEW



I woke slowly, blinking against the pale winter sunlight filtering in through the curtains. For a moment, I just lay there, staring up at the exposed wooden beams crisscrossing the ceiling overhead.

The events of yesterday came flooding back in a dizzying rush. It was the day after Christmas, and I was still here.

This was still real.

As if on cue, I became aware of Ben's large, solid presence curled around me beneath the blankets. One muscular arm was draped loosely over my waist, his broad palm splayed protectively across my stomach. I could feel his deep, even breaths stirring my hair, tickling the back of my neck.

Careful not to wake him, I shifted slightly so I could see his sleeping face. Even relaxed in slumber, it was the most handsome face I'd ever seen. My heart did a little somersault in my chest.

How was this incredible man mine?

After spending my whole life never quite feeling like I belonged anywhere, I'd somehow found home here in his arms. As scary as it was to accept after everything I'd been through, it felt so right.

Like coming home after years spent lost and wandering.

Unable to resist, I reached up to brush a stray lock of dark brown hair off his forehead. Ben stirred at the touch, mumbling something unintelligible as he burrowed further into

the pillows. I bit my lip to hold back a delighted laugh. He was just too adorable sometimes.

As I lay there watching him sleep, doubts began to creep back in around the edges of my happiness. But for once, I didn't spiral. I was able to push those thoughts away. To put them in the trash bin in my mind where they belonged.

He began to stir then, arms tightening around me automatically as he nuzzled his face into the crook of my neck.

"G'morning," he mumbled, voice still husky with sleep.

I rolled over to face him, taking in his endearingly rumped, just-woken-up state. "You're the sleepyhead this time."

Ben gave me a drowsy smile, blue eyes still soft and unfocused. He leaned in to press a kiss to the tip of my nose. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long," I said, unable to hold back a smile of my own. "I was enjoying the view."

"Oh yeah?" Ben raised an eyebrow playfully. In one smooth motion, he rolled us so I was pinned beneath him against the mattress. I let out an undignified squeak of surprise that quickly melted into laughter.

Ben grinned down at me, all traces of sleepiness gone from his face now. "Well, now I'm enjoying the view, too."

His gaze raked appreciatively over me in a way that made my whole body flush with heat. Then he ducked his head to kiss me, slow and deep, stealing the breath from my lungs. I melted against him, arms coming up automatically to twine around his neck.

We traded lazy, unhurried kisses as pale winter sunlight washed over our tangled bodies. The rest of the world seemed very far away right then. It was just us, cocooned in our own private world.

When we finally came up for air, I let my hands trail down the hard planes of his chest and abs, marveling as always at the contrast of smooth skin over solid muscle.

Ben shivered at my touch, muscles clenching beneath my exploring fingers. “Keep that up and we won’t make it out of this bed today,” he warned, voice husky.

I laughed even as heat curled low in my belly at the thought. As tempting as that was, there was something I wanted to do now that it was the day after Christmas and I had the nerve to do some more investigation.

“As much as I’d love to stay here with you...” I trailed off, arching up to nip at his stubbled jaw. Ben groaned, eyes falling shut.

“What? You have big plans for the day?” he asked, smirking.

“I want to talk to Dot Thompson,” I said.

With a sigh, Ben rolled off me and sat up, the blankets pooling around his waist. I made an involuntary noise of disappointment at the loss of his body heat. He flashed me a knowing grin over one broad shoulder.

“You’re not having second thoughts about her predictions, are you?” he asked teasingly, but there was a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

How could he be remotely uncertain? Especially when I was practically drooling as I stared at the planes of his back built by years of logging and carpentry.

Fuck, I was tempted to pull him right back into bed.

“Of course not,” I said, sitting up alongside him and planting a kiss on his huge shoulder. “I just wanted to ask her something about my own life and how I got here. You know, try to make sense of it all.”

And hopefully find a way to explain the interdimensional thing to Ben.

Ben nodded, scratching the scruff on his chin thoughtfully. “Sure.” He grinned then, eyes glinting mischievously. “Just don’t go falling for any of her love potions now. I’d like to think I’ve got you pretty well charmed already.”

I laughed, giving him a playful shove. It was like pushing against a brick wall. He didn’t move an inch. “Don’t worry,

you do.”

I slid out from under the covers and immediately regretted leaving the warm cocoon of blankets. The chill of the log cabin made me shiver and I barely suppressed a yelp. I rifled through the dresser where Ben had given me a drawer, pulling on a thick cable knit sweater and black slacks. The city boy inside me still hadn't accepted the thick denim jeans looming in our future.

When I turned back around, Ben was already dressed in his usual flannel and jeans, looking unfairly handsome as always. I stepped close and reached up to run my fingers through his perpetually tousled dark hair in a useless effort to tame it.

Ben's eyes fluttered shut at the contact, a soft hum of pleasure escaping him. When his eyes opened again, the warmth and affection in his gaze made my legs go to jelly as always.

“Ready to head into town?” he asked, pressing a quick kiss to my forehead. “While you see Dot, I'll run a few errands. We can grab breakfast at the diner after. Her parlor isn't far from there.”

“Ready as I'll ever be.”

Ben wrapped an arm around my shoulders, giving me a reassuring squeeze as we headed out of the bedroom. “Don't worry, she doesn't bite,” he said with a chuckle. “Much.”

We put on our boots and headed out into the cold winter air. Maybe it was my imagination, but it felt just a little warmer than before. It was kind of nice. Did they have some form of “seasons” after all?

I fidgeted nervously with the cuff of my sweater as Ben's truck rumbled down the snowy country road toward downtown Mistletoe Hollow. Despite his attempts to reassure me, my stomach was still in knots at the thought of visiting Dot Thompson's psychic parlor alone. At the same time, though, I needed to know how to explain things to Ben, so I couldn't exactly invite him along.

“You okay over there?” Ben asked, glancing at me with concern. “You're awfully quiet.”

I forced a smile, willing myself to relax. “Yeah, sorry. Just lost in thought I guess.”

Ben reached over and gave my knee a comforting squeeze. “It’s gonna be fine,” he said gently. “Dot’s a little strange, but she means well. Just have an open mind and try not to take anything she says too seriously.”

I nodded, taking a deep breath as we pulled into town. The quaint storefronts were dusted with fresh snow, wreaths and strings of twinkling lights adorning every door and window as usual.

Too soon, Ben’s rumbling red truck was parallel parking along the snowy curb in front of an imposing purple Victorian house. My heart immediately lodged in my throat as I took in the garish neon green-and-purple PSYCHIC sign flashing cheerily in the front window.

I’d seen this quaint yet eccentric building countless times in the movie, of course, but being here now in person was entirely different. The bright purple paint job stood out dramatically from the aggressively normal snow-covered cottages and storefronts surrounding it. Lacy golden trim and shutters accentuated tall peaked gables and a wraparound porch decked with crystals and stained glass suncatchers.

It was certainly eye-catching, but somehow still blended into the overall whimsical atmosphere of Mistletoe Hollow. After all, a psychic’s house should be a bit dramatic and mystical, right?

Still, my nerves kicked into overdrive seeing it in real life.

Ben put the truck in park and turned to me, his kind eyes searching my face. “You gonna be okay going in alone?”

I attempted a smile, hoping it was more confident than I felt. “Yeah. I’ll be fine.”

Ben nodded slowly. “Alright. I’ll be at the hardware store just down the block if you need me. You can see it from here.” He gave my shoulder a comforting squeeze.

“Thanks,” I murmured.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed open the passenger door and stepped out onto the snow-lined sidewalk. The chilly air bit at my cheeks, grounding me.

You can do this, I told myself firmly.

With a final wave to Ben, I headed up the front walkway towards the looming psychic parlor, my boots crunching through the fresh powder.

My hand trembled slightly as I reached out to grasp the ornate brass lion's head door knocker in my hand. I gave it three raps, then stepped back, rubbing my hands together anxiously as I waited.

Had I not knocked loudly enough?

Maybe she didn't hear me. Was it rude to knock again...?

Just when I was considering knocking one more time, the heavy oak door creaked open, revealing Dot Thompson in all her glittering, bejeweled glory. She didn't look remotely surprised to see me as she appraised me through her snazzy cat-eye glasses.

"Well, hello, Matthew! I've been expecting you," she said, her painted red lips spreading into a wide, welcoming smile.

Before I could even greet her, she was ushering me inside with a jangle of bracelets and bangles. I blinked, my eyes struggling to adjust to the dim yet cozy interior after being outside in the bright snow.

She led me through a beaded curtain into a small, circular room. A round table draped with a purple velvet cloth sat in the center, two high-backed chairs on either side. The walls were completely covered in shelves holding crystals, candles, tarot cards, and other mystical objects I couldn't identify. A black cat sat in the window overlooking the street, ignoring us, long tail swishing pointedly.

"Have a seat, dear," Dot said, gesturing at one of the chairs.

I lowered myself gingerly onto the plush velvet as Dot settled across from me. Her multitude of bracelets clinked musically

as she folded her elegant hands on the table, regarding me over her jeweled glasses.

“Now, what brings you to see me today?” she asked, as if she didn’t already know.

I fidgeted with the cuff of my sweater under the table. “Well, I wanted to ask you more about, um... how I got here. To Mistletoe Hollow.”

Dot nodded knowingly. “You’re still having a hard time accepting that this is all real, aren’t you?”

“It’s just... hard to believe,” I said finally. “In my world, Mistletoe Hollow is a movie. So being here... it doesn’t seem possible. I want it to be, but...”

I trailed off, chewing my lip and staring down at the sparkling cloth covering the table.

Dot made a thoughtful noise, tapping one long, jewel-encrusted nail against her chin. “Interesting. And I’m assuming you don’t recognize me?”

The color must’ve drained from my face because she let out a musical little laugh that was all too familiar.

“I mean, you do remind me of my agent, Evie,” I said warily.

Dot’s painted lips curled into a knowing smile. “That’s because I *am* Evie, darling.”

I gaped at her, stunned. “You... you’re Evie? *Literally* Evie?”

She nodded, still smiling. “In the flesh.”

I stared at her in utter disbelief. The poised, sophisticated woman sitting across from me now definitely bore a resemblance to the glamorous, fast-talking agent I knew back in my old world. I’d noticed their similarities from the start, when she’d first greeted me in the diner.

“I don’t understand,” I finally managed to say. “I came here because of a mishap with a cursed VCR, as far as I can tell. What about you?”

“It’s quite a long story, darling,” Evie said with a dramatic sigh, leaning back in her chair. “For the record, the VCR was

not cursed. It's entirely unrelated."

She reached for a jeweled cigarette case on the table and extracted an impossibly long, thin cigarette. With a snap of her fingers, the tip lit itself. I blinked in surprise as she took a slow drag, blowing out a stream of purple smoke that smelled vaguely of lavender.

"Magic has always been a passion of mine," Dot began as if that were a perfectly normal thing to say, tapping her cigarette elegantly against a jewel-encrusted ashtray. "Even as a young girl, I was fascinated by the idea of worlds beyond our own and slipping between the cracks of reality. Of course, my family dismissed it as nonsense."

She rolled her eyes dramatically, blowing out another stream of fragrant smoke. "They wanted me to settle down with some nice, normal man. Can you imagine?" She gave an exaggerated shudder, her bracelets jangling. "But I had bigger dreams. So as soon as I was old enough, I left that provincial little town and made my way to New York City. That's where I first discovered the tools for interdimensional travel—crystals, tarot cards, certain herbs and elixirs."

She gestured around the room, and I noticed now that every shelf seemed to hold some object imbued with mystical energy. My eyes widened.

"It took years of experimentation and more than a few mishaps, but eventually, I figured out how to do all kinds of things," she said.

"Like what?" I asked eagerly, leaning forward. This was unbelievable, but I was hanging on her every word.

Dot took another slow drag of her cigarette, clearly relishing the suspense. "Well, for starters, I learned how to glimpse into other dimensions," she said, waving a hand airily. "With the right combination of cards and crystals, I can see brief snatches of alternate worlds and realities. Even communicate with people in them, on occasion."

My mind was spinning. It sounded too crazy to be true, but after everything I'd experienced lately, I was starting to have a

very open mind about what was possible.

“I also learned how to summon spirits and channel their energy,” Dot continued, counting off on her bedazzled fingers. “Astral projection, psychic premonitions, reading energies... really, darling, you name it.” She gave a little shrug. “I’ve dedicated my life to uncovering the mysteries of the universe and the true nature of reality.”

“So... is that how you ended up here in Mistletoe Hollow?” I asked. “You found a way to travel between dimensions?”

Dot smiled, tapping more ashes delicately into the ashtray. “Yes, exactly. You see, I’d been having visions of this place for years—just brief glimpses at first. It called to me, I suppose. I knew it was somewhere important, somewhere I needed to be.” She sighed wistfully. “It took me ages to figure out how to get here fully, but one day, it finally worked. I stepped through a door in my apartment and into this world.”

“Just like that?” I asked, incredulous.

“Well, there was a bit more to it than that,” Dot admitted with a tinkling laugh. “But essentially, yes. As soon as I arrived and saw this charming little town, I knew I was meant to make it my second home.”

“It’s a movie, though,” I said, still confused. “Isn’t it?”

“It’s a real place in a real world, darling. It’s just not our world, and there are countless worlds out there,” she replied. “The Mistletoe Hollow movie came out quite some time after I’d already been here myself. My best guess is that the director had dreams about this place, too, and decided to make a movie based on those dreams. Happens all the time, really.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “That makes sense.”

More sense than I was expecting it to, at least.

“So I’m really here?” I asked slowly. “This isn’t some coma dream or hallucination? Mistletoe Hollow is an actual place that exists?”

Dot nodded, her bright green eyes glinting knowingly behind her glasses. “As real as you and me, darling.”

I slumped back in my chair, exhaling shakily. It was a lot to take in. But oddly, underneath the shock, I felt a blossom of hope unfurling in my chest. If this place was real, then maybe I really could have a fresh start here. A new life.

A new life with Ben.

“I know it’s a lot to process,” Dot said gently, stubbing out her cigarette. “Take all the time you need, darling.”

I nodded, rubbing my temples as I tried to wrap my head around it. “I just can’t believe this is really happening,” I murmured. “One moment, I was heartbroken in New York, and now...”

“Now you’ve been given a second chance,” Dot finished with an understanding smile. “I know it seems sudden. But trust me, you’re here for a reason. Mistletoe Hollow doesn’t just let anyone in.”

“I’m assuming you had something to do with that, though,” I said, remembering how she’d been the one to suggest re-watching the movie in the first place when she’d called me that fateful day.

“Of course. I did a little spell for you.”

“Why?” I asked, totally stumped. “I mean... thank you, but why?”

“I care about you, and I was worried,” she replied easily. “And it takes a lot for me to worry. I could tell you needed an escape. It would have been cruel if I didn’t help you come to Mistletoe Hollow, a place you already loved deep down in your heart.”

I sat there for a long moment, letting her words sink in. She was right. Being here was exactly what I’d needed. This place had become a refuge for my battered heart, a soft landing spot after the traumatic firestorm in my own world.

“You’re my agent, though,” I said carefully. “Wouldn’t it have been better for you to keep me in my world?”

“Who says you can’t write here?” she asked with a twinkle in her eye. “Some of the greatest stories have been told by hand

—or by typewriter. Perhaps Mistletoe Hollow is where your greatest story will unfold. The one that’s been waiting inside you all along. I can always bring your creations back to our old world, you know. I’m assuming you don’t want to go back and forth.”

“I really don’t. Maybe just to tie up loose ends and make sure nobody thinks I’m dead,” I said with a snort. “But, wait... you sent me here to write?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. That was peak Evie.

“It is a bonus,” she admitted. “But you don’t have to, of course.”

I leaned back in the chair again, considering her words. The thought of writing again stirred something in me—a spark that had been smothered under the weight of my past life’s disappointments. Here, with the unexplainable magic of this town and the genuine connection I felt with Ben, inspiration was already flickering to life.

Dot stood up then, her bracelets jangling softly as she moved around the table to place a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Give yourself permission to be happy, Matthew. Allow yourself to love—and to be loved in return.”

I nodded slowly, a strange sense of peace settling over me as her words sank in.

With an encouraging smile, Dot walked me back through the beaded curtain to the front door. “Go on now,” she said as she opened it for me. “Ben is waiting for you.”

I pulled her into a hug and gave her a tight squeeze. “Thank you,” I murmured. “For everything.”

She laughed and gave my cheek a light peck. “I’m more than happy to have been able to help.”

Stepping out into the crisp air, I squinted against the bright light reflecting off the snow-covered street. I glanced down the block to where Ben said he’d be and spotted him emerging from the hardware store, carrying a small bag.

As if sensing my gaze, he looked up and our eyes met across the distance. A smile broke across his face—a smile that was all for me—and my heart skipped a beat.

I took a deep breath and started walking toward him, feeling lighter than I had in years. With each step, my doubts and fears seemed to melt away.

“Hey,” Ben called out as I approached, his voice filled with warmth. When we reached each other, he wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me in close, kissing my forehead.

“Hey,” I replied with a grin that matched his own.

“So?” he asked curiously as we started walking together toward the diner. “How did it go with Dot?”

I laughed softly. “Let’s just say Mistletoe Hollow has more surprises up its sleeve than I could’ve ever imagined.”

Ben chuckled and bumped his shoulder gently against mine. “That’s what makes life interesting.”

CHAPTER 15

MATTHEW



We reached the diner and slid into a booth by the window. Jackie came over with menus, greeting us more enthusiastically than before and asking how Christmas was for us.

“It was wonderful, thanks,” I said, unable to keep the grin off my face as I thought back to the previous day’s memories. Wonderful seemed like an understatement. “How was yours?”

“Oh, just lovely, honey,” Jackie said, beaming at us. “Christmas in Mistletoe Hollow is always magical, but this one was extra special with my new man. Seems like everyone was feelin’ the holiday spirit even more than usual!”

She gave me a meaningful wink, and I felt my cheeks grow warm. Had word already spread about Ben’s and my new... relationship? Or was she just picking up on our vibes?

“I’m so glad to hear that,” I said, hoping I didn’t sound as flustered as I felt. “This town really goes all out to celebrate. It’s incredible.”

“You betcha!” Jackie said. “And the Jubilee Jamboree was one for the record books. I loved watching you dance, by the way. Great chemistry.”

I felt my cheeks flush even deeper at Jackie’s compliment. Beside me, Ben let out an embarrassed chuckle and rubbed the back of his neck, his own face slightly pink.

“Oh, um, thanks,” I managed to say. “The Jamboree was really fun. I’d never experienced anything like it.”

“I’m not surprised, honey!” Jackie said with a laugh. “We don’t do things small here in Mistletoe Hollow, that’s for sure. But I could tell you boys were enjoyin’ yourselves, and that warmed my heart.”

She gave us another wink before heading off to grab our milkshakes. Guess that was our “usual” now, not that I minded at all. I turned to Ben, feeling suddenly shy.

“So... I guess we’re the talk of the town,” I said.

“Yeah, looks like it,” he said, seeming pretty damn pleased. “Sorry about that. Folks around here mean well, but they do have a tendency to gossip. Especially about newcomers. You won’t be one forever, though.”

“I won’t be, huh?” I teased, smiling.

Our eyes locked, and for a moment, it was like we were the only two people in the busy diner. The clatter of silverware and chatter faded into the background until all I could focus on was the man sitting across from me.

When Jackie returned with our shakes, I jumped a bit, startled out of the moment. We both laughed self-consciously and thanked her before taking a sip of the cold, creamy treats.

“So, um, what kinds of things do you have planned for today?” I asked Ben, hoping to steer the conversation to less embarrassing territory.

He took another long pull from his straw before answering. “Well, I’ve got a few small carpentry jobs around town I need to take care of. Nothing too major since it’s the day after Christmas. Thought you might want to tag along if you’re interested. Could always use an extra set of hands.”

I perked up at that, touched by the invitation. “Really? I’d love to help out if you think I won’t just get in the way.”

Ben chuckled. “I’m sure you’ll do just fine. It’s mostly just minor repairs and touch-ups. Patching little holes, tightening loose hinges, that kind of thing. I’ll show you the ropes.”

“That sounds great,” I said, taking another sip of milkshake. “I’d love to see more of how things work around here.”

“Great way for you to make some new friends, too,” he said. “Don’t worry, I won’t turn you into a full-fledged carpenter. I’m sure that isn’t your thing.”

“It’s not,” I admitted with a laugh. “I don’t know too many twink carpenters. I’m definitely the writer type.”

“Speaking of writing, we should really get you set up with a proper office space,” Ben said. “I know the guest room isn’t ideal, but we could move some furniture around, get you a desk in there...”

“That would be amazing,” I said, too excited to hold myself back from interrupting him. “I’d love to have a space to write in. It’s been a while since I’ve felt inspired enough to put pen to paper, but being here in Mistletoe Hollow...” I trailed off, shaking my head in wonder. “Let’s just say the juices are flowing again. Um. The... the creative ones, I mean.”

Ben grinned wryly at me. “Oh, really? Just the creative ones?”

I stuck my straw in my mouth to stifle my giggle, but it just made my milkshake bubble.

Ben cradled the diner mug, his fingers absentmindedly tracing the rim. “I’m glad you’re settling in. Mistletoe Hollow can be a lot to take in when you’re not used to it, but you seem to be managing just fine.”

I sucked in a deep breath, gathering my thoughts. “It’s nothing like what I’m used to,” I admitted after a moment. “You seriously have no idea. I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

“Try me,” he said, and I could tell he meant it.

I chewed my lip, unsure where to even start. “Well... when I say I’m not from around here, I mean I’m *really* not from around here. As in not even from this world,” I began slowly. Ben raised his eyebrows, but didn’t interrupt. “I’m from what you guys just seem to call ‘the big city.’ Where I’m from, it’s called New York.”

I paused, waiting for him to react, but he just watched me steadily, eyes intent.

I took a deep breath and decided to just come out with the full truth. “Where I’m from, Mistletoe Hollow is... fictional,” I said cautiously. “It’s a setting in a series of Christmas movies. So you can probably understand why waking up here was a bit of a shock.”

Ben’s eyebrows shot up, but to my surprise, he didn’t seem angry or accusatory. Just intrigued. “That’s not what I was expecting you to say,” he admitted. “Then again, I always thought New York was a fictional city, so I guess that’s fair. I’ve heard of stranger things happening.”

I huffed out a little laugh, rubbing the back of my neck. “Yeah, it’s pretty out there. I have trouble believing it myself sometimes. You’ve seen New York in pictures and movies and stuff, then?”

“Yeah. Is it really like that? Futuristic?” he asked.

“I mean, it’s not futuristic to *me*, but compared to here, it is,” I admitted.

“Well, it certainly explains a few things that you’re literally not of this world,” Ben mused, leaning back in the vinyl booth. “Like why you were so disoriented at first. And all your questions about things most folks here take for granted.”

I nodded, relief washing over me now that part of the truth was out there. “Yeah, exactly. It was super weird.”

Ben smiled slightly. “Must have been a trip, waking up inside a movie.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” I said wryly. “I thought I was losing my mind at first. Kept waiting to wake up from some crazy dream.”

“But you know now that it’s real?” Ben asked gently. There was no judgment in his tone, just open curiosity. He was really taking this well.

I thought for a moment before answering. “Yeah. I do. And Dot was able to explain some things about how travel between worlds is possible.”

“Dot told you about interdimensional travel?” Ben asked, eyebrows raised again.

I nodded. “Yeah. She found a way to travel here herself a long time ago.”

I gave him the broad strokes of my conversation with Dot, explaining how she’d had visions of this place and figured out how to cross dimensions over time. How the movie seemed to be inspired by someone else’s dreams of Mistletoe Hollow.

“That’s incredible,” Ben murmured when I finished, leaning forward with his elbows on the table. “Parallel worlds and magical travel between them? Not something you hear about every day in a small town like this.”

“Trust me, it’s not something you hear about in the big city either,” I said. “I can barely wrap my head around it. But Dot swore it’s all real. And after everything I’ve experienced, I believe her.” I paused. “What about you? Do you believe it? I know you’re not into the idea of magic.”

Ben sat back, brow furrowed in thought as he processed everything I’d told him. “Well,” he began slowly, “the idea of magical travel between worlds isn’t something I can readily accept. But there are definitely things in this universe—and maybe others—that can’t easily be explained. So while it might not have been literal magic, there’s clearly *something* happening. And I might believe in magic a little more than I did before.”

He gave me a crooked smile that melted me.

“I could prove it to you,” I said carefully, picking at the cuff of my sleeve. “There are a few things I probably need to take care of, and I’m kind of scared of going back without you. So... do you want to come with me? Maybe next week?”

“Of course,” he said without missing a beat. “I wouldn’t let you do that alone.”

I let out a shaky breath, overwhelmed with gratitude. Of course Ben would support me, even with something this unbelievable.

“Thank you,” I said, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand. “I was kind of scared to tell you everything, but I’m glad I did.”

Ben smiled warmly, turning his hand over to lace his fingers through mine. “I’m glad you told me, too,” he said. “No more secrets between us from now on. Okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed, relieved.

Jackie came back with our food piled high on her tray, and we quickly lost ourselves in new conversations over the diner’s delicious breakfast foods. I told him more about my life back in New York, my daily writing routine, my favorite cafes and restaurants.

He listened with interest, asking questions here and there. In turn, he told me more about his life growing up in Mistletoe Hollow. His memories sledding and ice skating on the frozen lake as a boy. How Jake had shown up one day, too, from outside of town. How he’d been adopted as Ben’s brother. I soaked up every detail, loving this glimpse into his world.

Our conversation flowed easily, and I was struck again by how comfortable I felt with him. How I could be totally myself, and he would still want me.

After he paid the check—after finally agreeing that I could cover it one day if I really wanted to once I was writing again—we bundled back up in our coats and made our way outside into the brisk winter morning. My cheeks stung from the cold, but I didn’t mind. I was excited to spend the day by Ben’s side, getting a taste of his world.

After we paid the check, we headed out into the brisk winter afternoon. I blinked against the brightness, taking in the charming main street lined with twinkling lights and evergreen garlands. I was never going to get used to how picturesque this little town was.

As we strolled down the sidewalk hand in hand, I marveled again at how I fit in here. How quickly it had started to feel like home. Like this was where I truly belonged. Walking

beside Ben, I knew without a doubt it wasn't just a feeling, too.

This was exactly where I needed to be.

And I was ready to write an entirely new story.

Our story.

CHAPTER 16

BEN



One Week Later

The duffel bag sat at the foot of the bed, half-zipped and bulging at the seams with whatever clothes Matthew thought he'd need for our short trip to his world. He was still flitting around the room, trying to decide if he needed another sweater or one more pair of jeans.

"You know we're just going for the day, right?" I teased, leaning against the doorframe with my arms crossed. "We're not moving there. And we're going to be late."

Matthew shot me a playful glare as he held up another sweater, considering it. "Dot will know when we're arriving, won't she?" he asked. "She is a psychic, after all. It's okay if we're a few minutes late."

"Guess so," I said, watching in amusement as he stuffed the sweater into the bag with all his strength.

"I can't show up in flannel and work boots," he added. "Someone might see me. And besides, we could go to a nice restaurant or something. I'll actually have my wallet." He paused. "Speaking of which, do you think my money would work here?"

"Does it have Santa's face on it?" I asked with a snort.

"No," he grumbled. "Dot says she'll pay me for working here, though, so... I'll have Santa money of my own soon."

"I make plenty to support us," I replied.

“I know, but I like contributing,” he said, sighing as he held up yet another sweater. I was surprised he’d grown to like that one, considering it had been in the “no” pile when Jake had first brought it over. “What about this?” he asked.

I chuckled and pushed off from the doorframe, coming up behind him to wrap my arms around his waist. I nuzzled into the crook of his neck, breathing in the fresh scent of his hair. “You’d look good in anything—or nothing,” I murmured into his skin, making him shiver.

“Okay, okay, fine,” he said, laughing. “I think I have everything.” He zipped the bag closed with a final tug and gave it an affectionate pat before turning to face me. “Last chance to back out.”

I shook my head firmly. “I meant it when I told you I’m with you every step of the way. Besides, I’m curious about your world. And I’d like to see proof of real magic.”

“Oh, yeah, teleporting is gonna shift your view, isn’t it?” Matthew mused.

“Maybe.”

He smiled, but there was an anxious wrinkle on his forehead that hadn’t been there before. He’d been biting his nails, too. I’d found out about that the previous night, when the sharp, nibbled edges had scraped against the head of my cock.

“Hey,” I said softly, cupping Matthew’s face in my hands. “We don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. I know going back there won’t be easy for you.”

Matthew sighed and leaned into my touch. “It’s okay. I’m just nervous, I guess. It’s going to be super weird. I’ll probably get reverse culture shock or something.” He swallowed hard.

I stroked my thumbs over his cheeks. “I get it. But we’ll be together the whole time. And if at any point you want to bail, we bail—no questions asked.”

I gently tilted Matthew’s chin up and pressed my lips to his in a soft, lingering kiss. He melted against me, the tension in his body easing as I wrapped my arms around him.

We stayed like that for a long moment, just holding each other close. Matthew's arms looped around my neck while mine encircled his waist, keeping our bodies pressed together. I could feel his heart beating steadily against my chest, and the warmth of his breath against my cheek.

Hugging him like this always seemed to calm him down. I could feel him unwinding in my arms, his tense muscles relaxing and going slack as his breathing evened out.

"Okay," he said, letting out a long breath. "Let's go."

We gathered up our things and headed out to my truck. Matthew tossed his duffel bag in the back while I started up the engine. As we pulled out onto the dusty dirt road leading away from the cabin, I glanced over at him sitting silently in the passenger seat. His forehead was creased in thought as he stared out the window at the passing trees.

"You okay?" I asked, reaching over to give his knee a comforting squeeze.

"Yeah. Just getting lost in my head a bit," he murmured.

"You wanna talk about it?" I asked gently, keeping one hand on the wheel while the other rested on his knee.

Matthew was quiet for a moment, still gazing out at the trees zipping past. "I'm just thinking about what it'll be like," he finally said. "And I know it hasn't been that long since I came here, but... it feels like it has. Like time isn't the same."

"I've heard that from other out-of-towners. Jake says the same thing."

"About that..." Matthew said, trailing off as he continued staring out the window. Then he turned to look at me, chewing his bottom lip. One of his cutest nervous habits, and they were all cute. "What else is out there? Beyond Mistletoe Hollow, I mean."

I blinked in surprise, gripping the steering wheel a little tighter.

I knew he wanted to be here with me, but for a moment, I wasn't sure.

Then I looked again. No—the look on his face wasn't one of someone who wanted to leave. Just open curiosity.

“There are plenty of towns,” I said. “Did you... think Mistletoe Hollow was literally all there was?” I couldn't help but laugh.

He sat up a little straighter, listening. “There are?”

“Yeah, there are a few other towns scattered around. They're all pretty small and remote though, like Mistletoe Hollow. Folks like to keep to themselves, I guess. There's not as much travel between them as you'd think.”

“Are they... holiday-themed towns?” he asked, sounding a bit excited.

“Holiday themed towns?” I echoed, glancing over at Matthew with a raised eyebrow.

He nodded eagerly. “Yeah, you know, like how everything in Mistletoe Hollow is all Christmas, all the time. Are there other towns that are themed around different holidays? Like Halloween?”

“Yep. Jake's from a town that celebrates Easter the way we celebrate Christmas,” I explained. “It took him a while to adjust, to say the least, when our parents adopted him.”

“Sooo... we could travel for Valentine's Day?” he asked hopefully.

“Cupid's Grove? Sure,” I said, laughing.

“What's it like?”

“Well, I've never actually been there myself,” I admitted, keeping my eyes on the road. “I haven't had reason to leave Mistletoe Hollow, to be honest. But I've heard stories from travelers passing through town. It's all decked out in pink and red year round. Heart decorations everywhere, streets named after famous romances, swan lakes with paddleboats. Very romantic, from what I hear.”

“We *have* to go,” Matthew said eagerly. “You realize that, right? And I don't mean twenty Christmases from now.”

“We will,” I promised, smiling over at him. “We’ll go as soon as we get home.”

“Is that a promise?” he asked, grinning.

“It’s a promise.”

We were still chatting and laughing about our impending romantic getaway when I pulled the truck up to the sidewalk in front of Dot’s overly purple Victorian. I cut the engine and we both glanced up at the imposing structure looming above us.

I squeezed Matthew’s hand. “You ready for this?”

He nodded with a quivering sigh. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

We climbed out of the truck. I grabbed the duffel bag and slung it over my shoulder before following Matthew up the creaky wooden steps to Dot’s front door. He was scurrying ahead of me like he just couldn’t wait to get this over with, jittery with nervous energy. He rapped the lion’s head door knocker, then stood back, bumping into me and stepping on my boot.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly.

“Sorry?” I laughed a little. “You’re half my size.”

After a few moments, the door swung open and Dot popped out, as dazzling and glittery as usual. “Matthew! Ben! So wonderful to see you two again.”

“Hi, Dot,” I said with an easy smile. Matthew echoed me, though his voice came out a little strained.

“Please, come in, come in!” Dot ushered us inside, closing the door behind us with a thud that made Matthew jump slightly.

I followed Dot down the dark wood-paneled hallway to the sitting room, pressing a little closer to Matthew. I’d never been inside her home. It looked how I’d always imagined—gothic candelabras dripping wax everywhere, dusty old furniture, that musty yet strangely comforting antique smell.

It was a wonder she wasn’t from Pumpkin Point.

“Go ahead and have a seat,” Dot said, motioning to the antique fainting couch and chairs clustered around a low coffee table.

“We’re not going to the parlor today?” Matthew asked, settling onto the couch beside me. A black cat leapt into his lap, demanding attention and affection while ignoring me. I reached out to pet the cat, but it ducked expertly to avoid my hand.

“Not today,” said Dot, sitting in the high-backed velvet chair across from us, a long cigarette dangling from her bejeweled fingers. “We need a bit more room for this.”

I watched curiously as Dot took a long drag from her cigarette, the end glowing orange in the dim light of the sitting room. She exhaled a plume of pungent smoke that made my nose wrinkle before I could stop myself.

“So how does this work?” I asked, absently scratching the cat behind its ears as it purred contentedly in Matthew’s lap, making painful-looking biscuits on his legs. He didn’t seem to mind. “Some kind of portal?”

Dot let out an amused chuckle. “Not quite, dear. We’ll be doing a little ritual to shift your energies and consciousness to the frequency of Matthew’s world.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Is it safe?”

“Of course, of course,” Dot said breezily with a wave of her cigarette. “I’ve done this countless times. Never had any problems. And when you’re ready to come home, all you have to do is say so.”

I wasn’t totally convinced, but I glanced over at Matthew and could see he was putting his bravest face on. He was clearly ready for this. So I nodded. “Alright.”

“Excellent!” Dot clapped her hands together, making the bangles on her wrists jingle.

She rose from her chair in a flurry of scarves and skirts and bustled over to an antique cabinet in the corner of the room. I watched curiously as she rummaged around inside, muttering to herself.

“Aha!” she exclaimed, emerging with several items cradled in her arms. There was a brass bowl etched with strange symbols, a bundle of herbs tied with twine, a few colorful candles, and a

large book bound in cracked leather. She dumped everything on the coffee table with a thump and a puff of dust.

Matthew sneezed and the cat flew off his lap.

“Right, let’s get started then,” Dot said, flipping open the book. The yellowed pages were filled with elaborate calligraphy and illustrations of planets, stars, and other celestial symbols. Definitely not English, though the flowing script had a certain familiar beauty to it.

Dot lit the candles first, placing them at precise points around the table to form a circle. Then she took the bundle of herbs and crumbled some into the bowl, filling the air with an earthy, pungent aroma.

“Take each other’s hands,” she instructed. Matthew and I clasped hands, watching raptly as Dot began waving her own hands over the bowl and chanting rhythmically in a lyrical language that sounded suspiciously like something she’d invented off the top of her head. Her bracelets jangled musically with the motions.

Wisps of white smoke started curling up from the bowl, coiling and dancing hypnotically through the candlelight. The pungent herbal scent grew stronger, tickling my nose. Dot’s chanting rose in volume and intensity, though her voice remained smooth and melodic.

The room began to spin slowly around us. I blinked hard, gripping Matthew’s hands more tightly. His eyes were wide, reflecting the flickering candles surrounding us.

“Stay focused on each other,” Dot said, her voice floating through the haze. “Think only of your destination.”

Matthew’s face was the only clear thing left amidst the blur of shapes and colors swirling around us. I stared into his eyes, watching the dancing candle flames reflected in his dark irises. The smoke stung my eyes, making them water, but I refused to look away.

“Have fun, dears! But not too much fun,” she called out cryptically.

Then everything went silent and still.

CHAPTER 17

BEN



I blinked, realizing I was now staring up at a pale blue sky dotted with puffy white clouds. The scent of car exhaust and hot asphalt flooded my nose, replacing the herbal haze.

I sat up slowly, gripping Matthew's hands even tighter. We were seated on a narrow strip of grass between a busy road and a row of shops. At least, I thought they were shops. Traffic roared and whooshed past in a dizzying stream.

My head spun as I tried to take it all in.

"It worked," Matthew breathed. He released my hands and rose unsteadily to his feet, staring around with an expression caught between wonder and shock. "You're here. We're both here. It... it worked."

I slowly got to my feet as the world spun and tilted around me. The sensory overload was almost too much. My brain felt like it was going to break. I'd never seen anything like this before.

I still wasn't completely sure about magic, but this seemed like proof.

Cars roared past us in an endless stream, their horns blaring impatiently. People hurried by on the sidewalk, dressed in suits and staring down at little glowing screens in their hands. Enormous buildings loomed all around, glass and steel monoliths that disappeared into the clouds overhead. Strange electronic billboards plastered the sides of buildings, displaying rapidly flashing images and videos accompanied by bright, loud music. The smell of the air made my eyes water.

There were Christmas lights everywhere, and wreaths hanging on many of the too-tall flickering lampposts, so at least the situation wasn't entirely hopeless.

But New York was dizzying.

Disorienting.

So incredibly foreign that I found myself wrapping an arm around Matthew's shoulders, pulling him in closer, clinging to and protecting the one familiar thing in this bizarre new world.

He slid a supportive arm around my waist, leaning in close so I could hear him over the cacophony of sounds. "Crazy, right?" he said, an amused smile playing about his lips. "Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

How was he not frightened?

He was so small, and this world was so... *immense* .

I just nodded mutely, unable to form words yet. We started down the sidewalk, Matthew expertly steering us through the crowds. I kept my head down, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other without tripping. The snow-dusted concrete was hard and unyielding beneath my boots.

We walked for what felt like miles through the twisting canyons between shining, angry buildings. Matthew kept up a steady stream of commentary, pointing out landmarks and explaining things, but most of it went in one ear and out the other. I was too overwhelmed to absorb anything except the most basic sensory details—smells, sounds, the feeling of Matthew's arm around me.

Eventually we arrived at a glass tower that looked just like all the others, and Matthew looked up at it, shielding his eyes from the glaring sun with his hand.

"Home sweet home," he said with a wry smile, glancing over at me.

"This is your home?" I asked, blinking, once I was able to find my voice again.

"Yep. Well... not anymore," he said, laughing a little.

I followed Matthew through the imposing lobby with its marble floors that echoed our footsteps. The doorman tipped his hat to Matthew, greeting him by name. Matthew smiled and greeted him in return as we stepped into the elevator.

“Penthouse, please,” he told the operator, who silently pressed the button for the top floor.

The doors slid closed and the elevator began its swift ascent, making my stomach drop unpleasantly. I wasn’t used to moving vertically like this. Matthew gave my hand a reassuring squeeze, sensing my discomfort.

Since when was he the one reassuring me?

With a soft ding, the doors opened directly into Matthew’s apartment. I followed him inside, my eyes going wide. The space was enormous, with floor-to-ceiling windows offering dizzying views of the cityscape below. But the décor was... unexpected, to say the least.

The walls and furniture were all black metal and glass, cold and severe. Strange abstract sculptures dotted the rooms, jagged shards of metal twisting violently into the air. It looked like some kind of terrible villain’s lair.

I froze in the doorway, staring in shock at the metal sculpture sprawled across Matthew’s kitchen island. It was a nude male figure with clawed hands, horns curling from his forehead, wings unfurled behind him. His face was twisted in a grotesque sneer, eyes glaring malevolently at nothing. And an enormous two-headed cock, if such a thing even existed, lay against his thigh.

Was it *pierced* ?

“Why is Krampus on your kitchen island?” I asked warily.

Matthew burst into laughter. “Krampus? That isn’t... that isn’t Krampus, Ben, it’s just some demon. And I don’t know. Greg put it there. He loved edgy, dark shit like that.”

He said Greg’s name like it didn’t bother him anymore. I loved that.

“It’s horrifying,” I said bluntly. The demon’s empty eyes seemed to follow me as I moved further into the apartment.

“Yeah, I guess I got used to it being around,” Matthew said with a shrug, looking back to the screen in his hands. It was making all kinds of noises as he tapped on it with his thumbs. He’d mentioned he wanted to “text” a few people to let them know he wasn’t dead, just leaving the city, but I had no idea what “texting” was and wasn’t in a hurry to find out.

I wandered over to the windows, desperate to look at anything except that demonic monstrosity. The view outside was just as overwhelming as before. Endless buildings stacked atop each other, metallic and faceless despite the festive Christmas lights decorating the streets.

“How did you live here so long?” I murmured.

Matthew came up beside me, wrapping his arms around mine and resting his cheek against my shoulder. “It wasn’t so bad. Honestly, I didn’t think about it much. I just worked a lot, kept busy.” He paused. “But now, being back here with you... it feels really different.”

I turned to face him. “Different how?”

He looked thoughtful for a moment. “Just more... fake, I guess? Like I can see through everything now, all the stuff that used to seem important. My job, my fancy apartment.” He shook his head. “It all feels so superficial. It’s funny. I thought living here was my crowning achievement. Like it couldn’t possibly get better than this.”

I pulled him closer. “Is that why you decided not to stay here?”

“It’s not just that,” he said softly. “It’s you.”

I smiled and pressed a kiss to his hair. “I’m glad. And don’t worry, we’ll get out of this cold metal world soon.” As if on cue, a deafening siren split the air outside. We both flinched at the sudden cacophony of horns and shouts drifting up from below.

Matthew grimaced. “I was thinking about taking you to one of the cool restaurants here, but... maybe we should order takeout instead.”

“You’re overwhelmed?” I asked, surprised. “This is all very normal to you, isn’t it?”

“Not anymore,” he admitted, moving away from the window to sit down on the stark black leather sofa. He looked small and lost amidst the cold, imposing furniture.

I sat down beside him, turning so I could see his face. “What do you mean?” I asked gently.

“It just doesn’t feel real. It’s so weird. It’s like I’m dreaming,” he replied, snuggling into my side and drawing his knees up to his chest. I moved the sparse throw pillows to cover him up since the apartment was so chilly.

“Well, you’re not dreaming,” I said.

He stared up at me. “Thanks. That’s *super* helpful.”

“Maybe one of your favorite comfort foods would help,” I mused.

“I do like sushi,” he said, perking up a bit. “And there’s no sushi in Mistletoe Hollow.”

“We have sushi,” I said, confused.

“No. You don’t. Sushi should not be covered in crushed candy canes and marshmallows,” he said flatly. “We’ll order some *real* sushi.”

Then a pounding on the door jerked Matthew from the nest of cushions.

The look in Matthew’s eyes told me it wasn’t a familiar interruption. He seemed puzzled and wary. We exchanged a glance before he pushed himself off the couch to answer it.

“Wait,” I said, holding out my hand to stop him. “I’ll get it.”

“Are you sure?” he asked nervously, nibbling on his nails again.

“Yeah. Of course. Just stay there,” I said, dropping a pillow on his lap for good measure as if it might hold him still. He hid behind it while I stood and walked to the entrance of the apartment.

When I opened the door, I was met with the sight of a lanky man who looked like a human weasel leaning against the door frame. He looked me up and down, a smug smirk tugging at his pouty lips. He was unnaturally sculpted, his shiny skin pulled tight across his unmoving features, like his face was some kind of organic mask.

And was his blond hair real? Or was it a hat of some kind? It was stiff and solid, and when he flicked his head to give me a filthy look, not a single hair moved out of place.

I hated him immediately.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded, trying to push past me.

I didn’t move, my broad body blocking the stranger’s attempt to enter the apartment. “I should be asking who *you* are,” I replied evenly.

His eyes lit with fire, but his expression didn’t shift. His face seemed... frozen. “I’m Matthew’s boyfriend,” he snapped. “Now who the hell are you and what are you doing in our apartment?”

I stared at him for a moment, surprised, before looking back over my shoulder. “*This* is Greg?” I called back into the apartment.

“Yes,” Matthew squeaked from the couch.

“What do you mean, ‘this is Greg’?” the living mannequin hissed indignantly. “Move it, asshole!”

I had to stop myself from laughing out loud. This scrawny little ferret thought he could intimidate me? I was at least a foot taller and easily twice his weight.

“Matthew has moved on,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “And I suggest you do the same.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” he spat. “I came here because Mrs. Rosenbaum texted me saying she heard Matthew had come back. I was worried about him. He’s been gone for days.”

I blew a puff of air through my nostrils. “Well, as you can see, he’s perfectly fine. So you can be on your way now.”

I started to close the door, but Greg slapped his palm against it to keep it open. “Not so fast,” he growled. “I’m not leaving until I talk to Matthew myself.”

He tried shoving past me again, but I stood firm, using my size to block him. No way was I letting this creep anywhere near Matthew.

Greg’s face twisted into an ugly sneer. “Oh, so he’s fucking *you* now, is that it?” he spat. “Did he tell you he loved you? He doesn’t. He’s just using you to try and make me jealous.”

I stared down at him in disgust. This was the person who had made Matthew feel so powerless for so long? Who had chipped away at his self-esteem bit by bit through manipulation and gaslighting?

It seemed absurd now that I was face-to-face with Greg in the flesh. He was like a yappy little dog nipping ineffectually at my heels, while I was a bear who could flatten him with one swipe of my paw if I wanted to.

But I wasn’t going to stoop to his level. I didn’t need to.

“Time for you to go,” I said in a low warning tone.

“It’s okay, Ben,” came Matthew’s quiet voice from behind me. “Let me talk to him.”

My protective instincts flared up and I almost refused. Why did Matthew need to talk to this venomous snake? But one look at Matthew’s determined face told me he needed to stand up to Greg himself.

So I stepped reluctantly aside, allowing Matthew to take my place in the doorway. He stared up at his ex, his expression steely and resolved.

“Greg,” he said carefully, his voice shaking a little. “You need to go.”

Greg’s smug look faltered for a second before the sneer returned. “Go? What are you talking about? You think some... some *hick* can compete with what we had? He’s just a warm body until you come crawling back to me.” He shot me a contemptuous look over Matthew’s shoulder.

Matthew shook his head, some of the pain in his eyes hardening into anger. “You didn’t come here for me. You came here because you can’t stand not controlling me anymore.” His voice grew stronger with each word. “But I don’t need you. I never did, and I never will. So how are you going to control me now?”

Greg’s smug expression wavered. He clearly hadn’t expected Matthew to stand up to him.

I was so proud.

Greg sputtered, clearly taken aback. “What... what are you saying? You don’t mean that. I know you, Matthew. You need me. You can’t live without me.”

I tensed, wanting to step in, but Matthew held up a hand subtly to stop me. This was his battle.

Matthew squared his shoulders and lifted his chin, staring his ex right in the eyes.

“No, Greg. I don’t need you anymore,” he said, his voice unwavering. “I’ve changed, even if you haven’t. I’ve finally realized my self-worth, and I know now that I deserve better than how you treated me.”

Greg’s expression darkened, his eyes narrowing. “You’ll regret this,” he hissed. “No one else will ever put up with you like I did. You’ll come crawling back, and I’ll remember you mouthed off to me.”

Matthew didn’t flinch. “Even if I’d never met Ben, I’d rather be alone than be with you.”

He started to close the door, but Greg slapped a hand against it to keep it open. “We’re not done here!” he snarled, trying to shove his way into the apartment.

That was it. I quickly stepped forward, using my larger frame to block Greg’s path.

“I believe you are,” I rumbled.

Greg’s eyes widened as he took in my sheer size up close. I rarely used my strength to intimidate, but this snake wasn’t

going to slither his way in here and hurt Matthew again. Not if I had anything to say about it.

Greg sputtered indignantly, but I could see a spark of fear in his eyes now. He knew he was no match for me physically.

“Time to go,” I said firmly, taking him by the shoulders and steering him firmly but gently out of the doorway.

Greg tried to resist, squirming in my grip, but I held fast until he was back in the hallway outside the apartment. As soon as I released him, he stumbled back, smoothing his clothes and glaring daggers at me.

“This isn’t over,” he hissed.

“It is,” I said flatly, closing the door.

I turned to Matthew. “Are you okay?” I asked gently.

He let out a shaky breath, his shoulders slumping in relief. “Yeah. Yeah, I think so. Thank you for stepping in.”

I pulled him into a hug. “Of course. I’m proud of you.”

Matthew squeezed me tight. “I can’t believe I used to let him walk all over me like that,” he murmured. “He’s so... ridiculous.”

“Does he look the way he does on purpose?” I asked.

“He does,” Matthew said with a small laugh. “It’s called plastic surgery. But you’re not supposed to take it that far.”

“I was afraid he was going to spring a leak,” I admitted.

“He probably would have if you’d gotten into an actual fight,” he mused. “You’re my knight in flannel armor.”

I leaned in to kiss his forehead. I’d never been anyone’s knight before, but for Matthew, I would gladly slay a thousand dragons.

Including plastic ones.

I’d do anything for him. Even if it meant trips back and forth between Mistletoe Hollow and this... pointy hellscape.

“Ready for sushi?” I asked.

He nodded eagerly. “Definitely. I thought I’d lose my appetite when he came here, but I’m starving.”

He led me back to the couch and plopped down on it. He reached for the palm-sized screen he’d plugged in to charge and it lit up in his hands.

“What is that?” I asked curiously, settling in beside him. It seemed everyone in this city had one, but I wasn’t sure what they were.

“A phone,” he said. “Ours are a little different from the ones you’re used to.”

I stared at the little glowing rectangle in Matthew’s hand, completely baffled. He swiped his finger across the smooth surface and it sprang to life, displaying colors and images that shifted as he moved his fingers.

“This is how we order food here,” he explained. “The sushi restaurant has an app that lets you pick what you want, and they’ll deliver it right to the apartment.”

I blinked at him.

He tapped on the screen, which was showing a list of names and pictures of rolls wrapped in what appeared to be seaweed. “What do you like? Tuna? Salmon? Shrimp tempura?”

“Shrimp what?” I asked weakly.

This was too much. Food appearing as if by magic, on little light-up paper?

I stared down at the glowing screen in Matthew’s hand, completely lost. He was tapping and swiping at images that moved and changed at his touch. I’d never seen anything remotely like it.

Magic.

This had to be real magic.

Matthew glanced up at me, and I could see my own bewilderment reflected in his glasses.

“Here, look,” Matthew said gently, sensing my confusion. He angled the little device so I could see the screen better. A

portrait filled the display—a smiling older man with rosy cheeks and a white beard in a red suit. Snowflakes floated all around him.

“Who is that?” I asked.

“Santa,” Matthew replied. “I have him as my wallpaper right now since it’s almost Christmas here.”

I looked closer. “That isn’t Santa.”

Matthew gave a nervous laugh. “What?”

“Not enough eyes.”

Matthew turned white as a sheet. “Oh. Okay. Right. The real Santa is an eldritch being. Totally forgot.”

He went back to the moving pictures of sushi. I could feel my eyes glazing over. This was all too much.

“We’ll just get a variety,” he said. “That’s the best way, anyway.”

He tapped a few more times, then held the phone up to his ear. He started speaking into it, confirming an order for various foods I’d never heard of. He glanced at me questioningly when listing dessert options, and I just nodded silently, not sure how he expected me to know what any of this was.

When he was done, he set the phone down and took my hands in his. “I know this is a lot to take in,” he said. “This world felt so overwhelming when we first came back. And it still does. It must be even more bizarre for you.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “Just a bit. I can’t wrap my head around it.” I shook my head. “Your world is full of magic. Why didn’t you think it was?”

Matthew laughed. “No, it’s not magic. It’s technology. I’ll explain it all, I promise. I just didn’t want to dump everything on you at once and fry your brain.” He leaned in conspiratorially. “Between you and me, I think magic makes more sense. Half this stuff, I don’t really understand how it works either.”

That made me feel a little better. If Matthew was confused by his own world sometimes, maybe I wasn't a completely lost cause.

We cuddled on the couch in a nest of pillows until there was another knock on the door. It didn't seem like it could possibly be our food this soon, even with magic or technology or whatever it was.

Matthew tensed against me, his body going rigid. I could feel his heart rate pick up where he was pressed close. After the confrontation with Greg, he was understandably on edge about any unexpected visitors.

"It's okay," I murmured, smoothing his hair and dropping a kiss to the top of his head before extracting myself from our nest. "I'll see who it is."

I walked up to the door and checked the peephole first this time. It wasn't Greg. It was a brown-haired guy holding a huge paper bag and staring at his phone. His silver-plated nametag said Levi.

I turned to give Matthew a reassuring smile. He was sitting up straight, hugging a pillow to his chest as he watched me. "Just the food we ordered arriving. No crazy exes."

Matthew's shoulders slumped in relief.

I opened the door to greet the delivery guy. He looked up from his phone, giving me a polite smile.

"Matthew?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, I'm Ben."

Levi blinked at me. "Uh... okay. But this is the right apartment? Matthew Harrington?" He leaned back and looked at the numbers on the door.

"Yes, this is his apartment," I said.

He still looked confused, but he just shrugged and handed the large paper bag over to me. "Alright, well, here's your order."

"Thanks," I said, but he kept standing there, looking at me.

“Wait!” Matthew called from the couch. “You have to give him a tip. I didn’t add it in the app.”

“The tip of what?” I called back to him.

Levi blinked hard.

“There’s money in the drawer to the left of the sink,” said Matthew.

“Oh. Wait a sec, sorry,” I said to Levi, turning to put the food on the counter. I reached into the drawer and pulled out a few green bills. When I handed them to the delivery guy, he stared at them in shock.

“You’re not, uh... trying to proposition me for anything, are you, big guy?” he asked warily.

Now I was the one who was confused. “It’s just the tip.”

He shrugged and pocketed the money with a big grin. “Well, thanks. Happy holidays.”

Oh, right. They had more than just Christmas here. “You, too,” I told him before closing the door. When I turned around, Matthew was staring at me.

“How much did you give him?” he asked.

“They had hundreds on them,” I replied. “That’s enough, right?”

“Yep,” Matthew squeaked.

Relieved, I carried the bag over to the couch and set it on the glass coffee table. He immediately dug into the bag and started unpacking all the containers, arranging them neatly. There were so many colors and textures—long cylinders wrapped in black and green paper, mounds of bright orange balls, slices of pink fish arranged artfully over beds of white rice. It was like edible art.

I watched Matthew grab a pair of lacquered sticks and expertly pick up a roll between them. He dipped it in a dark sauce and took a bite, closing his eyes blissfully. A bit of rice clung to his lip, and I reached out to gently wipe it away with my thumb.

He opened his eyes and grinned at me. “Go on, try it!”

I picked up my own pair of sticks awkwardly, fumbling to grab one of the rolls. Matthew showed me how to hold them properly between my fingers. When I finally managed to lift the roll, the whole thing fell apart into a mess of rice and seaweed and I sighed.

Matthew just laughed again. "Here, use this for now," he said, handing me a fork. "You'll get the hang of chopsticks eventually."

I took the fork from him gratefully and speared one of the fallen rolls. I took a tentative bite, the mix of flavors and textures exploding on my tongue.

"This is incredible," I mumbled through my mouthful. "Much better than the sushi we have back home."

Matthew beamed, clearly pleased that I was enjoying the food from his world. "Try a bit of this," he said, pointing to a mound of pinkish leaves in a little plastic cup. "It's ginger. If you're brave, you can try that green stuff, too. It's wasabi."

"It is Christmas sushi, then?" I asked, surprised. I took a forkful of ginger and some of the wasabi.

"No!" Matthew cried, nearly dropping his chopsticks as he scrambled to stop me, but I was already chewing.

Oh. That was a mistake.

Blinking back tears as my eyes watered and burned, I picked up one of the sodas on the table and chugged it to the last drop.

"Help," I choked out.

Matthew shoved a spoonful of ice cream from another container into my mouth, quenching the flames. Leave it to Matthew to have the perfect solution to my self-inflicted suffering.

"Better?" he asked, watching me carefully.

I nodded, my eyes still watering. "Much. Thanks."

He grinned. "I tried to warn you."

"No kidding," I croaked. My throat still felt raw. I helped myself to another spoonful of ice cream straight from the

container. Matthew didn't seem to mind me double-dipping.

"What else do you need to warn me about?" I asked, suddenly not sure about the rolls piled high with tiny orange balls.

Matthew's eyes lit up eagerly. He loved explaining things, especially when it came to food. "Well, sushi rice is seasoned with rice vinegar, which gives it that subtle sweet-tangy flavor. The seaweed wrap is called nori. It's roasted, so it has an umami, almost nutty taste."

I nodded along like I understood any of those words.

"And then you have all kinds of fillings, like raw fish, shrimp, vegetables, egg..." He pointed out each ingredient as he named them. My eyes couldn't keep up.

"Raw fish?" I interrupted.

"Yep. Sushi grade, so it's safe to eat uncooked."

I stared down at the expertly sliced pink fish atop the rice. "If you say so."

I tentatively tried a piece with salmon. The buttery smooth texture surprised me. Delicious. Still, I made sure to chase it with a California roll containing cooked crab meat just to be safe.

As we ate, Matthew told me all about the origins of sushi and its rise in popularity in America. I was content just listening to him talk passionately about something he loved while I tried a bit of everything. He was really into this. No wonder he didn't like Mistletoe Hollow's aggressively festive version of it. I even managed to eat a whole piece with chopsticks, though it required intense focus.

When the last piece had been devoured, Matthew let out a contented sigh and leaned back against the couch cushions. He had a blissful look on his face, like he'd just experienced nirvana.

"That really hit the spot," he said with a happy sigh. "I'd been craving good sushi for so long."

I gathered up the empty containers and brought them to the trash can. It opened automatically with a soft whirring sound,

making me jump. “I’m glad you enjoyed it so much. There’s nothing like that in Mistletoe Hollow.”

Matthew watched me tidy up, a thoughtful look on his face. “No, but if I ever need a sushi fix again, we can get a hotel or something. Mistletoe Hollow has you. And you taste better than anything I’ve ever had in my mouth.” He grinned.

I couldn’t help but laugh at his shameless flirtation.

“Is that so?” I asked, unable to keep the grin off my own face as I walked back over to the couch. I leaned down to kiss him, reveling in the sweetness of his lips. Our lips parted after a moment, but I stayed close, nuzzling my nose against his.

“Ready to go home, then?” I asked, my voice husky.

“Hell, yes.”

The sharp edges of the modern furniture started to soften and blur. Outside the window, the jagged cityscape melted away into gently rolling white hills. We watched in surprise as everything changed, and when we looked back toward each other, we were dusted with the snow flurries falling slowly all around us. Snowflakes were already clinging to Matthew’s hair and eyelashes as he gazed at me in wonder.

Our lips met as all the harshness and chaos of the big city faded away, replaced by the tranquil hush of freshly fallen snow.

“There’s no place like home,” he murmured.

I chuckled softly, tilting his chin up for another kiss.

“Matthew Harrington, you *are* my home.”



The End.

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Best,

Joel