



ANNEKA R. WALKER



**MERRY
KISMET**

A GIFT-WRAPPED ROMANCE

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Book Cover by Martha Keyes

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Dedication

TO ESTHER HATCH, MY treasured whist partner,
conference roomie, and writer bestie.

Chapter 1

Brie

CHRISTMAS SHOPPING IS MY therapy. There's always another person who needs a mug or a cookie-scented candle. It's my way of staying busy too. If I spend all my time gift-giving, there isn't time for the dreaded holiday loneliness to set in. Today, my list is small: four boxes of candy canes to go with the books I bought my first-grade students for Christmas. It's an in-and-out job, and my budget demands I don't get distracted in the store again.

I pop inside Warren's Grocery and breathe deeply. There are cinnamon pinecones in a center aisle display calling my name. My exhausting day of herding hyper kids ready for the holidays somehow lessens. The therapy is working already.

I see the tag and the over-priced number on the pinecone bag and tell myself a firm no. In a moment of weakness, I lean toward them as I walk by, sniffing like a proper Christmas addict. I look up and see a wall of people pushing through the candy aisle. No surprise. Warren's is the only decent grocery

store in Bearwood, Idaho, so a crowd this time of year is to be expected.

I inch my way closer and attempt to look over a woman's cart to the shelves behind her. My candy canes must be farther down, but the aisle is clogged with people acting like kindergarteners incapable of forming a decent line.

Someone taps my shoulder. I turn to find an older woman with rosy cheeks, short spiky white hair, and chunky snowflake earrings. She is dressed in a red cable-knit sweater with a Warren's name tag clipped by her collar, forest-green jeggings, and black boots with an eclectic-looking gold buckle. Whoever she is, she resembles a contemporary Mrs. Claus.

I blink. "Yes?"

"It's pretty congested, isn't it?"

"It does look daunting."

"I can help. Follow me." She pulls the closed sign off the end of the register and un-clicks a rope barring the lane. When she steps aside, I notice plenty of Christmas candy stacked on a rack, including boxes of candy canes and my favorite salted chocolate caramels.

"This is perfect," I say.

"I just finished stocking it." Trendy Mrs. Claus steps behind the register while I pile boxes from the rack to the checkout counter, studiously ignoring the chocolate caramels. They are

a different kind of therapy that I might have abused too recently.

“Do you have fun plans for the weekend?” the cashier asks, her tone curious.

Why do store clerks ask personal questions, and I always feel obligated to answer? Despite my better judgment, I tell her exactly what my plans are. “I’m watching Christmas movies.” I omit the *alone* part, since my roommates have plans the entire weekend and have abandoned me, but it still sounds lame. It beats hanging out at my mom’s house to avoid the consuming quiet. But why am I justifying myself? Movies are perfectly acceptable—and holiday ones even traditional.

“I love Christmas movies too.” She leans over the conveyor belt when I set my boxes down. “They’re best with a hot cup of cocoa and someone special by your side, am I right?” She winks at me like I know all about how having a significant other makes movies ten times better.

I haven’t had a boyfriend in a long time. Emphasis on long. I live with my two best friends, so I’m not completely alone. But Brie Holland is old news in a small town like this. I’m destined to be single forever. I’ve never admitted this out loud, but I think life is against me having serious dating relationships. If my roommates marry or move away, I’m in big trouble. I smile, as if the idea of spending my evenings alone every weekend for eternity thrills me. “I’m the independent type,” I lie, pulling out my credit card to hint I’m in a hurry.

Mrs. Claus gives me a sympathetic look and rings up the first box. “Have you made your wish list for Santa yet?”

I sigh inwardly. More conversation. “Not yet.” I don’t make Christmas lists for myself. I’m a single girl in her late twenties. Besides, after I finish shopping for other people, what’s left has to go into savings. I have goals.

The Mrs. Claus cashier holds up a green notebook matching the color of her jeggings. In gold script across the front is the word *Kismet*. I didn’t even see her reach for it or know where it came from. “What do you think?” she asks. “Isn’t this darling? It’s perfect for making a Christmas wish list so Santa can send you exactly what you want.”

I suddenly feel like she is the schoolteacher and I am the first grader, buying into her singsong voice and feeling a rise in anxiety to get my list made before it’s too late. I blink until I regain my senses. The notebook is cute. Really cute. And the title pulls at my romantic heart.

The cashier can’t know I’m fascinated with the idea behind fate, *kismet*, and divine intervention (thanks to my secret theory that I’m jinxed on ever finding love), but she waves it in front of me as if she can read my mind. I want it like I do the cinnamon pinecones by the entrance and the chocolate caramels on the rack behind me. But I am a teacher, and I have hundreds of notebooks. She is a saleswoman—a good one—but I don’t *need* the notebook. “No, thank you.” I swipe my card to pay for my candy canes before she can change my mind.

“Oh, I wasn’t going to make you pay for it, honey. It’s on the house.” She winks at me.

“Really?” My heart warms. It never gets old seeing someone get into the Christmas spirit, no matter how small the gesture. “I can pay for it,” I offer. What can I say? I have a sweet tooth for sweet people.

“Nonsense, I had a good feeling about you the minute I saw you. It’s meant for you, and you can’t convince me otherwise.” There is a strange knowing tone to her voice, but older women always act like they know far more than their younger counterparts. I don’t let it bother me.

“Well, it’s very kind of you.”

“It’s nothing.” She grins. “Merry Christmas ... or should I say, Merry *Kismet*.”

“Thank you so much.” I reach for the notebook.

Her eyes widen with excitement. “Let me gift wrap it for you.”

“Oh, it’s not necessary—” my voice fades. Mrs. Cashier Claus isn’t listening because she is now humming “Jingle Bells” louder than the store speakers. Before I can stop her, she spreads wrapping paper out and starts cutting away at it. It has cute little elves all over it—and the whole thing is so ridiculous, I smile.

“Wrapping books is my favorite,” she says. “So simple. Nothing at all like wrapping an animal. Trust me when I say, don’t ever try wrapping a dog.”

I raise my brows. I am not going to ask. I have a feeling that if I do, I will never get home with enough time to watch my Christmas movie, and I have a favorites countdown that I am religious about. Still, I'm touched that she's going to such effort for me and for no apparent reason, so I smile and agree with her.

She finishes and hands me the expertly wrapped notebook. When my fingers touch the gift, the door from outside opens and swirls of snow blow in. It feels magical—like a sign. No, like fate. Goosebumps run down my arms, and for a second, I feel like a kid who actually believes in that sort of thing. I'm losing my mind. The holidays make people crazy every year. This time, it's me. Clearly, I was up too late with yesterday's movie and have been on my feet too long today. I need to go home ASAP.

I thank the kind cashier woman, ready to run with my bag of candy canes in hand.

“Wait,” she says. “Don't forget to write your Christmas wish list as soon as possible! There's only sixteen days left until the big day. It's important you give kismet time to work its charm.” She smiles, but even though she is done talking, I hear her unsaid words in my head. *You don't want to be watching Christmas movies alone forever.*

I'm scared about the state of my mind. I should've bought my chocolate therapy. I give her a polite wave and hurry away. Before long, I navigate the snowy roads to my home—the left

side of a duplex with charming red doors and a dated couch inside calling my name.

But even after I unload my candy canes, eat my leftover enchiladas, change into my sweats, and crash on the couch with my remote, I can't seem to focus on my movie. Did my roomies have to make plans at the same time? I won't see either of them until Monday. No one is around to distract me from myself. The word *kismet* keeps dinging around in my head like a pinball machine with Mrs. Cashier Claus pulling the lever on repeat.

I make myself popcorn, but the salty snack doesn't distract me. I even try stretching on the floor, knowing how it usually relaxes me. It doesn't work this time.

I hit the off button on my movie before the end and eye my wrapped notebook. Just because someone told me to make a Christmas list doesn't mean I have to make one. My life doesn't depend on it, and frankly, neither does my Christmas. I don't really need anything. I have a great place, two fantastic roommates, and a classroom full of kids to love. Besides, who wouldn't want a quiet weekend all to themselves?

Without the buzz from the TV, the room is eerily still. My Christmas tree and other decorations normally cheer me, but not today. In one swipe, loneliness licks the satisfied smile from my face. I do my best to fight it, but the emptiness of the room presses on me.

I grab my phone and check the time. I need a lifeline, and I'm calling a friend. Jocelyn is still at her cousin's wedding

and has tons of responsibilities over the makeup and hair, so Gabby it is. She gets to be the lucky roomie who can't get out of hearing my woes, even if she's having a weekend sleepover with her sister. Hopefully, her practical mindset will talk some sense into me.

Gabby answers with a cheerful, "Hey Brie! Is it too quiet over there?"

"Maybe." She knows me too well. I feel a little lame calling her when she's supposed to be spending time with her Irish twin who is rarely in town. Not to mention I saw Gabby at lunch since we work at the same elementary school. "I need five minutes of adult conversation."

"I will never say no to a plea like that."

"Thanks. Tell me what fun things you have planned with Sophia, and I'll leave you alone."

I listen politely as she fills me in. She adds a funny thing a student did today. She teaches music so her stories include kids from kindergarten through fifth grade. When she turns the question around, I tell her briefly about my experience at the store, ending with the gift of the notebook, but leaving out the kismet part. I doubt she's heard of the term. And why would she? Gabby isn't fascinated with fate like I am.

"What a sweet and slightly strange cashier. Have you started your list yet?"

"You were supposed to tell me it's a ridiculous idea. Besides, I don't need anything."

Gabby huffs. “You’re entitled to a little ridiculous. A Christmas list is about what you *want*, not need. You’re an elementary teacher, for heaven’s sake. This is preschool stuff.”

I give a short laugh. “But I’m also an adult, and last I checked, Santa isn’t real. Making this list isn’t going to magically get me everything I want.”

“Wow, you’re a romantic. You can’t talk like that. People are going to start confusing you with me.”

I pick at a thread snag on my worn hot-pink sweats. If being a sentimental sap who dreams about love more than what is healthy, then yes, I’m guilty of being a romantic. “Even romantics lose their faith once in a while, Gabby. Besides, I read about the discontentment factor in one of those books you loaned me. You of all people should know, it doesn’t do a person any favors to focus on what you lack.”

“Keep it simple,” she advises. “It could be a good distraction for you. You’re always thinking about what everyone else needs. It’s your turn.”

I smirk. “Fine, I’ll write *I want a man* across the top in bold letters.”

Gabby laughs. “Your words, not mine.”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to write a little list. I do believe in the spirit of Christmas.” How easily convinced I am. Maybe I’m not a romantic. Maybe I’m a sucker.

“That’s my girl,” Gabby says through the phone. “Make yourself some hot cocoa and call me later. We’re about to start

a ping-pong tournament, so I've got to run.”

I end the call, and before I can stop myself, I grab the notebook and a few colored gel pens. I unwrap my gift and spend way too long decorating my wish list title across the first page with holly berries on the corners. My slippered feet are up on a large brown-leather ottoman, but for some reason, I'm uncomfortable.

If I'm meant to be single forever, I can't change it by wishing for it. But if I can ... which I can't ... I wouldn't wish for just any man. I would go all out and wish for the only guy I've ever loved.

I'd wish for Rockwell Davenport. A die-hard romantic would label him the cinnamon roll type. The good guy who cares about everyone, respects women, and has the manners of a gentleman. Yep. He's a cinnamon roll. Ultra yummy, inside and out.

Unable to resist, I smile. Memories of my teenage boyfriend have stayed with me for nearly seven years. What can I say? I only fell once, but I fell hard.

I tap my pen on the notebook, too focused on the juvenility of the wish. Then on a whim, I don't hold back.

#1. I want Rockwell Davenport for Christmas.

Once I start, I can't stop.

#2. I want him to take me to the family Christmas party so I don't have to be lame and go alone. Again.

#3. I want him to dance with me.

#4. I want him to kiss me under the mistletoe.

#5. I want the happily ever after we didn't get the first time.

I laugh at myself because it would be stupid to cry. Obviously, if Rockwell and I were meant to be, he wouldn't have done something completely out of character and broken my heart. I wish I hated him, but I don't. I've just missed him for a really long time.

I wonder why I didn't put buying my own house or renting the studio down the street to teach dance on my list. Those at least are things I could control if I worked hard enough. But this isn't a beginning-of-the-school-year goal sheet. It's a Christmas list. It's supposed to be filled with impossible things.

I shut the notebook and set it on the ottoman, exchanging it for the remote. I think I have maxed out on self-pity and need a distraction. Right before I hit the play button, my doorbell rings. The noise makes me jump, and I spill some of my popcorn on the couch.

I glance at my phone. It's ten o'clock. Even when my roommates are home, I don't like answering the door late at night. Call me a scaredy-cat because the name fits perfectly.

Should I ignore the bell? I'm not exactly dressed for company. And who would visit me this time of night? But maybe I need a friend to snap me out of my dead-end head space. It would mean opening the door ...

I reach for the baseball bat I keep under my sofa. I'm not crazy, just careful. I also keep one under my bed as well and have pepper spray on my keychain. A girl with minimal muscle mass has to be prepared. I teach first grade, so I am good at squatting by desks, but that's about it. I creep to the door with my bat over my shoulder.

"Who is it?" I call.

The answer is mumbled.

Crap. I thought it would work.

I decide to open the door an inch, keeping my toe up against it in case I need to shut it fast and hold it shut. Unlocking the door first, I start to pull it open enough to peek out. What I see makes me nearly fall through the doorway. As it is, I let it swing open wide.

Rockwell Davenport is standing on my doorstep. He is far more handsome than he was as a teenager. His shoulders fill out his once gangly form, a thin line of scruff spreads across his jaw, and his once shaggy hair is now short and combed back. His expensive suit and the cocky way he carries himself only add to my picture-perfect view.

I gape, my mouth refusing to close.

Holy kismet.

Chapter 2

Rockwell

SOMEONE MUST HAVE PUT something in my cocoa on the plane. Or maybe I'm sleepwalking from my long drive from the airport. Either way, I can't believe what I'm seeing.

Travis said my temporary neighbor manages the duplex and has my key, but he didn't tell me the name of said neighbor. Maybe I should've asked. No, I definitely should've asked.

The last person I expect to be standing on the other side of the door from me is Brie Holland.

Correction: Brie Holland holding a baseball bat.

Travis, I thought we were friends.

"Rocky?"

I swallow because the cold must be doing something to my tongue, slowing my response. No one has called me Rocky in a long time. Brie is the one person I hoped *not* to run into while in Bearwood. She might be the only good thing I remember about this backward town, but she has to despise me for what I did to her. I shiver on her doorstep, and I'm not sure

it's from the cold. Her brunette hair is in a messy bun on the top of her head, and she's wearing an oversized Christmas Mickey Mouse T-shirt and clashing hot-pink sweatpants. And if possible, she's never looked better. Adult Brie is an understated knockout. She stares at me with those bright, wintery blues, and I stare right back.

“Hi.” The word comes out low and slow and like I mean something by it. It's the shock talking.

“You must be freezing. Come in.”

I eye the bat warily.

When she sees the direction of my gaze, she gives a sheepish laugh and sets it aside. I don't trust the situation, but like a robot, I stoically shuffle inside. I have a personal code with a rule not to bother people after ten—with the exception of a few of my closest friends. It's not polite. Bothering my ex-girlfriend is an even bigger no. But it's five degrees outside, and I refuse to sleep in my car tonight. Going inside Brie's home is a necessary evil. “Thanks,” I mutter. “I forget how cold the nights are here.”

“And the days.” Brie shuts us inside together, and it's not the warmth of the room shooting my internal temperature up ten notches. I haven't felt this awkward in years. How is this happening?

My eyes go to the Christmas tree in the corner covered in teacher-themed ornaments and a pair of Brie's old pointe shoes on the shelf beside a row of pictures. I reflexively scan them for a picture of her with a guy, and when I don't see one, I

glance to the back hall for Brie's boyfriend to spring out behind a corner. Mom updates me regularly on all things Bearwood, which normally drives me crazy, but I would remember if she said Brie had married.

It doesn't matter if she is dating, or single, or whatever. I talk fast so I can get out of here. "I'm sorry to arrive so late," I smile automatically, like at work when I'm trying to please a client. "Can I get my key to the place?"

"A key?" Her brow rises. "Wow, the list skipped right to number five." She mumbled the rest, but it sounded like, "Better late than never."

What did she mean by list? Like realtor listings? I think she's confused because I didn't go through any realtor. Travis is hooking me up with a place to stay while I take care of my mom. I'm giving him some free work advice as a thank you—even if he thinks I'm here checking out his offer to partner with him. I try to clarify my situation to Brie. "Travis said you manage the place next door, and you'd have the key for me."

Her eyes widen and she points to the wall separating the two sides of the duplex with her thumb. "No way. You're renting next door? I mean, it's fine for you to rent there. But you *already* talked to Travis?" She shook her head like the whole thing was impossible.

"Is it a problem if I stay there?" I'm beginning to think it is.

She waves her hands in front of her. "No! No problem at all." She steps closer to me, her index finger extended.

What is she doing?

She pokes me in the shoulder and looks up with an embarrassed laugh. “Sorry, just checking something.”

This is beyond weird. She clearly doesn’t believe I’m stupid enough to show my face here after a good seven years, but thankfully a poke is a pretty tame reaction for barging in on her out of the blue. I need to retreat, and fast. “Can I get the key?”

She backs away a few steps before turning into the connecting kitchen. She opens a drawer and pulls out a set of keys. “Travis never told me he got a renter.”

“Serious? He never said anything?” I am going to kill Travis. “I’m not exactly renting it. I’m only here for the holidays, and Travis insisted I stay here.”

She taps her fingers on her arm. “So, it’s like Cinderella, except this time I get until the end of the holidays?”

Does she hope to kill me by then? There’s no hate in her eyes. “I’m not following.”

She shoots off a short, high laugh. “You don’t need to. Let me give Travis a quick call to make sure everything’s in order.” She must be in shock too. Her eyes are larger than normal and her smile so wide, it can’t be sincere.

Brie strides to the couch, graceful even in her sweats, and grabs her cell phone. I see a notebook on the ottoman with the shiny word Kismet across the front. Is this a new slang word? Kiss met? Wait, is this a journal of her kissing?

I whip my gaze up to Brie who's scrolling through her phone for Travis's number. My disobedient mind easily recalls my first kiss with Brie. I cough into my hand. Talk about a distracting visual at the worst time possible. I can barely look at Brie now without thinking about it. I make a mental note to look up the word *kismet* later. I don't like the idea of her journaling about kissing men, even if it's none of my business.

Next to the notebook is a pile of gel pens and the remote. Popcorn is strewn across the couch, so I apparently interrupted a movie night. Maybe it was a horror film, and she threw the popcorn when she got scared. My assumptions are all over the place. Young Brie hated horror shows and wouldn't catalog kissing.

I suppose time could have changed her interests.

Now I'm curious about adult Brie who's waiting for Travis to answer his phone. What has changed about her? It's not as if I haven't thought the same question a million times since I walked away from her. I shake my head. I don't have any intention of getting to know her again, so those thoughts need to stay right where they're at.

I didn't travel all the way to the panhandle of Idaho to rekindle an old friendship—or any sort of relationship, for that matter. I'm here to assess Travis's business and see if I can save him any money—as a favor to him for old time's sake—but most importantly, I'm here to convince my mom to move back with me to the city. Everything else, including Christmas,

is extra. Then it's back to home sweet home where work is my top priority.

Travis answers on Brie's second attempt, and she holds the phone up to her ear. "Travis, hey, it's not like you to keep me out of the loop. When exactly did you arrange to have a guest stay next door?" She nods and puts her other hand on the back of her neck. I get a flashback of teenage Brie standing that way. A pang in my gut reminds me how much I miss those days. Everything was simpler and happier back then. Ignorance really is bliss. Once the bubble pops, there is no going back to living in a fantasy world. Ever.

After a few exchanges, Brie says bye and drops her phone to her side. "Travis didn't think you were coming until Monday." She tilts her head and examines me, and not in a check-you-out sort of way, but an are-you-for-real way.

"Does he mean he's going to see me Monday for work?" We've both been busy the last few weeks, and we clearly didn't communicate well. In truth, I don't know why I flew out at the beginning of the weekend and not the end of it. The airline prices must've been cheaper then. "It doesn't matter. It sounds like a simple misunderstanding."

"It matters if you want working utilities." Brie hands me the keys and grimaces. "It's going to be a cold weekend."

Yikes. I pocket the keys. "I assumed everything was ready to go."

"Did Travis warn you the place isn't furnished?"

I cough into my hand. “No Travis did *not* tell me that detail.”

Brie pulls her mouth to one side. “I can help with a blow-up mattress and a sleeping bag.”

“Really? You keep this kind of stuff on hand?”

“This is Bearwood. Camping is in our blood—or maybe you’ve forgotten.”

Dumb question. I guess I’m used to LA now where people glamp but never camp.

“I’m not so sure what else I have duplicates of. Maybe you should go stay with your mom?”

“Noooo.” Staying with Mom is not an option. “She’ll think I’m moving home, and I’m not.”

“You’re not?” Brie actually looks disappointed. I file it away to examine later. “I mean, you’re here for the holidays. Right.”

“Exactly, and I don’t want to give her the wrong idea. Besides, I prefer my independence. I can handle living in an unfurnished place for a couple of weeks if it means having privacy.” Bearwood doesn’t do the privacy thing well, which is one of the reasons I never came back after my parents split. An unfinished, ice-cold place is more favorable to me than announcing to my mom or the rest of the town that I’m back.

“I’ll gather a few things for you,” Brie says. “The utilities should be working by tomorrow afternoon.”

I stand awkwardly while Brie digs in her coat closet. She’s shaking her head and muttering something about her crazy

day. I feel bad about adding to it and coming a few days early, but I blame Travis for not preparing her. Heck, for not preparing us both! Brie takes out the air mattress first, a twin size. I am built for a king-size bed, and the picture on the case looks like a toddler bed. Thankfully, the sleeping bag looks normal, and I tuck them both under my arms.

“Are you sure this is ok?” I ask. “I wouldn’t want to impose.”

She gives me a flat stare. “Are you planning on sleeping on the wood floor with your coat as your blanket?”

“I’ll just borrow these then.”

She nods. “That’s what I thought.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I’ll return them when I leave. Maybe I’ll see you around.” It came out with more excitement than intended. It should have been an obligatory see-ya-later statement.

She grins. “Definitely.”

Her smile was my undoing in high school, and I’m not completely immune to it now. I hesitate, wondering the right way to respond. She’s so sure we’ll bump into each other again—it is a small town—but as far as I’m concerned, her smile needs to stay far away from me.

It’s great to see her again, but there’s a good reason I haven’t said so out loud. Like with my mom—I need to maintain my boundaries. No use giving anyone the wrong idea about this visit—and no smile is going to weaken the lines I’ve drawn.

I'm making an effort for Travis, but after I convince my mom to move to the city, I don't plan on coming back to Bearwood. No point getting cozy here—or *with* anyone.

Brie laughs lightly, my expression giving away my unease.

“You're staying next door,” she clarifies. “We're bound to see each other a lot.”

Right. Proximity wins. Travis owes me. He probably planned this whole thing from the beginning. But if I have anything to say about it, Brie and I will only be seeing each other in passing. The Mickey Mouse and pink sweatpants girl is going to be living in the North Pole as far as I'm concerned.

Chapter 3

Brie

MONDAY MORNING, I FIND Gabby in the music room laying out the classroom instruments and prepping for her day. Her thick, short, dark hair is pulled back in a tiny ponytail behind her head, and she's dressed in a pencil skirt and flowy blouse. She exudes simplicity and elegance. I pounce on her. "You will never believe what happened this weekend."

Gabby latches onto my arms. "You finally agreed to go out with Will Butler again?" Her enthusiasm is greater than mine has ever been on that topic. She loves talking about me dating again, but for some reason, I'm never allowed to encourage her.

I scowl at her red glittery fingernails, courtesy of our bestie Jocelyn, and how they're digging into my arm. "I'm *not* interested in Will, remember?" Will teaches sixth grade, and he's a good guy, handsome even, but there's no chemistry between us. It would take too much work to date a guy I don't feel anything for. I'm not practically minded like Gabby.

“You didn’t say no, did you?” Gabby pouts. “He doesn’t have to be your soulmate for you to date him.”

I roll my eyes. “I went out with him three times. We were both bored and couldn’t keep the conversation going. I think he only asked me out to get his mom off his back. I know it won’t work, trust me. Besides, I think he’s a better fit for you.”

She wrinkles her nose and drops her arms. “Don’t change the subject and tell me your news.”

“You’ll never believe this,” I follow her around her desk as she plops into her chair. I lean my hip against her desk. “I put Rockwell Davenport’s name on my Christmas list.”

I raise my brows, and she stares back with dull, brown eyes.

“Interesting choice, but not wholly surprising. I’m proud of you for following through.”

I resist my exasperation. “I’m not finished. I put his name on the list, and I kid you not, five seconds later the doorbell rang. When I opened the door, guess who was on the other side?”

“Your mom?”

“No.” I roll my eyes. “Rockwell!”

Gabby jumps out of her seat. “What? Why didn’t you call me?”

“You had your ping-pong tournament with Sophia, remember? Then my weekend got crazy-busy fast. I had to represent us at the Wassail Night meetings all Saturday, and besides church Sunday, I spent every spare second cutting

snowflakes out at my parents' house." I intentionally leave out how Will was at the Wassail meeting. Gabby would only ask if I'd made an effort to talk to him. How could I when thoughts of Rockwell were taking up every spare brain cell?

She's still staring at me. "Your excuses disappoint me. Even his crazy older sister has come back to town a few times, but *never* him."

I appreciate her reaction. I need someone to share my shock with. "It gets crazier. He's renting the other side of the duplex from us for the holidays."

Gabby's head comes closer to mine like we're sharing ghost stories. Rockwell wasn't a ghost, was he? I'm still in denial that he was in my duplex two nights ago. "Stop. He comes here out of nowhere and is staying next door?"

I give a grave nod. "It was like I subconsciously summoned him."

"That's weird."

"I know. But he didn't magically fall at my feet, apologize for leaving me behind, and beg me to date him. So sadly, that's where my fantasy ends."

"Maybe I need to write a list."

"I thought you were the rational one? Travis is the one responsible. He arranged for Rockwell to stay for the next couple of weeks. Which means you and Jocelyn have to behave."

“Us? You’re my only concern. What if he breaks your heart again?”

“His presence here has nothing to do with me. Although, for a second, I actually thought my list was responsible.” This is exactly why I’m careful not to overfeed my romantic imagination.

“It’s fascinating thinking Travis is behind this. How did he do it?”

Travis was the most eligible bachelor in Bearwood, which isn’t saying much. He moved here when we were seniors in high school, and we were all surprised when he came back to settle here after college. Our group of friends isn’t particularly close to him since he offended Jocelyn (which is nearly an impossible thing to do) the year he moved back.

“I can’t figure it out,” I add. “Travis was never close to Rockwell in high school. I’m not sure how he of all people managed to convince Rockwell to come back.”

Gabby squints at the music note border above my head. “I might have heard they went to the same college.”

“What? I’ve never heard this before. It makes sense though.” How did I miss Travis and Rockwell having more history past high school? And why do I feel jealous? I drag myself back to the conversation at hand. “Either way, it’s clear Rockwell didn’t come over Friday night for me at all. Which is fine since I looked like a homeless person. I had popcorn strewn all over our couch. He probably thought I’d let myself go. He practically ran out the door after he took his key.”

“Please tell me you weren’t wearing your Mickey shirt.”

I grimace. “It’s so comfortable.”

“Didn’t Jocelyn and I beg you to donate that one?” Gabby groans. “Forget the shirt, you still have time to redeem yourself if he’s staying next door for a few weeks. He should regret what he left behind.”

“Really? Because I didn’t get the vibe that he’s interested in hanging out with me, and I’m not going to throw myself at him.” I push my dark hair behind my ear. “If it’s meant to be, things will work out on their own.”

Gabby blinks in a slow, exaggerated way like she’s telling me I’m stupid with her eyes. “Enough of this guy-chase-girl mentality, or my life happens like it does in the movies.”

“You and I both know I don’t have the skill set for chasing guys.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, especially since I haven’t forgiven Rockwell on your behalf, but you’ve liked him forever. You’ll regret it if you don’t see this through.”

She’s right. Something potentially exciting is finally happening to me. I’ve never forgotten my first love—my high school first love who dumped me—like every other normal person on the planet. The regret could be devastating. “Unless ...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless he’s here so I can finally see how imperfect he is for me.”

“Most people would’ve thought that when he broke your heart and skipped town.”

I’m not most people. Rockwell had been my best friend. You can’t beat a guy who puts sticky notes with sweet messages in your locker and in all your folders or can make you laugh when you want to cry. He patiently videotaped me for hours when I needed footage to critique myself for my role as the Sugar Plum Fairy in the Nutcracker, and once drove me home when I was sick in the middle of a school day, and didn’t even blink when I threw up in his backpack. He looked at me like I was the whole world. No one has looked at me quite like that since.

Rockwell Davenport was and is the unforgettable type. When I learned about his world crashing with his parent’s divorce and all the lies laid at his feet, I would’ve run too. I was devastated he left, but I also understood. Sometimes I hated that I didn’t hate him. Disliking him, at least, seemed appropriate.

“Maybe I’ll finally get over him,” I breathe.

Gabby taps her mouth with her manicured finger. “Now that’s a viable option.”

It’s more in line with the anticlimactic excitement life usually serves me. Either way, it sounds like I need to spend time with him to know. This opportunity is too good to be true. But it’s not natural for me to chase a guy. I straighten when I see the clock. I have to hurry back to my class. I talk fast. “What should I do?”

“First, you’re going to call Jocelyn at lunch and fill her in. This kind of news can’t wait. Then after school, you’re going to knock on Rockwell’s door and ask him to lunch. Be the cool, chill Brie I know, and he won’t be able to resist. Besides, Sofia is begging me to sleep over again, and Jocelyn isn’t back yet. It’s the perfect time to make plans.”

Cool, chill Brie. I can do it. Rockwell and I will go to lunch and take it from there. I know I put a lot of things on my Christmas list, but I don’t really expect them to happen. Lunch or dinner or whatever would be amazing. I do believe two people can be meant to be together. Like Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, or Marie and Pierre Curie, or let’s be real, Mario and Princess Peach. You can’t tell me those couples don’t fit perfectly together. They brought out the best in each other too. It’s exactly what I want in a relationship.

What Rockwell used to do for me.

Until he left Bearwood on the night of high school graduation. He’d never been back in all these years. His mom gives me the occasional update on him whether I want it or not, and I know he’s dated off and on but never married. What I don’t know is if he has a girlfriend currently. I can’t think about it right now. I’m going to knock on his door no matter what.

The rest of my school day goes by quickly. Thank goodness because I need the distraction. We do snowman math with cotton balls, a writing piece on how to catch a reindeer, and an art project where the kids draw themselves as elves. We have

three more days of school until we're out for the break, and the wiggles are real.

I'm normally exhausted by the time school is over, but I have this weird adrenaline going through me. I'm going to ask Rockwell out. No biggie.

I notice Rockwell's sleek, black Mercedes as I drive by our shared duplex—saying that sounds so weird—and I'm impressed by how well Rockwell must be doing in his career if this is his rental. He was always a hard worker, sometimes balancing helping on his parent's farm with a part-time job. His mom told me he's a financial analyst. I know nothing about what a day in his life looks like, but I'm happy for him. Whatever success he has, I'm sure he's earned it.

I park my very unshiny, inexpensive Ford under the carport on my side of the duplex and check my reflection in the mirror. My dark hair is a little flat and my minimal makeup worn off. Not ideal. At least my wide-legged jumper is a cute business-casual, and I like the way it hugs me in the right places and hides the unflattering ones. My jacket is a discount purchase and a little worn, but I look ten times better than I did Friday night. It's got to count for something.

I can freshen up after I ask Rockwell out. If I don't ask him now, I'll lose my courage. Besides, part of me wants to make sure he survived the weekend and isn't inside his house frozen to death. Afterall, I haven't seen him since Friday night.

I shake the morbid thought away the moment I see our shared porch has been shoveled. I hadn't had time to do it this

morning, and Rockwell must've noticed. Which means he's alive. I smile gratefully at the cleared concrete. Despite my urge to walk to my door, which is literally only a foot away from his, I steer myself to his door and lift my hand to knock.

My hand only meets the air. I can't do it. What if he says no? Or worse, is annoyed. I stand there for who knows how long, deliberating. Finally, I dare myself and my fist makes contact with the wood.

My insides go into full-on panic mode, but I don't run. I don't even move. I stare at the door like my worst nightmare is about to come true.

And nothing.

Where is he? I glance through the window beside his door. It's long and narrow and covered by an opaque curtain. I chew on my lip. What if he really had frozen to death? He could have shoveled the porch in his loafers, soaked his socks and pant legs, and gone back inside only to get sick from being damp in freezing temps. Why didn't I offer him my couch?

There is a top corner of the window where the curtain doesn't reach. There's only one thing to do. I put my foot on an empty flowerpot and I'm in luck. It fits. I put my weight on it and stretch up. I'm a few inches short from the sliver of window that will show me inside.

I hop a little on my one foot, careful not to knock over the pot. One look to see if Rockwell is alive. He can avoid me all he wants—for now—but if he's dying of hypothermia, I need to know!

Just a little higher.

“What are you doing?”

The noise scares me, and my foot lands funny. I fling out my arms to keep my balance. It’s too late. I’m falling.

Arms come around me, catching me from a painful landing. I look up and Rockwell has me from behind. He gazes down at me over my head, but he isn’t laughing at how ridiculous I am. In fact, he looks annoyed. Though besides his grumpy face, his hair is combed, and he looks incredible.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his tone far more sincere than I expect.

I force a smile. “Yeah, I’m good. Thanks.”

He lifts me up so my foot comes all the way out of the flowerpot and releases me once I’m steady.

My heart is pounding faster than jingle bells—I know because the song was on repeat in my class today. “I was ... you know ... checking on you. Like any good neighbor would.”

“Through my window?” He leans to the side to examine the window, and I notice he hasn’t shaved today. Oh, right, his place has no water. I focus on what he’s looking at. He’s probably thinking of boarding up all his windows the first chance he gets. Travis won’t let it fly, but I don’t say anything because Rockwell talks first. “I don’t think good neighbors are peepers.”

“Ha ha ha.” My laugh stutters. “Actually, I was worried you were frozen to death in there. I did knock first.” I’m not sure how I missed him in his car, but he had to have been in there when I drove up. Does that mean he witnessed me deliberate on the porch like a moron? Great, he probably thinks I’m stalking him. His frown deepens, so I quickly blurt, “You should thank me for caring enough to peep—I mean, check on you.”

He raises one brow at my slip. “It was cold, but the sleeping bag did its job.”

“Good.” I can’t think of anything else to say. I guess I’m waiting for him to suddenly crack a smile. The old Rockwell would have produced a wide, reassuring grin right about now and teased me some more. Not that his serious face isn’t doing anything for me. Being near Rockwell leaves me simultaneously happy and flustered. These kinds of feelings are exactly why I can’t commit to regular guys like Will Butler.

Rockwell points to his door with his thumb. “Travis said the utility guys are on their way. I should get inside.”

“Oh, of course. I just got home from school, and I have a lot to do.” I don’t really, besides wrapping books for the kids. I could do it later tonight, or even tomorrow. Gabby’s words echo in my mind, and I know I’m going to regret not saying anything. “Stop by later if you want some dinner.”

My delivery is cool and chill and very neighbor-like. I’m impressed with myself. After falling out of a flowerpot, I need

a win.

Rockwell's jaw tightens. It's more defined than it used to be, and the movement might be subtle, but I catch it. He's hesitant. I don't blame him. I'm a nervous wreck myself.

"Uh, sure. What time?" he asks.

I try not to act surprised. My eyebrows might have twitched, but at least no drool came out of my mouth. I mentally calculate what I have in the freezer and how long it'll take me to make it. "I usually eat around five thirty, but I'll keep a plate warm for you if you get busy." Do I sound desperate? I am, but I back up a few steps so I don't show it. I reach for my doorknob and miss it. I look down so I can connect my hand with the right place. I wish I had a fancy pin-code lock, but it's an old-school key entry, which means it's time to dig through my purse for said key.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Rockwell pull his key from his pocket and let himself inside. It's then I realize I own another copy of his key if Rockwell ever does come near dying again and needs me to rescue him. I almost laugh at myself, but I finally find my key ring and slip into my living room.

I rub my hands together, gearing up to make lasagna and a salad. While Rockwell might be a successful finance guru, my hunch is he hasn't mastered many cooking skills. He'll appreciate my choice. I'm not trying to win him over with homemade food or anything. I'm doing the neighborly thing by helping out a guy who has no working kitchen.

Actually, I'm *totally* trying to win him over with food. Rockwell is acting standoffish and cold, and I might need to examine these negative traits a little closer if I intend to get over him properly. I can't read him well yet. It's been so long, and yet, seeing him again brings the old times to the present. I'm nervous about messing with a part of my past I should've made peace with long ago. Hasn't this part of my life already been decided for me? Regrets can go both ways, and I hope I'm not about to regret inviting Rockwell over.

Chapter 4

Rockwell

SEEING BRIE PEERING THROUGH my window made me forget about the jug of water in my car. I need it to flush my toilet. I've heard of Christmas surprises before, but this is next-level. The room feels colder than outside. But no matter how brisk the room temperature is, it beats showing up at Mom's house. I still haven't told her I'm in town. I'm dreading seeing the farm again too. It's been too long.

I promise myself to stop by tonight. She needs to see me before it gets around that I'm back—which won't be hard with the small population in Bearwood. I'm worried Mom will think I'm changing my mind about this place. Things have been rough for her the last few months, and I hate that I have to disappoint her. I'm stalling for another reason too. I have too many memories at our house for me to hurry over there. Memories of her and Dad—of an idyllic childhood that ended up being all pretend. Nothing has been the same in my life since the day they split. I'm as good as I will ever be now, and I aim to keep it that way.

I grab my water jug and a few grocery items from my car and make sure everything is set for the utility guys. It doesn't take long since the house is relatively empty. I glance around at the cold emptiness and remind myself that I'm here for a reason. After I talk with Mom and see to Travis's job, I can wash my hands of the place for good.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's Travis. I swipe to answer and hold the phone to my ear. "Checking to see if I'm still cursing your name? The answer is yes."

Travis laughs into the phone. "Is this a bad time to tell you I sent over some bank statements and spreadsheets to your email?"

My stomach growls. I think of Brie and her offer for dinner. "Yes, a very bad time." I can't believe I blurted out that I was going over to eat. Her invitation caught me off guard. Can you blame a guy? I've been railroaded by Travis since I arrived, and my game is off.

Travis hums into the phone. "You ran into Brie again, didn't you?"

"Maybe." I bet he couldn't guess I held her in my arms less than seventy-two hours after our initial unplanned reunion. But I'm not volunteering any information to him. He doesn't deserve it.

"I've been telling you for years that you two are meant to be together. You know I couldn't help but set you up."

"You always were great at apologizing," I growl.

“Think of it as me doing you a favor. I helped you get the most awkward part of your visit over with right away. Now you can enjoy your break ... and your neighbor.”

“Your sense of humor keeps improving.” I turn as if a place to sit will magically appear. I lean against the faux gray marble countertop instead. “If it wasn’t for all the times I’ve had you check on my mom and the farm for me, I wouldn’t have let you convince me to stay here. I’d be at the local B&B right now—with heat, furniture, and a fruit basket in my room—instead of hoping Brie doesn’t murder me in my sleep.”

“Brie couldn’t murder a fly. She’s too nice and you know it. And old Marge at the B&B never leaves fruit baskets. I hear her last guest had bedbug bites. The unfurnished duplex is prime real estate in comparison. It has a camping appeal that you’ve complained many times about missing.”

“Camping appeal? Is that what this is?”

“I’m as surprised as you are that Brie didn’t offer you her couch.”

“That’s low, Travis.”

“I’m joking. Trust me when I say, simple country life has a lot to offer. You’ll thank me someday. Listening to your best friend Trav is the way to go.”

I clench my teeth, filtering my words into the nicest retort I can manage. “Said best friend set me up in the place with my ex-girlfriend. My trust for you is frozen somewhere on the

front steps, and I think I stepped on it for good measure when I came in.”

“Ouch.”

“You deserve worse.” My phone beeps, letting me know my battery is low. I charged it for a few minutes in my car, but it’s not enough to last long. “I’ve got to go; my phone is going to die.”

Trav sighs. “Fine. Let me worry about getting coal for Christmas, and you focus on enjoying yourself. You work harder than anyone I know and deserve it. Start with asking out your neighbor.”

I hold back a moan. I know Trav really is a good guy. Who else would keep tabs on me all these years and force me back here? “I’ll make an effort, but no dating. It wasn’t part of the deal.”

“It’s a start,” Trav says. “Call me later after you go through your email.”

I say bye and hit end on the call. Mindlessly, I scroll to Morgan’s contact. My sister doesn’t care if I’m back in Bearwood. She’s too busy trying to keep her third marriage together. Relationships aren’t her strong suit. It’s a family trait. We used to have a lot of fun together as kids though, and I miss her. Being back here only enhances the feeling, and I wished we talked more. Our family has been low on her priority list since ... well, since she learned about Mom and Dad. I wish I would’ve clued in sooner instead of finding out on graduation night. I remember throwing up when I heard

about Dad's *other* family. Either way, we were both messed up by the end.

I slide my phone across the laminate counter. The utility guys save me from boredom a few minutes later when they knock on my door. They're early, and I'm not mad at all. It only takes a minute to get the gas turned on. The electricity and water should turn on at any moment.

When they leave, I pick up my phone again. I'm back to staring at the black screen, wondering how to entertain myself. I can't work here because there isn't internet, and the library is full of my mom's book club friends who would report my presence here faster than they can pick out a book. There is no fancy coffee shop with Wi-Fi or even a McDonalds with Wi-Fi in this backward town. I rub my hands together, the heat not kicking on fast enough. I'm cold, bored, and hungry. Since I'm not up for more lectures from Travis, and I'm not ready to face Mom and the farm, there's only one thing to do: Go help Brie make dinner. One night won't blur any of my lines. I've spent seven years securing them.

Maybe if I help cook, there won't be any debt to repay for borrowing her stuff—stuff smelling overwhelmingly like Brie. I think I even drooled on my pillow. But that was tired, weak Rockwell. Wide awake Rockwell is on his A game. Chipping in to help with dinner means it isn't a date. It's two neighbors who have to eat.

I knock on Brie's door a minute later. It's a quarter after four, and she isn't expecting me for at least another hour. I said I

was wide awake, not smooth.

I dig the toe of my shoe into her frozen doormat, but still when Brie pulls back the door. Instead of acting irritated like any normal person, she gives me an amused smile. “Couldn’t wait?”

Does she really not hate me? Or is this an act?

Brie is wearing a gingerbread apron, and I point at it. “I thought I would offer to help in the kitchen.” I sound lame. I *am* lame. “Since I have time.” And I broke the lame meter.

“Sure, I could use a hand.” She invites me in and leads me to the kitchen. I shiver as my body adjusts to the warm room. I didn’t realize how cold I am.

“So do you cook now?” she asks.

I stare at her. “Yeah, I cook.”

“Besides using the microwave?”

I cough. “You got me.”

She opens a drawer and pulls out another apron and tosses it to me. It’s pink and the bottom looks like a frilly skirt. I stare at it.

“It’ll keep you from getting sauce on your clothes. We’re making lasagna.”

I love lasagna. I’ve only had the store-bought kind for the last several years, and my mouth waters thinking about something home-cooked. I shed my coat and put on the apron

—not sure if I am confident enough to wear it. Since I'm motivated by the food, I go ahead and tie it.

She turns and laughs silently into her hand.

“You did this on purpose. You have a different apron, don't you?”

“I actually don't. Want to switch?” She points to her own apron.

“Yes, but I want lasagna more. Let's get started.”

She nods and hands me a brownie pan. I don't think it's really called a brownie pan, but it's the right size I remember Mom using for brownies all the time.

“Think you can handle spraying this with cooking oil?”

I give an exaggerated frown. “This might shock you, but I fry eggs all the time. I know my way around cooking spray.”

She shakes her head and tosses me a can. I cover the brownie pan with a heavy layer of oil. No part of the lasagna is going to be wasted by sticking to the pan. Next, Brie has me grating mozzarella cheese.

There's a quiet awkwardness between us. I'm reminded of the last time I saw her. Tears dripped down her cheeks and hurt filled every inch of her gaze. I've carried the memory for a long time. Remorse kept me from thinking of anything to say to break the silence. Brie belonged in Bearwood and I didn't. I'd done the right thing that day. She wanted a happily ever after, and I no longer believed such a thing existed. My parents killed the idea the moment they destroyed our family.

I pause my cheese grating. It's fine. It just makes cooking lasagna with her seven years later as unexpected as Professor Snape's unbreakable vow. I didn't see either coming. Hopefully, the outcome of dinner won't result in murder though. Mine, specifically.

"What do you plan to do while you're in Bearwood?" Brie asks. Her voice is chill. Is there a chance she has forgiven me? Or does she not care about our past together? Oddly enough, I'm not sure which one I want it to be.

I shift my weight so I'm looking at her. "I'm planning on lying low, taking care of my mom, and helping Travis at the office. As soon as I'm finished, I'll be out of your hair."

She raises one perfectly shaped brow. "You do know it's the holidays, right?"

"What does that have to do with anything? Christmas is just another day of the year."

She points a spoon covered in sauce at me, flinging drips on the counter. "You did not say that."

I push her hand away, not wanting to touch the messy spoon. I'm a little worried about what she plans to do with it, but I should've been more worried about touching her. The back of her hand is silky smooth. I shake it off and say, "I'm not a grinch. My Christian heart can get sentimental like everyone else, but I'm not married to any traditions either."

"As long as Christmas is still special, I suppose I can respect your level of celebration." She seems satisfied enough to stir

the sauce again. “But you should at least have some fun while you’re in town. I don’t know how much vacation time you get, but it seems a shame to waste it sitting in an unfurnished duplex.”

“I’ll be working remotely here and there.” I didn’t want to mention how I don’t take many vacation days. Besides a few trips over the years with some of my buddies in the city, it isn’t enjoyable for me to travel by myself. I might die being in Bearwood this long. I’m a guy who needs purpose in his day. But I have a feeling I will need the entire vacation to convince my mom why she needs to move in with me. I’ve flown her out to visit me as often as possible, but her health is making it harder for her to travel. Brie doesn’t need to know all the details. “Maybe I’ll squeeze in some fun. We’ll see.” I don’t make any promises I can’t keep. “What about you? What are your plans?”

She starts layering noodles over a layer of sauce in the pan. “I have two more days of teaching before my break.”

I wipe some of the cheese out of the inside of the grater. “My mom mentioned you taught at the elementary school. I always thought you would dance professionally.” Brie’s mom used to drive her over an hour for lessons. I’ve never seen such intense dedication, but talent like hers was worth investing in.

She lifts her gaze slowly to meet mine. Those blues as perfect as the sky on a clear day momentarily darken. “Some dreams aren’t meant to be. I tore my ACL right before auditions and had to have surgery. The recovery was brutally

slow, and I was low on funds. It was a sign. Dancing wasn't a practical choice to support myself with. Teaching is a more steady, long-term gig."

A pang of sadness strikes me on her behalf. She must've been devastated. Mom never told me about her injury or her missed auditions. It must've been during the all-consuming divorce battle, but I'm sorry I didn't know. I should've been there for her.

I pick at a clump on the grater. It was better I didn't know. We all have unfulfilled dreams. There was a time before my parents split that I thought I'd come back to Bearwood after college, marry Brie, and raise a family. My life is completely different than what I'd imagined back then. But what high schooler has anything figured out? "You were always good with kids. I bet you're an amazing teacher." I say it to appease my own guilt as much as to offer sympathy.

"Thanks. I love my job. Someday, I hope to rent out a space and teach dance classes on the side." She blinks. "I don't know why I told you that. It's a pipe dream. I've actually never told anyone about it before."

A part of me is pleased she would confide in me. We used to be each other's confidants. She has to know I wouldn't say anything to anyone. "I hope you get your space." She deserves to have a portion of her dream. She should keep working toward it.

She laughs softly. "We'll see. I still need to save a little longer."

I finish shredding the cheese block, nearly nicking my fingers in the process. “You didn’t tell me what you had planned for your break.” Now we’re talking, I don’t want to go back to the weird silence.

“The usual. The extended Holland family dinner, get in some baking and holiday movies, a gift exchange with my friends, deep-clean my closet so I can donate a few things, and of course, hit up Wassail Night.”

“Sounds like the Christmases in Bearwood I remember. Maybe not cleaning the closet, but definitely Wassail Night.”

“Isn’t it the best? You should go.”

I shake my head. “Hard pass. Wassail Night is for teenagers crushing on each other and kids getting high on sugar. Not my scene.”

Brie laughs. “I’m feeling offended on behalf of our town’s favorite night. It’s a night we all come together as a community, despite whatever differences we have during the year. Not to mention, those crushing teenagers have a safe space to be, and kids can enjoy themselves. Forgive me, I’m passionate about the subject.” She eyes me. “What do you do for fun if things like Wassail Night are beneath you now?”

I shrug. I don’t want to get into my work with the outreach program and things I’m passionate about. She’d be surprised to know I understand her perspective. I’m glad the town has Wassail Night for the reasons she’s mentioned. I’m not ready to deep dive and get too personal though. “I hit the gym and play some ball.”

She smirks. “It shows.”

I want to appreciate how she’s noticed my form, but she doesn’t sound impressed. “I can’t tell if you’re giving me a compliment or an insult.”

She finishes laying down another layer of noodles. “Let’s just say, it’s a shame you grew up to be boring.”

I don’t expect her to say those words. I gape and fold my arms across my chest. “I am *not* boring.”

“The old Rocky loved Wassail Night. Only boring people grow out of loving it.”

“Or everyone grows out of it, and you didn’t.” Out of retaliation, I dip a finger in her sauce bowl and stick it in my mouth. Sweet nectar of the Italian gods.

She swats me away. “Then prove it to me. Do five fun things during your time here.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you have to attend Wassail Night.”

I remember my last Wassail Night all too well. Maybe she’s forgotten. It was the first time I kissed her. My eyes drop to her mouth, the shape forever etched in my mind, the bottom lip slightly bigger than the top. I drag my eyes away—surprised at how much effort it takes. Wassail Night is completely off the table. My one rule for myself for this trip was absolutely no nostalgia. I worked hard to put this place behind me, and I want to keep it that way.

“Five fun things?” I shake my head. I don’t want to agree, but my competitive side makes it hard to turn down a challenge. Plus, I don’t want hard feelings between us. If I do as she asks, maybe the lingering guilt I’ve carried will finally fade. “Do I get to be the judge on whether or not my idea of fun counts?”

She shrugs. “Sure.”

“Then I’m counting this as number one.” I sneak another swipe of the sauce. Or should I say red gold? I wonder what she put in here. It’s so savory. If she wasn’t in the room, I might try to drink it.

She steals the pan away from my view and slides it in the oven. She sets the timer and when she turns around, her eyes take a mischievous glint. “I have an idea. I know how to make this night really fun.”

I don’t think she means anything suggestive, but I have a sudden image of us kissing in the kitchen. Obviously, she doesn’t mean that kind of fun, but she’s the one who brought up Wassail Night. Some memories evoke emotions too hard to suppress. But now I’m nervous about what she does mean. I don’t want a night on the town or anything resembling a date *at all*.

“Be right back.” She slides by me, and I catch her scent again. It’s not a strong perfume like you smell on the ladies in the city. It’s a natural scent—soap mixed with a whole lot of Brie. I’m stuck in place trying to hold it in, but the sweet smell

fades. I blink slowly and turn. Where did she say she was going?

Brie returns a moment later from one of the back rooms with a couple of reusable bags in her hands. She holds them up to emphasize them. “It’s party time.”

I frown. What is she talking about? I walk over to her and take a few bags since they look heavy. I glance inside. Candy canes and children’s books? Yep, definitely not kissing-in-the-kitchen kind of fun. I wouldn’t have done that, of course. The fact that it crossed my mind was bad enough. “Are you planning on reading to me? Story time with Brie?”

She laughs. Dang, I’ve missed that sound. “No, we’re wrapping them for my students.” She hands the rest of the bags to me and darts back down the hall. She comes back with a few rolls of wrapping paper, scissors, and tape. “You can put those on the table. We can wrap until dinner is done.”

“Slave labor,” I grumble.

“Fun,” she clarifies.

She pulls out her phone and pushes a few buttons. A speaker in the corner starts blaring Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas.” My frown melts a little. Brie has a personality too bright to dim.

“I better get seconds of lasagna for this.”

She pushes the bag closer to me. “You can have thirds if you do a good job.”

I pull out a *T'was the Night Before Christmas* book and get to work. Brie has to remind me how to wrap. I'm a gift bag kind of guy. I almost got the hang of it by the tenth present. The parents are going to think these are from a student and not the teacher.

Brie compliments me after each one though. I'm not one of her first graders, but I beam under her attention as if I am. We move to the floor as our mess grows. She was right. This is fun. The smell of lasagna, the holiday music, a task to keep my hands busy, and a pretty girl in front of me. I hesitate over my last thought, trying to take it back.

Well, anyway, it shouldn't be too hard to do something fun like this four more times. And then goodbye Bearwood, no strings attached and guilt-free. No one even has to know I ever stayed next door to Brie Holland or even saw her.

The doorbell rings.

"It's probably Jocelyn coming to grab dinner before her next hair appointment," Brie says, mentioning our mutual high school friend. "She and Gabby are my roommates. Jocelyn is notorious for forgetting her keys, and I must've locked the door without thinking." Before Brie can even stand, the door opens by itself. It's not Jocelyn.

Brie's mom is standing there. And, gulp, so is mine.

"Rock?" Mom gasps. "What are you doing here?"

I shouldn't have waited until later tonight to tell my mom I'm in town. And worse, I'm sitting on the floor next to Brie in

a mountain of wrapping paper with the pink frilly apron I forgot to take off and a meal wafting from the oven, which looks suspiciously like one of two things. Either I have suddenly given up my day job to be a homemaker, or Brie and I are dating. I can see the ideas blossoming in Mom's startled eyes. I'm ninety percent sure she believes the latter when she suddenly smiles.

And with her overly hopeful grin, my carefully built boundaries are under attack.

Chapter 5

Brie

ROCKWELL MUST HAVE FORGOTTEN to put romance on his Christmas list this year along with everything else holiday related. Yes, I'm converted to believing everyone should make Christmas lists. I don't know why I ever doubted them.

I sink into the chair behind my desk, but instead of digging into my lunch, I relive what happened last night again. Part of me is dreaming of good old Christmas magic rekindling an old flame. The other part of me remembers I'm an adult living in the real world. Any sparks flying over Rockwell during dinner last night were squashed the second his mother saw us together. Why did she and my mom have to pick that particular moment to drop off the town committee's Wassail Night flyers for the school?

"Earth to Brie!"

My hand drops from under my jaw, and I look up from my desk to see Gabby waving her hands in front of me. "I didn't hear you come in."

“I noticed. When you didn’t come to the lounge to eat your lunch, I decided to check on you.”

I lift up my Tupperware with my slice of leftover lasagna. “I wanted to get everything set out for our craft this afternoon, so I’m multitasking.”

“You seemed a little lost in your head. Anything happen with Rockwell last night? Did you ask him out?”

“Sort of? We made dinner together.”

“Wow.” Gabby’s eyes light up. “I am so proud right now. I didn’t think you’d actually follow through.”

I shake my head, poking my lunch with my fork. “It wasn’t anything like a date. I made him wrap my students’ presents with me.”

“Okay, that’s sweet.”

“It was and we had a good time—at first. He’s nothing like I remember him being. Except his voice, and his eyes ...” He has this way of making me feel like he’s watching me and approving of what he sees. It makes no sense, and the approving part has got to be my overactive imagination. “Anyway, I don’t think we are weirdly fated to date again or our moms wouldn’t have come over the second he started to relax.”

“No way. Your moms?” Gabby laughs. “Sorry, but what are the odds?”

“I’m not creative enough to make this up. Not to mention he hadn’t told his mom yet that he was in town. Luckily, Sandy

was so happy to see him, she forgave me for harboring her son.”

Gabby winced. “Dang. I can’t think of a better way to kill any romance vibes—or not romance vibes. Whatever it is, moms will kill it.”

“You’re telling me. Our moms didn’t stay long, but there were some awkward, *we’ll talk later* comments, and some not too conspicuous winks. Rockwell stayed for a piece of lasagna, but he ate it in three bites and was long gone. I have a whole half-pan of leftovers at home.”

“Relax, he didn’t leave town, did he?”

“I don’t think so. His car was still there when I left for school this morning.”

“Then there’s still time.”

“For what? Me to stare into his window again like a creepy old lady?”

“There’s still time to get over him properly. Wait, old ladies stare through windows? And did you say *again*? When was the first time?”

“Never mind. I’m pretty sure this is life taunting me. The candy cane of my dreams landed right in my hands, but the dumb plastic is so tight I can’t get at it.”

Gabby seems disturbed by my analogy, but she didn’t have to tie a couple dozen candy canes to presents last night. It’s the only analogy subject I am capable of at the moment.

“You’re in the overthinking phase again.”

“I am not.” I sigh. I am, and I know it. Dang it.

“Don’t sabotage yourself. Like you said, it might be your best chance for closure.”

I shake my head. “He’s got a chip on his shoulder.”

“I believe it. I was there when he suddenly became a mega big jerk and dumped you, remember? But it was years ago, and you’ve forgiven him, even if I’m not there yet. Maybe you need to get the grumpy guy to talk.”

I wave my fork back and forth. “Rockwell’s not exactly grumpy. More serious and extremely careful. The Rockwell I remember was up for anything. This guy has blinders on and isn’t deviating from his new life plan—which might be working and working out. Whatever it is—it has the word work in it. Even if I was open to something, he isn’t.” I shove a bite into my mouth. I’m not heartbroken or anything. It’s been great seeing Rockwell again, and being near him has awakened my comatose heart, but I’m more stuck on what’s missing with him.

I can’t help but think about the night he left Bearwood—the same night his parents split. He broke up with me and took off. I found out later about his parents and tried to call him. I knew he was upset over his parents and was certain he needed me to talk it out. But he didn’t need me at all. He would have answered my calls or responded to a single text if it were true. I’d be lying if I said it still didn’t sting.

“It’s good he’s being careful because we wouldn’t want him to make the same mistake twice.” Gabby says, stealing my fork and eating a bite of my lasagna. Through her chewing she says, “Oh, this is good.” She swallows and uses a tissue to dab her lips. “Worst case scenario, you go on a few dates. It wouldn’t hurt for you to put yourself back out there. It’s been a while, and Rockwell should do his part in this dating therapy.”

“Dating therapy?”

“Closure dating. It’s gotta be a thing. Besides, this was your idea, not mine. I’m just trying to be supportive so you can have healthy relationships again in the future.”

“Okay, but how am I supposed to get him to date me? I can’t feed him lasagna every day.”

Gabby shrugs. “It’s been a long time since he’s even seen you. You can’t expect sparks to fly on day one. And if they don’t fly, then even better, right?”

They were flying on *minute* one. On my end, that is. “I don’t want to tempt fate by forcing anything.”

Gabby grabs my phone. “Text him.”

“What?”

“I know you have his number.”

My eyes widen. “How do you know?”

“Because you never deleted it.”

There’s no use lying. Gabby knows me too well. “It’s been forever. Of course he has a new number.”

Gabby gives me a smug look. “I’ll try it and see.”

“What? Fine, take my lasagna and give me my phone.”

She happily takes the swap. “Tell him there’s more lasagna in the fridge if he wants to get himself a piece for lunch. Also tell him where your spare key is.”

I laugh like she is ridiculous, because she is. “I would never do that.”

“Please, please, please. Remember my speech on regrets? If it’s not meant to be, you still have to dig a little deeper if you’re going to get over him.”

I huff and open my phone. Her logic is far too convincing. I type a quick text and send it to him. “It’s not tempting fate because he isn’t going to get the text. He has a new number now so, thanks to you, a stranger is now going to know where my key is.”

My phone vibrates and my pulse races. I pick it up and see the response from Rockwell. The actual Rockwell. Crap. He wasn’t supposed to get the text!

ROCKWELL: *I was dreaming about your lasagna. Thanks *hungry face emoji**

I cringe. “But if he deleted my contact info, how did he know it was me?”

“Who else fed him lasagna last night?” Gabby shakes her head like I’m a complete idiot. “Or maybe he never deleted your number either?” She says, raising an eyebrow at me.

“Right.” And now he has my number if he didn’t before. I don’t know how to feel about it. I type in a quick response.

BRIE: *Enjoy!*

I set my phone down. “You owe me,” I grumble.

Gabby laughs. “You mean, thank you?” She gives me back my nearly empty Tupperware. “This stuff is amazing, by the way. Way better than the frozen stuff Warren’s Grocery sells. Tell Rockwell to save me a piece.” She waves to me and leaves my classroom.

My phone buzzes again.

ROCKWELL: *I fed your cat for you. I didn’t see any food, but I found a can of tuna in the cupboard and took care of it.*

My cat?

I text back quickly.

BRIE: *We don’t have a cat.*

ROCKWELL: *Oh, really? So, I shouldn’t have let her in?*

BRIE: *Uh, nope.*

ROCKWELL: *I’ll try to catch her.*

BRIE: *That would be a good idea.*

It’s time to get my students from recess, so I pray Rockwell is better at catching cats than he is at judging who their owners are. And then I smile because maybe a cat chase is exactly what he needs to lighten up. Grumpy, aloof Rockwell doesn’t stand a chance of remembering his feelings for me.

Maybe it's the fact he's in my house, maybe it's that he's texting me, or maybe I'm a tad delusional, but my thoughts are turning dangerous. One in particular: If Rockwell liked me once before, isn't there a possibility he could like me again? Sometimes being a romantic is an invitation for heartbreak. But also, being a romantic means the hope outweighs the logic.

Chapter 6

Rockwell

MOM AND I ARE having dinner tonight at Bob's Grill to talk about why I'm in town. The last few days, I've been busy with work and haven't seen her as much as I hoped to. I've sort of been avoiding her after she caught me with Brie, giving her time to forget it ever happened. I know it's not realistic for me to hide out at Travis's work or an empty duplex for another couple of weeks, so I agree to a public meeting.

It's been ages since I've been to Bob's, and it's surprising when I walk in how little has changed. Depending on what side of the diner you sit in, you could be in the bakery. Patricia's pies, despite the name, isn't loved for her pies. But Patricia does make incredible chocolate croissants and a cherry turnover that melts in your mouth.

Everyone who recognizes me stops by with a friendly hello and welcome home. I cringe, waiting for the undertones to reveal how they really feel. For some reason, I thought everyone would hate me for walking away. I'm surprised.

They actually seem eager to see me and hear about what I'm up to. I don't know what to make of it.

Once the welcome committee settles down, Mom nudges me. "See, I told you they've missed you."

I nod to placate her, and we find a table and seat ourselves. I lean over to try and look in the glass display of desserts on the other side of the room, but the paint chalk snowflakes mar my view. It's not a problem. I don't have to see them to taste them in my mind again. I'm dreaming about turnovers when the waitress comes to take my order for dinner.

I order automatically. "Bob's Toast, please." I realize a second later that Bob's Toast, which is his signature Korean sandwich with egg, ham, cheese, and cabbage, might just be plain toast after all these years. It might not even be on the menu.

The waitress pens it down, so thankfully, there is still a perk for returning to Bearwood.

"I'll take a salad," Mom says. I'm pleased she's eating healthier than she used to. When the waitress leaves, Mom captures my full attention. I quietly observe her. She hasn't dyed her hair for a while, and her usually tidy medium-brown bob isn't laying neatly like usual, and she has a line of gray at her part. She's wearing a flowy dress, which I assume is her new standard since she's still holding her left arm close to her stomach. I hate to stare at it because I know she's self-conscious of her paralysis from her stroke this fall. Her arm, however, is the reason I'm here.

Mom needs to be close to specialists in the city, and she needs to live closer to me in case anything happens. A woman at her age with only one usable arm needs help. My sister, Morgan, isn't going to volunteer. She can barely take care of herself and doesn't seem to take much interest in the family. Caring for Mom is up to me.

“I am so happy you've come home, Rock.”

I smile at her, even though my visit isn't what she's hoping for. “I know it's harder for you to travel now, so I came to you this time.”

“I can travel fine.” Mom's tight jaw appears as stubborn as my own.

“In Bearwood you can, but to the city is different. It's why I want you to move there. I can take care of you easier if you're with me.”

“Why don't we talk about Brie?” She's evading me again. I'm not taking no for an answer anymore. It's why I traveled all this way.

I ignore her question and keep giving my speech. “I can start packing you up while I'm here and set up a moving company for when I leave. I already bought you a new bed and set it up in my spare room. It sits up like a hospital bed but is ten times more comfortable. It even has a massage feature.”

“I don't need a hospital bed, Rock. And I like my independence here. Now tell me when you and Brie started

seeing each other again. How did you two keep such a big secret from me?”

I rub my hand over my jaw. I really thought the bed was a selling point. I needed to stay patient and focused and treat this like a business deal. A little calm persuasion and logic will win out in the end. “It’s a win-win deal for both of us. I won’t worry as much having you close, and you won’t have to fly to see me. It’s what we both want.”

My whole last sentence is drowned out by my mom’s waving and shouting excitedly, “Hey, there!”

The gorgeous ghost of my Christmas past is haunting my thoughts. Either that or the glare from the string of lights Bob has up around the perimeter of the room are playing tricks on me. It’s Brie again. It’s been a few days since our lasagna dinner, and I’m still not used to seeing her. She’s with two of our high school friends, Gabby and Jocelyn. My eyes though are only on her. She has her hair down long over her flowy white sweater, and her jeans hug her athletic dancer legs. She looks over and I swear her eyes sparkle when she sees me. Her smile makes me feel like I’m worth something. She always did see the best in people.

I’ve been in this exact scenario before a dozen times, only years ago. For one crazy moment, I wonder how I had the inner strength to walk away.

“What a coincidence seeing you ladies out tonight,” Mom says, waving them over.

The three of them stop at our table.

“I heard you were back in town.” Jocelyn lightly punches my shoulder. From what Mom told me, she’s a beautician here in town. She fits the stereotype with perfect makeup and hair and a bubbly personality. It’s oddly nice to see she hasn’t changed.

“It took you long enough,” Gabby mutters under her breath, though her smile is friendly. Same old Gabby too—sure-footed and not about to be taken advantage of by anyone.

“Good to see you again, ladies.”

Mom snags Brie’s arm. “Rock didn’t tell me you were joining us tonight.”

“Actually, nothing was planned.” Brie sends me a helpless look.

Mom bats her hand. “I’ll take a happy coincidence then. I hope you and your friends will join us. We need to catch Rock up on all the Bearwood news.”

Brie glances at me, her eyes asking for permission.

I’m tempted to turn them away because this dinner was supposed to be an opportunity to lay all my groundwork for moving Mom. Instead, I exercise the manners she taught me. “Please, join us.”

“Why not?” Jocelyn says to the others. They drag over a few more chairs. Jocelyn places one next to me. She doesn’t sit but motions to Brie with her head.

An almost imperceptible blush steals over Brie’s cheeks and she slips into the seat, tucking a thread of silky brown hair

behind her ear. I can almost feel it between my fingers. Some memories are powerful.

As soon as Gabby and Jocelyn are seated, I signal a waiter who brings over a tray of ice waters, and everyone orders. Brie gets Bob's Toast too, and Mom gives me a knowing look. So what if we like the same sandwich? It's the best thing on the menu. I'm surprised we're the only two who order it.

"Tell us what you ladies have been up to," Mom says, leaning her good arm over the table.

"The usual for me," Jocelyn answers first. "Christmas is another wedding season, so I'm seeing more brides than Santa Clauses these days."

"The brides would rather see you than Santa too," Brie says. "You have a gift for making people feel beautiful."

"Aw, that's so sweet." Jocelyn puts her arm around Brie and squeezes her shoulders.

"What about you, Gabby?" Mom asks.

Gabby shrugs. "We had our school Christmas concert last week, so I'm ready for school to let out tomorrow."

I forgot Gabby took a job at the elementary school Brie works at. Mom mentioned it at some point to me. She feels obligated to tell me all the Bearwood news, even though I tune out ninety percent of it.

They chat for a moment about the concert and the funny things a few students did—including the typical kid who sang loud and off-key and the kid who did his own dance moves

during the entire concert in the front row. My job sounds boring in comparison, but I'm pretty sure I was the off-key kid when I was in grade school, so I'm in the right profession.

"Now, Brie," Mom says, "you're the one I've been dying to talk to. I'll have you know, seeing you and Rock together again is the best Christmas present anyone could have given me."

Brie's eyes widen, but they can't be as big as my own. Gabby chokes on her water, and Jocelyn, nonplused, slaps Gabby on the back. Someone has to rein in my mom, and fast. I open my mouth, but Mom plows on, "When did you and Rock start dating again, and how did you convince him to come back to Bearwood? I'm not complaining about you keeping secrets from me because I'm too happy. You've managed to do what I've failed to do for years."

"Mom, we aren't—"

"It's been such a hard few months since the stroke, and I know I don't talk about it much, but this really makes all those hard days worth it." Mom's tearing up now. There's a weight in my chest as heavy as a bag of rocks. Mom hates crying in front of people. I can't let her believe Brie and I are together though. That's not fair to anyone.

"I'm sorry Mom—"

I'm cut off again but this time by Jocelyn. "I always thought Rockwell and Brie looked good together."

“Me too,” Gabby adds, though she seems to add this reluctantly.

I always thought Jocelyn and Gabby decent, but they’re killing me. Do they have to be so encouraging?

“I know, aren’t they perfect for each other?” Mom throws in, dabbing at her eyes with her good arm.

I open my mouth to object.

Brie’s hand lands on mine and my words fall short. I look at her hand and then at her panicked expression.

It’s a simple gesture, but it makes an ambiguous statement to my mother. In fact, she’s practically announcing we’re dating. She’s too nice to disappoint my mom, but the signals she’s sending are confusing—even to me. Has she forgotten there is a literal wall between us at the duplex—a thick one—and it isn’t going anywhere? So why don’t I move my hand out from under hers? She squeezes it in a wordless apology, and my heart simultaneously squeezes too.

It’s nostalgia. Good old Bob’s twinkle lights are working their Christmas magic. If I can’t move my hand, I need to move my mouth and get myself out of this situation fast. But no matter how hard everyone is working to keep my mom happy, it will mean more heartache later. I love her too much to lie to her. “Mom, don’t pull Brie into this. You know I came to see you.”

Brie releases my hand, and suddenly I feel like a jerk. I’m not sure why because we were only dating for thirty whole

seconds. Fake dating, for the record.

“I know you did, sweetie, but Brie and I can share. We’re big girls.”

How is she not understanding? “Mom—”

The waiter shows up with our plates and silences my explanation. Once the plates are set in front of us, Jocelyn compliments the waitress’s engagement ring. Women, doing what women do best, erupt into conversation. Between the others at the table and the waitress, they pull from her the story of her complicated courtship and *to-die-for* proposal. Those were Gabby’s words, not mine. While they’re gushing, I’m stuck on how to explain the truth to my mom about Brie and me. At least my sandwich is good. Everything else about the night feels like a fail.

“Sorry about that,” Brie whispers to me, her eyes like a contrite puppy and pulling all the heartstrings—some I didn’t even know I still had. “I’ve never seen your mom cry before. It freaked me out.”

I can’t be mad at her. This isn’t her fault at all or even her friends’. I’m owning this. I should’ve run as soon as I saw Brie was my neighbor, and I should have gone to see my mom right away. It’s my bad.

“We can talk later at home,” I say. We need to discuss her cat, or not cat, anyway.

She nods and turns back toward her friends. I blink as I hear my words again in my head. I made it sound like we’re a

married couple. Why didn't I say we can talk at the *duplex*?
Now I'm even confusing myself. Good one, Rockwell.

Chapter 7

Brie

I DROVE TO BOB'S Grill with Gabby and Jocelyn, but Jocelyn suggests I leave with Rockwell. They both suddenly have other plans. I blame Jocelyn for attending too many weddings lately and hanging around scheming moms. She's starting to act like them. Neither roommate is aware of the specifics on my Christmas list, but they do know I'm seeking closure. I'm not sure how driving home with him will help me. My friends are so annoyingly smooth.

Yes, Rockwell and I are going the same direction, so it makes sense ... unless his mom thinks we're dating. No one in their right mind would want to get in said guy's car after a mess up like that. I send my friends my best *you'll regret this* glare.

"Yeah, I'm down with taking Brie home." Rockwell's kind but unenthusiastic response sends his mom practically skipping to the door.

"I'll call you in the morning, Rock!" Sandy says right before the door shuts behind her. My friends wave as they follow

after her.

I wonder if the three of them somehow planned this arrangement. I wish I could blame them for my hand-grabbing earlier. I sling my purse over my shoulder, and Rockwell motions me to go first. Neither of us say anything as we weave our way out of Bob's Grill.

The lighting in the parking lot is decent, and it illuminates the falling snow in a yellow haze. I tug my jacket closer around my shoulders. I really shouldn't leave my house in the winter without a real coat. Rockwell seems impervious to the cold and lost in his thoughts. He has to be contemplating one hundred and one ways to take revenge. I never should have told him where my spare key was.

When I see Rockwell's car, I momentarily forget about my stupidity and the bone-chilling cold. It's a luxury ride I don't experience often, and I'm embarrassed to admit how excited I am to get in his car. He opens the door for me—receiving all the gentleman points—and I slide into the cold leather seat. The interior screams money, and I notice a button for the seat massage. Ooh la la!

After Rockwell turns on the car, he shows me the seat heater settings. It isn't the massage, but I desperately require heat far more at the moment. Rockwell flips the radio to some Christmas tunes and turns the volume low. "Did I guess the right station?"

"You did," I say. He hasn't forgotten.

He reaches back and hands me a blanket from his back seat. It's a plain gray fleece, and it's calling my name. "You need a thicker coat."

He's got to be mad about what happened inside, but this reminds me of the old Rockwell who puts aside his own feelings to take care of someone else.

"Thanks." I spread the blanket around my legs and reach over to adjust the temperature. Finally, my body shakes cease their earthquake-level spasms. Which is unfortunate because now I can fully focus on my awkwardness. I don't really want to apologize again so soon, so I search for some normal conversation—an icebreaker. "I didn't see a cat in my house when I got home. Was it hard to catch it?"

Rockwell's right hand is in the twelve o'clock position on the steering wheel. He looks over his arm at me and shakes his head. "It wasn't hard to get it out of your house. But it's been impossible to get it out of mine."

I sputter a laugh. "What happened?"

"It bolted inside the same way it did when I opened your door. The thing is fast. It jumped on the kitchen counter to the top of the fridge and onto the top of my cabinets. I'm telling you, that cat has issues."

"I'm sure it's cold and hungry."

"Wait until you see it. You might change your mind."

I chuckle and we fall into a weird silence. I know it's time to apologize again. "I'm sorry about me and my friends. We

should have cleared things up with your mom.” I’ve read enough fake dating books to know it always backfires.

Rock nods. “It’s fine.”

“I haven’t seen her this happy in years.” I’m not justifying my stupidity. Wait, yes I am. Did Rockwell even know how hard life has been for her? And well before the stroke too. I know she visits him a lot, but it’s easy to put on a good face for a few days.

Rockwell sighs. “I’ll explain everything to her tomorrow. Don’t even worry about it.”

I run my hands against the smooth sides of the seat. “Please, be gentle.”

Rockwell looks at me again. “What do you mean?”

“Smile when you deliver the news. Say it like you aren’t eliminating all her hopes and dreams.”

Rock’s grip shifts to his other hand, and he sets his elbow on the console. When he looks at me this time, his head is closer and I can’t look away. “You do realize her dreams consist of you and me married with five kids.”

My eyes widen. His mom and I have the same dream? I choke on air and cough into my hand.

“You think I’m joking? I’m serious. For her to be deliriously happy, we’d have to live next door to her until we’re all buried together in Bearwood cemetery.”

I don't really see a problem with this scenario. Except for the glaringly obvious one sitting next to me. "Yeah, that's crazy." And freakin' adorable. I leave out the last part because Rockwell might swerve and crash his beautiful car.

"See why I'll have to be direct with my mom?"

"Sort of."

He raises his brow, highlighting his big soul-filled brown eyes, even in the dark. "What do you mean?"

"She's a sensitive woman, especially right now. She deserves some happiness at Christmas."

"So you want me to lie to her? Tell her we're seeing each other?"

"No, but you don't have to sound so disgusted by it."

"About lying?"

"About dating me." I can tell he isn't interested in dating me, but the weak side of me wants to know how *uninterested* he is. So I don't sound like I'm fishing, I quickly add, "You did it once, and you didn't seem so averse to it then ..."

Rockwell's jaw visibly clenches, and his hands tighten on the steering wheel. I force my eyes on the dark road out his windshield, regretting every word. Heavy air fills the space between us, and it threatens to smother me.

"Come on, Brie," Rockwell's frustrated tone breaks the silence. "What guy wouldn't want to date you? You're

gorgeous, talented, full of life. I've never met anyone like you."

I flick my eyes to his, but his gaze remains on the road. It's a relief he's not looking, or he'd witness me melting next to him. I no longer need the seat heaters. In fact, I'm sure my face is on fire. Oblivious to my reaction, Rockwell shakes his head. "It's not you as much as it's Bearwood and all that comes with it. To be honest, I'm not interested in having a girlfriend right now."

I tuck all those delicious compliments away to replay later on repeat and address the heart of the issue. "Why does Bearwood bother you so much? You loved it here."

He taps his fingers on the console. I want to reach out to still them, but I've already pushed my luck in the hand-holding department tonight. "A few bad memories can taint everything."

He's talking about the divorce. By then his older sister had already left the house and was living a wild college life and hardly speaking to the family. I know Rockwell took the brunt of the news. From the stories my mom tells me, he put himself in between his parents and played mediator for two long years even after he left Bearwood. It wasn't an amicable parting, and by the looks of it, the scars run deep. I hurt for him. I've wished a bazillion times that he would have let me be there for him. If he'd just answered one of my calls. I don't know why he insisted on doing it alone.

“Whether you admit it or not, you had a lot of good times here too.” I say it teasingly, trying to lighten the mood. We have hundreds of ones we’ve made together—first as friends through middle school, to best friends in high school, to when we finally stopped worrying about ruining our friendship and started dating senior year. I want all those memories to count for something.

He pulls the car up to the carport on his side of the duplex. He shuts off the engine but neither of us move. The silence isn’t oppressive like before, but it gives space to allow my whirling thoughts to settle.

Rockwell slouches in his seat. “Remember the time we went to Bob’s Grill and tried all of Patricia’s desserts to see which one was the best?”

I’m not expecting him to relax next to me or for him to want to reminisce. Just thinking about that day though makes me laugh. “You spent over a hundred dollars on cream puffs and pies, and I had the worst stomachache afterward.”

“So did I.” His hand goes to his stomach. “I don’t know if I could ever bring myself to eat one of her pies again.”

I groan. “Especially her pumpkin. Remember how rubbery it was?”

Rockwell laughs—a real, deep laugh I haven’t heard in years. “It was like chewing gum. What was in there?”

I shake my head. “We shouldn’t be making fun of her pies. Patricia is the sweetest old lady.”

“Sweetest? She’s trying to kill people. Does anyone still buy her pies?”

I nod. “Her peanut butter chocolate fudge mousse isn’t bad.”

He puts up his hands. “I’m sorry, I don’t believe she can make a decent pie. I’ll buy all her eclairs, turnovers, cinnamon rolls, and dipped chocolates, but no pies.”

“And no bacon cupcakes.”

He busts up, and I’m a little in awe of it. “I forgot about those nasty cupcakes.”

“I won’t ever forget.” I hold out my finger like I’m underlining my next words in the air. “Don’t go bacon my heart. Let’s ice up prom together.”

Rockwell chuckles. “I get points for being creative.”

I give him my best death glare. “You get negative points for giving me stomach poisoning.”

“All blame goes to Patricia.”

We laugh and talk about prom and some of the other high school dances, swapping awkward moments and wardrobe fiascos. Then we switch to stories about people we know and where they ended up.

“Do you remember how I always bemoaned not having a middle name?” I don’t know where the memory comes from but we’re both blurting random things.

Rockwell nods. “It’s the only time I’ve ever christened anyone. I still think Brie Marie has a nice ring to it. My eighth-

grade self was shockingly original.”

“It was instantly perfect because you came up with it. Did you know I actually wrote Brie Marie on my school papers all through high school?”

“I feel strangely honored by your dishonesty. What if I would’ve suggested Myrtle or Bertha?”

“You wouldn’t have.”

“No, I was a goner back then. I wanted to impress you.”

I sense an awkward vibe forming, and I quickly throw out another memory so neither of us have time to think too hard. We swap more stories, and I laugh until my abs hurt. We spent way too much time together back then. I hardly have a memory without him. I lose track of time until Rockwell unclicks his seatbelt. “It’s getting cold out here. You should get inside.”

I smile because his voice is reluctant like he doesn’t want to call it a night. I’m allergic to the cold, but I could stay here forever, reminiscing. I know it’s better to leave on a high note, so I reach for the door handle. One last glance at Rockwell shows me some of his grumpy facade is missing, so yes, I consider it a successful night. Maybe I don’t need a boyfriend or even a fake boyfriend, but I definitely needed this night with Rockwell. I feel happier than I’ve been in a long time. Could this be what closure feels like? I wonder if I’ll wake up and be over him.

Chapter 8

Rockwell

I FORGOT ABOUT THE cat. I'm still not sure how it happened. I had gone on a long run this morning trying to make a game plan after Mom had seen me with Brie. Then there was dinner and the unpredictable hours spent talking with Brie. I can't believe I let myself spend time with her, but something about her made it so easy to relax and forget myself. Our history was so intertwined, I couldn't think about my youth without seeing her in every part of it. If it wasn't for my fatigue, I might have stayed in my car all night. I had to drag myself inside and drop dead from exhaustion.

Until the cat.

That thing is deranged. What other animal would think it okay to sit on a man's face in the middle of the night? The suffocating ball of fur almost killed me in my sleep. I woke in panic, this weight on my head and no air coming. I swatted at it, not even realizing it was the cat in the moment. Who knows how far it flew, but it squealed loud enough to wake the dead.

I'm not admitting this to anyone, but my own scream might have matched his. I scramble out of bed and flip on the lights. There it is, defending the corner of my room like it's his. Its mangled fur sticks out at odd angles.

I step toward it and the cat hisses at me. I'm tempted to hiss back, but why aggravate him? I find my phone and try to look up Bearwood's animal control. Lucky me, my phone's dead. Annoyed, I toss it on my bed. I must've forgotten to plug it in before I crashed. Now what? I'm not sleeping with that devil cat. I need a net or something to catch it in and then some sort of cage.

I glance around the duplex. It's bare. There's nothing in my room except for my suitcase, Brie's blow-up, and the sleeping bag she loaned me. I know the other rooms are more empty than this. I don't even own a broom to lead the dang cat from the corner it's staring me down from.

I scratch the back of my head. Should I sleep in my car tonight? There's no way I'm staying here. I keep my body facing the cat and shuffle to my suitcase. I shove my legs into some sweats and throw on a long-sleeved Henley. That's when I notice my watch sitting on my jacket. I pick it up. Yes! It has battery life. The time is 12:15. It's late, but it could be worse. I tap it and pull up Brie's number, henpecking a message with my too big finger.

ROCKWELL: *You up?*

I hold my breath. If she's sleeping, I'll feel like a jerk. When she doesn't respond right away, I sink down on my bed only to

jump back up again and eye the cat. It still hasn't moved. Its beady eyes are following me though. I swear, it's crazy.

My watch dings. I look at it.

BRIE: *No, but I am now.*

I feel bad I woke her. I hate texting on my watch, but I manage a stilted response.

ROCKWELL: *Sorry. Cat issues. Can I borrow your broom?*

It's quiet for a moment. And then another ding.

BRIE: *Sure.*

I don't bother with my shoes. I back out of my room and shut the cat in there. I'm not sure it's a good idea. Who knows what it'll do to my clothes. Or do on my clothes. I jog to my front door and blast myself with freezing cold air. My feet burn on the ice as I shuffle to Brie's side. I knock and wait, dancing as I do.

Bleary-eyed, Brie opens the door. She has her pink sweatpants on again, but this time instead of a Mickey shirt, she has a gray hoodie. She looks pretty cute, and my eyes want to soak her up. I'm slightly aware how terrible I look in my own sweats and my usual morning cowlick sticking up in the back. The broom in her hand calls to me. For both our sakes, I want to hurry.

"Thanks. I'll make this up to you, I promise."

"Let me help you." She rubs one of her eyes. "Between the two of us, we can close the gaps and herd it out of your place."

I shake my head. "I've already ruined enough of your sleep."

"What's a few minutes more?" she asks.

I shrug and she takes it as a yes. She has her slippers on, and she follows me back to my door. It's not a far walk, but my feet are numb by the time we step inside.

"Where's the cat?"

"I shut him in my room."

"Him?"

I nod. "No lady would act or look like this thing."

She follows me to my bedroom door, running her hand through her adorable bedhead. "I didn't know you disliked cats."

"I love cats. It's creatures who attack me in the night I don't like."

She snorts and covers her mouth.

I brace my hand on the doorknob. "Are you laughing at me?"

She smooths out her expression and shakes her head.

I roll my eyes and open the door an inch. When nothing comes flying at the door, I crack it open another inch.

"What are you doing?" she whispers.

"I'm being cautious."

"You're a scaredy-cat." She snorts again and busts up laughing. Clearly, she needs more sleep. "Sorry, no pun

intended.”

I give her a look rivaling the devil cat in my room. “I’m not scared. I’ve faced down a bear before.” I have too. Bearwood didn’t get its name because of the mass amount of wooden carved bears in the yards and pretty wildlife calendars.

Brie grins. “Oh, I’ve heard your bear story five hundred times, but I’ve never seen you like this.”

To prove her wrong, I throw the door open. “See? Not scared.” I turn and the cat is standing right there in the doorway. I jump and grab Brie’s arm. Peals of laughter pour out of her mouth.

“He surprised me.”

She tries to hold it in, but she isn’t doing a very good job. She hunches down and stretches out her hand.

“What are you doing?” I step in front of her to protect her.

“Rocky, it’s fine.”

There’s my nickname again, but I can’t get distracted right now. “He’s very angry. He could possibly have rabies.”

“I know this cat.”

“What?”

“He used to live here but got lost before Melinda moved.” She notices my confused look. “Melinda was the last resident here. Samson has been gone for at least six months, and I can’t believe he’s still alive. Having him back is going to make Melinda’s Christmas.”

“Ironic name. Especially with his hair issues.”

“He does look a little crazy. I’m guessing he got in some cat fights, and he appears a lot thinner too.”

“He inhaled the fish yesterday.” I step aside, trusting Brie knows what she’s doing.

“Come here, Samson.” She rubs her fingers together, and surprisingly enough, the cat responds. Soon Brie is rubbing the cat around the ears. She scoops him into her arms, and I stick out my hand to stop her.

“Careful.”

“Look, he’s harmless.” She’s not talking to me though; she’s talking to the cat.

“Wait a second, I didn’t do anything to him.” An image of me flinging him across the room in panic comes to mind, but I shove it aside. He was suffocating me, and that was self-defense.

“He’s scared of you.” She stands, cooing at the cat, and slowly makes her way back to the front door. “I’ll keep Samson for the night and call Melinda in the morning.”

“Are you sure?” I follow her to the door. “He jumped on my face and almost smothered me. I don’t want anything happening to you.”

She grins, her makeup-free face looking a few years younger and more like the high school Brie I used to know. “It’s sweet you’re concerned. I’ll keep him in my laundry room and shut the door if it makes you feel better.”

“It does.”

She stops at the door and leans her shoulder against it. “Goodnight, scaredy-cat.” She tilts her head in a flirty way that she’s completely unaware of. The dim lighting doesn’t help.

I grit my teeth, but not to keep from arguing. It’s to keep from leaning over and kissing her. It’s not the high school Brie I see now but a mature woman with the appeal to go with her. She is reeling me in like a fish completely hooked. I set my hand on the door beside her head. All our memory sharing tonight has unlocked feelings I thought I had a padlock on.

I want to touch her, but I hold strong. This is as close as I will get. That and Samson is still giving me the stink eye. I force myself to say something. Anything to explain why I’m drawn to her. “I guess this makes you my hero.”

Her smile makes me wonder if she senses my weakness for her. I suppose every lock has a key to break it open. After all these years, I didn’t think—I had hoped at least—she wouldn’t come close enough to try.

“I did save you tonight, didn’t I?”

First with my mom and now with the cat. I’m not sure what to make of it. A week ago, Brie was firmly out of my life. Now my reasons for staying away from her are starting to gray. I serial dated for a while, but no one ever gave me reason enough for me to invest for long. My desire to commit to Brie, however, had never been the problem. It was my fear of hurting her.

I step back. It's the right thing to do and shouldn't have happened at all. Brie deserves better. Besides, my mom requires all my attention. "Thanks, Brie. I owe you."

My gaze drops to her mouth like a glutton for punishment. Not a kiss though. It's off the table. I'll think of a more appropriate thank you as soon as my mind recovers, and then I won't have any reason to be near her again.

Chapter 9

Brie

IT'S MY LAST DAY of school before the break and eleven short days until Christmas. It's a contest to see who is more excited, me or the kids. They love their new books and each hug me ten times. I wave and watch them leave with their parents while others climb onto the bus.

I feel like squealing when the last one is gone. Last night has me acting giddy and extra smiley. Nothing happened. Nothing. So why do I feel like everything has changed? I swear Rockwell saw me last night. Not the high school ex-girlfriend fresh out of braces but the present, grown-up, not-overly-exciting me. And even more amazing, he didn't look disappointed. In fact, I swear I saw a glimmer of interest behind his intense gaze as we said goodnight.

So much for me getting over him. I woke up feeling exactly as I shouldn't.

I make my way inside the school and back toward my classroom. My phone buzzes in my back pocket as I pass the main office. I pull it out and read Melinda's text. She picked

up Samson from my place and said thank you for the hundredth time.

I quickly type *Have a Merry Christmas* and slide my phone back in my pocket. I laugh under my breath, thinking about how scared Rockwell was of Samson. He's a tough guy who folded over a mangy cat. For some reason, it makes him more human, and I love him more for it.

Love? I almost trip over myself. Like! We're not even close to love. Our car chat last night has me forgetting what year I'm living in. I shake my head to rid myself of any more crazy thoughts. I sort of forgot to focus on finding his weaknesses and getting over him when we were laughing and talking last night. I have an ugly feeling I'll live to regret this mounting hope.

Speaking of hopeless causes, I don't know what Rockwell's going to tell his mom about us. At least he doesn't hate my friends and I for making things harder for him.

"Brie!" I turn and see Gabby jogging toward me in the hall. "You're never going to believe this."

"Believe what?"

She shows me her phone. It's a text from her mom.

When did Brie and Rockwell start dating again?

I scrunch up my face. "You're kidding me!" If Gabby's mom knows, the whole world knows. And by world, I mean mine—the entire town of Bearwood.

"I'm sorry. She can be so nosy."

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's probably Melinda again. I pull it out and groan. I show Gabby the message from my mom.

Make sure you invite Rockwell to the family party!

Gabby pinches her lips together in a sad attempt not to smile.

"Say it," I groan. "This is all my fault."

"That isn't where I was going."

"Then what?" I turn into my classroom and start cleaning up.

"I'm happy for you two. I never in a million years predicted this. In fact, I've been annoyed for a good five years that you couldn't let him go."

"At least I gave you two years free of annoyance."

"Because I felt bad for you at first."

I roll my eyes. "And I did let him go, for the record."

"Outwardly, yes. But I know you, Brie. You've loved him for a long time."

There was the l-word again. I pick up a scrap of paper under a desk and focus on wadding it up into a tiny ball with my fingers. My feelings are hard to explain out loud. "Things ended on such a strange note between us, a few feelings might have stayed hovering in the periphery. I've never had a solid sense of closure."

"So, you think this is like when someone dies and you have to see the body to know they're gone?"

"Exactly."

“Brie, he didn’t die. You have to realize that spending time with him might open doors instead of closing them. You have to be decisive.”

“I know.” Gabby isn’t as sentimental as I am. She’s trying, but she can’t understand why it wasn’t so black-and-white for me. Rockwell and I grew up together, and a history like ours lingers. This is murky water I’m wading in. “I’m sure after a few more days of seeing him, I’ll get used to it and move on.” I hope that will be the case. I don’t think my heart can survive another break the size Rockwell is capable of creating.

“Well, whatever happens, I hope you find your peace.”

“Thanks.” I prefer the sappy side of kismet, where two people are meant to be together. I kind of hate the part of life where two people have to realize they aren’t compatible. I want a different ending than spending time with Rockwell so I can finally let go. I hate myself for wanting what I can’t have.

“I’m going to run and grab my phone and keys,” Gabby says, taking a step backward. “But invite Rockwell to the family party.”

“Gabby ...”

“Jocelyn and I both agree he’s even better looking than high school Rock. You can’t pass this up.”

“I can too.” Taking him to the party was like taking our friendship to the next level. Nope, not going to happen.

She takes another step, almost bumping into the open door. “Remember how your family get-togethers are?”

I blow out a long breath. As the youngest of six kids, it's either be the babysitter at the kid table, or join the massive date night and feel like a single loser.

"You know you want to ask him." She points at me and nods before leaving me alone.

I angrily hum, "We wish you a Merry Christmas," trying to remind myself how my friends mean well, my mom isn't crazy, and I didn't start a rumor about dating my high school ex-boyfriend again. Rockwell was patient last night at the restaurant, but he is going to be ticked when he hears about this. I wouldn't be surprised if he cuts his trip here short. He clearly wants to lay low while in town. Now everyone knows he's here and believes we're a thing.

Life built a giant trap for me, and I'm the only blind person stupid enough to walk right into it. *Merry Kismet*, my foot. I grab my stuff and pull on my coat. My footsteps to my car drag. What can I say? My enthusiasm for going home has waned. What if I accidentally run into Rockwell? Instead of driving home, I turn toward Warren's Grocery store. The place will be packed until after the holidays, but I'm prepared to face the crowd if it means avoiding the consequences of my actions.

I remember hearing Mrs. Carlson and her daughter started an earring pop-up boutique in the corner of the store. My sister loves the mod clay earrings, and even though I already have a present for her, I rationalize that I should pick her up a pair. In fact, it's now a priority. She needs the earrings. And if I

happen to bring home ten pounds of therapy chocolate in the process, even better!

I pull into an open parking space, my mind reviewing how I'm a terrible person, and shut off my ignition. I reach for my handle only to realize who I parked next to. How did I miss the gorgeous Mercedes? And ... no ... no! Rockwell is in the driver's seat. I don't want him to see me. I'm not ready to tell him the whole town believes we're dating. I see his head move my way, and I immediately sink down in my seat. I put my hand up to block my face.

It's fine. Normal people sit in their cars like this all the time. A car door opens next to me, and I think Rockwell is getting out of his car. Great. He'll go inside the store, and I can sneak away. I'm sad about the chocolate, but who cares about the earrings.

I'm just remembering my emergency chocolate stash in my cupboard when a shadow falls over my window. I immediately look up. It's a good thing my job does not consist of stakeouts because I would be dead or fired by now. Of course, it's Rockwell. Remember how fate turned on me? Yeah, this is further proof.

I duck again and squeeze my eyes, hoping I'll open them and he'll have taken the hint and walked away. A knock sounds on the window. I reluctantly straighten and open my door. He leans his head inside, much too close to my own.

“What's up, Brie?”

“I’m hanging out in my car.” Because doesn’t everyone do that in the dead of winter?

“Really? Because it looks like you’re hiding from me. Nothing happened with Samson last night, did it?”

I fake a cheerful tone. “I’m not hiding from you. And Samson was a perfect angel last night. Melinda picked him up while I was at school, and according to her texts, it couldn’t have been a happier reunion.”

Rockwell nods, an easy smile over his mouth. Is he faking too? Or does he not know yet? “I’m happy to hear it. I feel bad for making you get up in the middle of the night. Are you picking up groceries too?”

“I’m heading home, actually.”

“Didn’t you just pull in?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m heading home after I grab one quick thing.”

He seems amused by me. I’ll take it over his angry eyes that are sure to appear the moment I exit the car. When he opens the door wider, I slip by him. We walk together into Warren’s. I immediately search for the Mrs. Claus cashier so she can take responsibility for all of this. She’s nowhere in sight. In fact, if it wasn’t for her notebook, I would think my anuptaphobia (fear of being single—yes, I Googled it and it’s a thing) made me dream her up.

I latch onto a gangly teenage employee walking by.

“Is there a trendy older woman with short spiky hair working today?”

His freckled face lights with recognition. “Oh, our temp worker? No, she got fired for giving products away.”

She did seem like a generous soul. Does this mean my notebook is considered stolen property? I gulp. I’ll give a generous tip when I leave. I shake my head, needing to focus. Apparently, the gossip about me and Rockwell is a problem I have to solve on my own. I don’t even notice the cinnamon pinecones or the blaring music as I stealthily dart farther into the store. I’m too worried someone we know will see us and say something. Rockwell grabs a cart while I hover by a pyramid stack of Instant Pots, scanning faces.

“Are you buying one of these?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I already own one.”

“Okay. Well, I’m going to grab some fruit and veggies.”

“Good choice. Fiber is important, especially this time of year. Lots of tummy aches at school.” I step beside him because his large form hides mine if I stay exactly in step with him. I need to make it around the corner and then I can dart back home, and he can keep grocery shopping.

“Well, I don’t exactly share your passion for fiber, but I did want to chat about something else. My mom stopped by this morning.”

“Yeah?” I glance behind him and see Jocelyn’s dad. He won’t say anything, but I still don’t wave to be safe. I look back at Rockwell. “How did it go?”

“After she got over the shock of me staying in an empty place instead of with her, I told her we aren’t dating.”

My brows jump and he has my full attention. “You did? Did it go well?”

“Sort of.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means she didn’t believe me.”

My laugh comes out a little choked. “Oh.”

“It’s fine. She’ll get over it.”

I elbow him. He shouldn’t be concerned how I’ll feel about rumors. His mom is more important. “I thought you were going to be gentle?”

He chuckles. “I tried hard. I promise. She’s stubborn. Don’t get me wrong, I love her. I love her so much that I want to be the one taking care of her. I wish she would listen.” He puts a couple of bananas into his cart and steers toward the bags of baby carrots.

“So, are you mad about it?” I pick up a cucumber even though I don’t have plans on buying it, but I do need to do something with my hands.

“Nah. Let her think what she wants. When I return to the city, she’ll see that you and I didn’t go anywhere.”

“Except to the store,” I say lightly. Nothing for anyone to get excited about.

He takes my cucumber from me and sets it in the cart. “Except to the store.” He tilts his head to the side. “And since I owe you after last night, maybe to dinner?”

I whip my head to look at him—because I have to be dreaming. And bam. I hit my knee on a stand of fruit. I wince and my body automatically shrinks as I curl in over my knee. Rockwell puts his arm around my waist to help me up.

“Woah, you okay?”

I try to stand and my knee smarts. “Yep. Just a little embarrassed.”

“Brie!” I hear my name called and look up. It’s Gabby’s mom, Mrs. Fiore. I’d rather hit my knee again twenty times than answer, but how can I not?

“Hi, Mrs. Fiore.”

“Is that Rockwell Davenport?” Mrs. Fiore is a close generational look-alike to Gabby with her dark hair and high cheekbones, but she has stronger Italian features in her than Gabby does.

Rockwell tightens his grip around my waist giving me all the butterflies. It’s in response to Mrs. Fiore, but I can’t help my response. Besides, it all happened so fast; he hasn’t thought of releasing me yet.

“It’s been a long time,” Rockwell says, his voice even.

“Too long!” Mrs. Fiore pushes her cart up right next to ours. I’m scared she’ll say something about us dating. But I’m not

exactly in the condition to bolt. “I’m so happy to see you two are together again.”

And there it is. I want to cry, and not because my knee is on fire.

Mrs. Fiore tilts her head to the side and makes the face of a proud mom beaming over her toddler’s drawing—except she is staring at us, and there is nothing to see between us.

“Actually,” I say. “We’re just grocery shopping.” I reach over and tap Rockwell’s chest. His very hard, sculpted chest. Whoops. I clear my throat, reining myself in. That didn’t look good. “We’re living next door to each other for the holidays.” I’m trying to explain why we would be shopping together, but my words make Mrs. Fiore’s grin widen.

“Carlo and I used to shop together when we were dating too. We didn’t live so close to each other. Couples do things so differently now. In our day, we had chaperones.”

Rockwell coughs into his hand. Even if I can’t run, I recognize a cue to move on. “We’re just neighbors,” I step out of his hold, taking over his cart, and limp forward. “Good seeing you, Mrs. Fiore.”

Rockwell raises his hand and waves. Great. He’s speechless. I’m afraid to look at him.

I clear my throat and blurt the first thing I think of to break the silence. “So, what were you saying about dinner?”

Chapter 10

Rockwell

I DON'T THINK IT'S a good idea to be seen with Brie in public after the run-in with Mrs. Fiore. Brie attracts people to her like flies to honey. I'm as susceptible as anyone, I get it. But the town is starting to get ideas about us. I'm more concerned for Brie than I am for myself. A small-town rumor mill can be brutal. When I leave and don't take her with me, people will think I dumped her again. Even if she's over me, I don't want to do that to her.

Which is why my thank-you dinner is happening at my place. Travis said I owed her at least this much for waking her up in the middle of the night and sending a deranged cat home with her. A real man would never have allowed that.

I know I was a jerk by leaving her after graduation, but I've tried hard not to be a jerk since. It ate at me all day until I saw her at the grocery store. What harm could one thank-you meal do? Especially if we're hiding away from prying eyes in my bare living room. And we won't be alone since I invited Travis to join us.

Brie takes a seat across from me on the blanket I spread out on the ground—her blanket, to be exact—and picks up a carton of Chinese food to read the label. My phone buzzes.

I pick it up and read Travis's text.

TRAVIS: *Sorry man, a client is freaking out. I'm going to have to be the one to handle this. I promise, this was not a set up.*

I sit down hard on the blanket. One day wasn't long enough to think this through. Everything about this looks very date-ish and cozy. I originally imagined us surrounded by other people at Bob's Grill when I made the offer with Travis obviously by my side, but here we are. Alone.

"I love this," Brie says, tucking her stocking feet under her legs and completely oblivious to my exact opposite reaction. "I dream about good Chinese food. But you don't look very comfortable on the floor. You know I have a table next door."

The carpet is soft, but I need a backrest. I'm not a flexible guy, so sitting criss-cross applesauce isn't my style. Unfortunately for me, Brie has the side of the blanket touching the wall. It's better I don't admit my aching thighs and lower back, or she'll start to feel guilty. Instead, I say, "I'm not going to make you host me again. What sort of gratitude would that be?"

"A practical one."

I can be ultra-practical, but my mom taught me *some* manners. Even if we aren't dating, I can be nice. Not to

mention her roommates are home, and I don't want them for an audience to feed the rumor mill. "Can I get you more of anything?" I hold up the box of fried rice. I had to drive into Spokane to meet a client, and I thought Chinese would be a nice change for her. I remember her begging her mom to make us fried rice in high school. This isn't the same as homemade, but it's better than what I could make.

"Yes, please." She takes the box of fried rice from me and starts eating straight from it, ignoring her plate. "Oh, did you want some?"

I chuckle. "If I said yes, would you share?"

"Not likely." She takes another bite and holds the white container possessively to her chest.

"You need to get out of Bearwood more often."

"Is the fried rice hoarding making me look deprived?"

"Something about the hoarding combined with the bare surroundings."

"Hey, this is your place, not mine."

"Oh, I'm well aware." I dump some orange chicken on my plate and take a bite. After I swallow, I gear up my courage to share with her my crazy idea. "Listen, I didn't bring you food as a bribe, but I do have a favor to ask."

"Uh oh, you look serious."

"My mom called me and asked if you would come out to the farm."

Brie nods. “I understand. My mom wants you to come to our family Christmas party.”

I forget my well-crafted argument for a moment. “Really? I’ve never been invited to the exclusive Holland family party before.”

“It’s nothing to brag home to your friends about, but it is a high compliment from my mom. But back to you. What did you tell your mom?”

“I was hoping to tell her you would come.”

Brie chews on her lip. “Wouldn’t it give her the wrong idea about us?”

“That’s why I was hoping you would go there alone.”

She waves her chopsticks at me. “No way. That feels mean.”

“I had a lot of time to think on my drive today. My mom is obsessed with you. I mean it. She’s talked about you for years. What do you think about persuading her to move to LA with me?”

Brie stares at me for a moment before finally setting down the carton of food. She wipes her hand on a napkin, taking way too long to answer me. “What if ... what if I don’t agree with your plan?”

I lean back against my hands and stretch out my legs. “What’s not to agree with?”

Brie tucks her hair behind her ear. “Bearwood has been her home for her entire life. She wouldn’t be happy in a big city.”

“Happiness is a choice.”

Brie shrugs. “Yes, but some happiness comes from familiarity. She shouldn’t have to make a conscious choice every morning when she wakes up. Sometimes happiness is as natural as breathing, especially when you’re surrounded by your loved ones and the home you’ve spent decades building.”

I stare at her because the beautiful world she lives in inside her mind is part of what makes Brie so refreshing to me. She wouldn’t agree with me, but she’s always embodied the word hope. Which is one of the reasons I’ve tried so hard to put several hundred miles between us until now. I don’t hope for the same things she does. I work in facts, not fantasies. “I know it would be an adjustment, but I plan to build her a vertical garden on my balcony, and she already gets along well with my neighbors when she visits. They’re around her age, so she wouldn’t be lonely.”

“Why are you really doing this?”

“Isn’t it obvious? She needs to be closer to doctors. The risk of a second stroke is high. Especially with all the stress of running a farm. I hired her a fantastic manager a few years back, but she’s still too involved. She has to lighten her load.”

Brie pokes at her rice beside her. “Would you really build her a vertical garden?”

“I’ve already drawn up a couple of variations.”

Brie looks impressed. “I didn’t know a businessman had time for woodworking projects.”

I scoff. “I usually don’t. I tend to take on more projects at work than I should.”

She sighs. “I don’t know, Rocky—er, Rockwell. I don’t want to intrude.”

Her slip of her nickname for me feels right, and I wonder why she corrected herself. I guess the past will always be a barrier between us. In the good old days, if I wanted to convince Brie to do something for me, there was only one solution. I wondered if it would work now. I am desperate. “Wrestle for it?”

Brie decided that moment to put a bite in her mouth, and she coughed into her hand. “What? No!”

“Leg or arm? Come on, let’s do this.” I rub my hands together. The idea of easily creaming Brie and getting my way paints an extremely appealing picture for me. I’ll even have an excuse to touch Brie without committing to anything too. I don’t want to analyze how messed up my last thought is.

“What is with you and wrestling?” She groans and pushes her food away. “And what do I get out of this?”

“You tell me? I’m willing to drive a couple hours for more Chinese.”

She shakes her head. “It has to be bigger than that.”

“Bigger?”

“Much bigger.”

Should I be worried?

She gives a wicked laugh. “I got it. If I win, you have to suffer through the Holland family Christmas party.”

I blink. “Really? This is the best you’ve got? Done and done.”

“You have no idea what you’re agreeing to.”

“Are you calling my bluff? It can’t be that bad.” Mrs. Holland isn’t as intense as Mrs. Fiore, and I’ve met a few of Brie’s siblings already. But it doesn’t matter. I’m not losing, so there’s nothing to worry about. Is there?

Brie stares at her food before finally setting it aside. “It sounds funny saying it out loud.”

“I won’t laugh.”

“I’m the last sibling not married. Sometimes it’s easier being at the kid table than being harassed about being single. My family can be relentless.”

Something gnaws at my conscience. It feels strangely like guilt. I’m not responsible for her single status all these years later. I don’t understand how she’s not taken, but it’s ridiculous to think it’s all my fault. Right? For once my logic doesn’t convince me.

“Your family loves you, single or not. You know that.” I clear my throat, sorry I can’t help her out. My mom’s health is too important to me.

She sighs. “Yeah. I shouldn’t let it go to my head.”

“No, you shouldn’t.”

“Which is why I’m going to win so I don’t have to worry about it.”

I put my tongue in my cheek. She can’t actually think she has a chance. “Let’s get this started then. What’ll it be? Leg or arm?”

“Arm wrestling and my rules.”

Her rules means I follow the rules, but she doesn’t have to. I don’t care because it gives Brie a fighting chance. Or at least the hope of one. I might not be flexible, but I do take time to lift every day. It’s a great way for me to unwind. Now I wonder if I’ve unknowingly been preparing for this moment. I haven’t arm wrestled since high school, and I’m here for it.

I lay on my stomach and brace my elbow against the carpet, wiggling my fingers for her to come over and join me.

She is wagging her head like she can’t believe she’s doing this. I’ve followed plenty of her crazy ideas before, so she has to know this is nothing in comparison. I’m grinning like a fool by the time she lays down opposite me. I haven’t been this excited since my neighbor learned how to make homemade bread and started sending her leftovers to me. I’m finally going to convince my mom to move—or should I say, Brie is going to. I should’ve thought of doing this in the first place.

“Don’t be shy,” I beckon, opening my hand for her to take it. I don’t mean to sound flirtatious, but Brie’s eyes widen a little. She slips her hand in mine a moment later. “Your fingers are cold.” Without thinking I lean forward and blow on them,

tightening my hold to give her some heat. I'm not ready for what it does to my stomach or for Brie's blush.

"Are you cheating?" Brie starts to pull back. "You're cheating!"

"I am not."

"You're trying to weaken me. So not fair."

"It's not my fault if you can't handle holding my hand," I tease. Her reaction makes it all too easy to flirt on purpose this time. "Does this mean you're forfeiting?"

Brie put her other hand on the back of my right one, so both of hers envelope mine. "Oh, we're doing this."

Her game face makes me laugh. What she lacks in body mass and muscle, she always makes up for in sheer determination. It's good to see this side of her hasn't changed. "Ready?"

She knows it means she starts us. Then I'll watch her suffer for a minute, pretending she is making it hard for me, before I finish her off. A moment later, I feel the first pull on my arm.

Brie grits her teeth and pulls her whole body to the side.

I want to keep a straight face and be the nice guy, but she's killing me.

"How. Often. Do. You. Lift?" Each word is punctuated through her locked jaw.

"Every day."

Her round eyes make me laugh, and the action makes my arm slip a little. Not enough for her to win, but it gives her a false burst of confidence. She gives a piratical ha ha and turns her body so our arms are no longer in a straight line. In fact, she keeps traveling until she is beside me. She's on her side now, pulling with all her weight. I'm laughing so hard I can barely breathe. Her laugh intermingles with mine, along with some loud growling. My arm is getting tired, but it's the laughing that's my kryptonite.

I've got to end this, or I might actually have to attend the Christmas party, and then no one will believe me when I say we aren't dating. Which right now doesn't seem as terrible as I've been painting it all these years, but I know I'll regret it later. And I do need my mom to move to the city.

Brie's foot comes up and meets my side. What I lack in flexibility, Brie has in spades. Her bare foot digs into my side. I let out an unmanly squeal. It tickles. Bad. I think I would rather drown or be set on fire than die by tickling.

Time to finish this.

I start to lift her upper body off the ground and the tickling is replaced with her shrieks. "No! No! You can't win!"

Right before my move is finished, the front door swings open. I look over and see my mom standing there, holding a few bags in her good arm.

I don't know who is more shocked, me or her. Regardless, the wrestling comes to a sudden halt. Brie's lying next to me on the floor, her leg over my back and her arms entangled in

mine. In about two seconds flat, she springs off of me and into a sitting position. I roll up a little slower.

“What on earth is going on over here?” My mom marches into the room, her mouth gaping.

“We were arm wrestling,” I explain.

“Obviously. I could hear you two from the sidewalk!” She sets down her bags and folds her arms. “Haven’t you learned you can’t win over girls this way? Brie, did he try to make a bet with you?” Before either of us can say anything, she says, “Oh, Rock. Really?”

Wow. My mom had me.

“I’m glad I showed up when I did. Honestly, taking advantage of Brie like that. Never mind. I brought you some things to make it more comfortable over here. I have more in the car.”

“I’ll help you grab them.” Brie jumps up and slips on her boots. Behind my mom, Brie makes a face. A *we are in so much trouble* face. I almost laugh at the way she dashes through the door but squash it down when I glance at my mom. She’s wearing her no-nonsense look, and I don’t want to stress her out. I climb to my feet and put my arm around Mom’s shoulders.

“Thanks for thinking about me. You didn’t have to.”

She nods. “You’re right. You could have come and stayed with me on the farm.”

I wince. “Mom, you know how I feel.” The farm represents all the reasons I left.

“I know. But I guess if you were with me, you wouldn’t get to stay next door to your girlfriend and throw Chinese food everywhere. You’ll have to borrow Brie’s vacuum.”

“Mom, I told you already. We aren’t dating.” I look around and see the mess we’ve made. Somehow, we knocked over the rest of Brie’s rice. She’s not going to be happy.

“I’m not stupid. I have eyes.” Mom picks up the bags again and carries them into my room. I forget our argument long enough to try to take them from her, but she orders me to bring in more things from the car instead. I meekly obey because I realize how hard it is for her when I try to take away her independence. I want to prove to her that she can still have freedom if she lives with me.

I pass Brie in the doorway as she carries in two folding chairs. Maybe *this* woman will actually let me help her. I reach out to take them, but Brie steps back. “Don’t worry, I’ve got this. I’m a champion arm wrestler.”

“What?”

She lowers her voice. “Your ripped biceps aren’t everything.”

I lower my voice too. “Ripped? Were you admiring them?” Surprisingly, my mom hasn’t ruined my playful mood.

“Long enough to show them who’s boss. I won fair and square. Have fun with the Hollands.” Her grin sends chills

down my back. I trace back to the moment my mom walked in. Snap! She's right. Brie tapped my hand to the ground before jumping up. I'd been too distracted to realize it.

I can't believe I'm going to the Hollands' Christmas party. Worse, I'm back to convincing my mom to leave here all by myself. And obviously it's going well for me. She's clearly doing her best to make me an official Bearwood resident.

I watch Brie set up the chairs and position them like she's setting up home. It's not a bad picture. I force myself to turn away. Is it me or is my simple trip here becoming complicated?

Chapter 11

Brie

I STARE AT MY green Merry Kismet notebook at my number two wish, which is a date for the Holland family Christmas party. Maybe I shouldn't have cursed fate. Maybe this fighting for my happily ever after was a legit concept. I literally had to wrestle to get this particular wish fulfilled. It's been a few days since our awkward yet amazing night, and no matter how many times I slap my cheeks, I keep smiling.

What would happen if I intentionally tried to keep checking off the rest of these boxes? Could I do that? Could I chase after a dream? The thought gives me anxiety. There's too much at stake—like the state of my heart. I drop my notebook on my bedside table and pick up the sweater I found for Rockwell to wear to the party. Speaking of my insecurities, I'm nervous to give it to him. Instead of leaving to collect Rockwell for the party, I seek out Jocelyn.

I find her laying on her Barbie-pink bedspread reading a book. I clear my throat, and she looks up. "Do I pass?"

Jocelyn sets her book down and comes over to me. She studies me carefully with her professional eye before finger-combing my loose curls. “I approve.”

I let out the breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “Thanks.”

“Have enough fun for all of us,” she says. “It’s about time one of us was dating someone.”

“You mean, hanging out.”

She laughs. “Keep telling yourself that.”

I will. I definitely will. Before I lose my courage, I slip on my jacket and boots. I yell goodbye and head next door.

After a single knock, the door swings open. Freshly shaved and smelling heavenly, Rockwell pulls the door open wider for me. “Hey, want to come in? I need to grab my keys and we can go.”

I step inside and let him close it behind me. “I hope you don’t mind changing.”

“Is this too casual? You know my family doesn’t really do this kind of thing anymore.” His black, long sleeve polo fits snug and looks a-maze-ing, but it won’t pass the family test.

The slight vulnerability he’s showing me feels like a growing crack in the impenetrable armor he’s been wearing around his emotions. I want to reassure him, because who is more qualified to comfort a nervous person than another nervous person, but unfortunately, I need him to change.

“Actually ... I brought you a Christmas sweater to wear.” I hold it up for him to see.

He eyes the sweater and chews and purses his lips. “Does this even count as a Christmas sweater?”

I look at it. It’s fairly normal except for the random fuzzy duck on the front and the pastel stripes on the sleeves. The design had to be originally for a toddler, but some eager parent must’ve thought it a good idea to make a matching adult one. It only has one review, and it’s from a lady who remade it into a sweater for her dog. “Trust me when I say this qualifies for our party. We don’t keep our ugly sweaters to Christmas themes. The more unique the more likely to win the contest.”

Rockwell squints at it. “Does a duck count as unique?”

“I didn’t have a lot of options on this short notice.”

“Fair. What does yours look like?”

I unzip my jacket and show him my frog sweater. It’s the same as his duck one but with a frog.

“Cute.”

He’s looking at my face, not my sweater. I give an embarrassed chuckle and toss the sweater to him. “Don’t ruin your hair.”

“You like my hair, do you?” He gives me a flirtatious wink and strolls back to his room.

My heart skips enough beats, and I feel a little lightheaded. Goodbye grumpy Rockwell, and hello swoon! Too bad the

Hollands are going to reverse the mood faster than a person can name all the reindeer. Bringing him wasn't my wisest idea. But if I am supposed to get over Rockwell, my family will likely help me accomplish this better than anyone.

Once we're in the car—his car—I did offer to drive, I promise—I have to push at the crack in his armor he showed me earlier before we get on the road. I can't help myself. I want so badly to respect his privacy, but I also long for the friendship we used to have. “Is this going to be too weird for you tonight?”

“Probably.”

I wince.

He looks over and gives me a forced smile. “Nah, I mean, I'm not used to doing big family things, but you know I always pay my dues.”

“I've never beaten you before, so I wouldn't know.”

He smirks. “Yeah, I guess you wouldn't.”

I roll my eyes. “But really, if this is too much, tell me. We're friends ... at least I think we are ... and you can be real with me. I would generously let you off the hook if it's a big deal.”

I didn't want anything triggering him. He didn't seem jumpy; in fact, he gave off steady, grounded vibes, but I remember all too well the awful night seven years ago. I don't want to reopen any old wounds.

He taps his fingers on the steering wheel. “Yeah, we're friends.” It's dark out, but I see his Adam's apple bob down in

a deep swallow. “We’ve eaten together twice, and you didn’t kill me.”

“The very definition of friendship.”

“Well, I did wonder how much you hated me after the way I left.” His eyes hold the same question as if he needs to know the answer.

I wasn’t expecting our conversation to turn this direction, and I fumble for a moment for the right words. “I might have resented you a little. I didn’t like being shut out without warning.”

He nods, his whole face somber. “In hindsight, I didn’t handle anything well. I’m sorry, Brie. I hope you know it.”

I scratch my cheek, needing to do something with my hands. “It’s okay. I don’t understand completely, but I know your circumstances had to have been bad enough for you to do what you did.”

He nods again, but his face closes off. “Thanks.”

I can tell the conversation is over, and I can’t deny it hurts. He’s shutting me out again. I shouldn’t expect anything else, but remember, my brain doesn’t work logically. Friends. We’re working on a basic level, purely platonic relationship. So I steer our conversation back to those lines to avoid any more awkwardness. “So, friends, huh? Slash hero, I guess, since I did save your life.”

He winces. “Let’s not bring it up in front of your family.”

I giggle. “What about beating you in arm wrestling? Is that safe?”

“If you’re okay with me bringing up how my mom found us sprawled together on the floor.”

I choke on air. “Well said. My family will be intense enough without any of our added stories.”

He gives a soft laugh. “It’ll be fine. If you can put up with my mom, then I can handle whatever those B-named Hollands throw at me.”

“All the B names are a little much, aren’t they. Do you remember them?”

“I guess we’ll see, won’t we?”

“Good. Then we can get this party started.” My enthusiasm is forced because I have no idea what we’ve gotten ourselves into. I reach over and put on some Christmas tunes.

Rockwell’s look says, *really?* It only encourages me, and I belt out the lyrics to rub in my choice, all while keeping my finger over the buttons to keep him from changing them. If he wants to be friends again, he’s getting the real, unfiltered me.

He’s fighting his amusement by acting annoyed, which makes me laugh. Not twenty minutes later, we pull up in Rockwell’s car to my parent’s house, and I almost forget what we’re doing.

“Thanks again for driving.”

“Anytime.” It had snowed all day, covering the ground with six more inches. When I open the door, the moon makes the untouched snow in the fields sparkle like a sprawling lake of crystal. At least the deceiving beauty made for a pretty drive. I’m grateful for Rockwell. Wouldn’t it be nice to have him around more this winter? I push the thought out of my head. I don’t need a chauffeur, even if it sounds marvelous.

“Ready?” I say over the top of the car. I take one step toward my childhood home trimmed in white Christmas lights, but the sudden thought of all the strong personalities contained inside makes me hesitate. I’m not sure who will be the hardest to face: my three mercilessly teasing brothers, my two overbearing sisters, or my *We mean well* nosy parents.

Rockwell comes around to join me. “By the looks of it, you’re the one who isn’t ready.” He glances at my hands. “Are you going to be okay?”

I didn’t even notice I’m wringing them together and immediately stop. “Of course, I’m fine.”

“I thought the non-family member at the family party is supposed to be the most nervous.”

“Ha! Why would I be nervous to be with my own family?” I deliberately march up the path with him easily keeping pace.

“You tell me.”

I push open the front door, making the oversized wreath thump against the wood, and hold it open for him. “See? Not nervous.” I shut the door behind him and swallow deeply. I am

so scared. My family is going to make a huge deal about Rockwell coming. We're barely establishing our friend zone, and a night with my crazy siblings and overbearing parents is going to ruin everything. What was I thinking? I turn around and grab both his arms. "What do you say about saying hi and getting out of here?"

He puts his hands on my shoulders and makes an exaggerated effort in examining me. "Brie Holland, either you're scared, or you're embarrassed of being seen with me. I hope it's not the latter."

Any attempt he's making to lighten my mood doesn't happen because my sister, Barb, storms the entryway with her baby on her hip and her short brunette bob bouncing. "It's about time —" Barb's words fall short at the sight of Rockwell. His arms are still on my shoulders and my hands on his arms, and I can see in her eyes exactly what this looks like. Barb is four years older than me, but she knows all about our history. At least it was her who found us like this.

"Uh, hi," she says. "I didn't know you were bringing your ex-boyfriend. Or is the ex missing now?"

So much for safe. "Just a friend," I correct as we both drop our arms and inch away from each other.

She raises her brow. "No one is going to believe it. Especially with the couple sweaters you're wearing."

I glance down to the open gap in our un-zippered jackets. Dang, she's right. Why didn't I think of that?

“Shoot,” she says, her eyes widening. “Those are your Christmas sweaters, aren’t they? Didn’t you get the memo? We canceled the sweater contest this year.”

“What? No one said anything to me.” Who would end a ten-year tradition?

“We decided to put the money we were spending on ugly sweaters to charity. It was Bianca’s idea, so don’t hate me.”

My mouth drops, but I force it closed again. “How can I hate that you’re donating to charity?” I give Rockwell an apologetic glance. I would never have made him wear the very unmanly duck sweater otherwise. At least it was soft and screamed huggable. Not that I noticed.

Barb waves us in. “Come on, no reason hiding out here. You’ll be outed soon enough.”

Rockwell sends me an uneasy look.

“She’s joking.”

“And you’re not nervous at all.” He chuckles and sets his hand on my back. “Don’t worry about me. I can handle myself.”

But who was going to worry about me? Could I handle everyone thinking I was dating Rockwell when I was, in actuality, not? The idea of having a date to my family Christmas party sounded so romantic in my head, but the Hollands were going to turn this into more com than rom. I collect our jackets and add them to the overcrowded hooks on the wall.

I dutifully follow Rockwell's lead, and the two of us weave around the hall into a packed family room. My dad meets us first, slapping Rockwell on the back and squeezing his shoulder as only guys do.

“Good to see you, Rock! I heard you were back in town. I'm not surprised you found Brie so quickly. You two were always inseparable in high school. Glad you came tonight.”

“Thanks for having me.” Rockwell seems to beam under my dad's attention. I've heard his own dad hasn't really been involved in his life much since the divorce. I'm happy my dad is sharing his affectionate side at the moment and being so welcoming. Maybe I shouldn't have been so scared.

“Boys, you have another player for your game,” Dad announces.

My brothers look up from their Mario Kart pregame setup—a fierce tradition in our family almost as old as me—and several pairs of mischievous eyes look our way. Did they ever grow up? At least my two brothers-in-law are tame with their curious and disinterested looks.

“Rockwell Davenport. Nice to see you back.” Brad, the brother older than me, saunters over. I can't tell if he has friendly intentions or not.

“Brad.” Rockwell's voice is perfectly schooled.

Brad's shorter than Rockwell, but the size doesn't dim Brad's confidence. “Are you here to stay this time? Nice sweater, by the way. The duck is cute.”

Without thinking, I tuck my arm around Rockwell's. "He's only here for the holidays, so be nice."

"I'm always nice." Brad grins at me to prove it, but it drops as he turns back to Rockwell. "I hope you're man enough for Mario Kart, Rock. If you're going to stay, you have to play."

It sounds more like a threat than an invite and more like he's talking about our dating life than any game.

"Don't listen to him." I barely get the words out before Rockwell speaks.

"You know me, Brad. I can't say no to a challenge. I'll play and I'll win."

I look up and Rockwell's grinning. What's happening? He doesn't grin at me like that.

Brad slugs his arm. "Nice to know some things never change." I don't know how Rockwell passed the bro code, but apparently dishing it back to Brad was the way to his heart. "Brothers," Brad said turning to face his family on the couch, "this one is on my team."

Yep, I will never understand.

Bear's thick arm motions Rockwell to take a seat by him. I'm relieved since Bear, who was lucky or unlucky enough to be named after the town, is the oldest and a little more mature. He almost lives up to his name these days with his grizzly mop of hair and beard, but maybe it's the power of suggestion.

My shoulders relax as the game starts. I don't know how it's happened, but it's like the initiation is over and Rockwell's

passed some sort of test. I'm still trying to figure it out when Barb and my sister Bianca come up beside me.

Bianca is the only blonde in the family—and it's because of bleach, not natural color. "Come help us in the kitchen."

I've seen way too many Hallmarks and know exactly what the phrase means. They want me to spill the beans about Rockwell. But I'm onto them. "Actually, I was hoping to play Mario Kart."

"But the controllers are all in use," Bianca says. "Kitchen. Now." Her big sister eyes are big scary eyes at the moment. They want information and they aren't wavering. I glance at Rockwell and am surprised to see him looking at me. He gives me a smile. It's a wordless confirmation. He's fine and I should be fine. But can we not celebrate: a. He's checking on me, and b. His smile still makes me weak behind the knees? After the celebration, I promise to bottle the enthusiasm and keep it to myself. Forever. Because I'm still planning on getting over him. I think ...

Bianca doesn't have to hear a thing. She can probably read it all over my face. I am so not over Rockwell.

Chapter 12

Rockwell

PUTTING ON A GOOD face for Brie's family isn't hard. I never had any brothers, just Morgan. I don't really have her anymore either. She uses my parents as the reason she can't keep a job or a husband. I do my share of blaming, so I don't judge her too harshly. She's twenty-seven and young enough to create a future for herself, but she and I will always bear the weight of the dysfunctional home we left behind. Knowing this doesn't stop me from wishing my family isn't so distant. Brie's home is the stuff of dreams in comparison.

There's a lot of good-natured razzing in the tournament, and my competitive side is eating it up. Brie comes and tucks herself by my legs. Every time she brushes against me, I get distracted. Until she starts cheering for me. Then I swear, my game improves. I'm not trying to show off or anything, this is Mario Kart, but I'll take it. She hits my leg and whoops when I take an unintentional shortcut.

The brothers start complaining to their wives about not being supportive now that they're married. Brie's middle brother,

Braxton, says something about dating being so much better and gets hit in the face with a pillow by his wife.

Barb was right, they all assume Brie and I are dating. I did this to myself with my stupid wrestling bet. It's fine. Brie and I know we're friends. Our families will catch up eventually. But when Brie leans back against my legs, I wonder if I'll have to catch up too. As much as I have sworn off Bearwood and any attachments here, Brie confuses me. Our history is like a slippery slope, and being with her night after night has me voluntarily buckling up for the ride. I've told myself this is one more night and then I'll close the door forever. I don't want to ruin Brie's party by being too uptight.

It isn't until after the game ends and we crowd toward the buffet line that I start to feel uneasy. Everyone knows the drill, and families cluster together. The conversation turns to potty training and what deals they've found on toys. If I had stayed, I probably would've been talking about the same things. The idea rattles me a little. Brie hands me a plate when we get closer to the food, and her genuine smile settles me. She doesn't seem to judge me, and I can't figure out why. Her explanation in the car was too simple.

I fill up on all the homemade dishes. I don't remember the last time I had sweet potato casserole or broccoli-bacon salad. Brie has shorter arms than me, so I insist on dishing her when I can.

Mrs. Holland is an excellent cook, and I want to try everything. I don't expect her to come over and fuss over me.

She gives me a few bigger portions. There isn't room on my plate, but she makes room. I don't let my mom do this for me, even though she tries. It's nice to allow it for a moment and feel spoiled. I snag a second roll for Brie and set it on her plate. She is the one Mrs. Holland should be fussing over.

We sit down at the end of a long table, our chairs scooted close together to make room for everyone. Brie takes a bite of a fruit salad and gets whipped cream on her face. Without thinking, I quickly wipe it away with my finger.

She stills the same time her sister Bianca starts cooing. "I feel like I'm sitting next to newlyweds, the way you two keep staring and smiling at each other."

I don't blush easily, but I feel some heat creep up my neck. I was staring at Brie, wasn't I? Or I wouldn't have noticed the whipped cream.

"Bianca," Brie warns.

"What? I didn't get any good secrets out of you earlier. You can't blame me for being curious when you've never brought a guy to a Holland Christmas party before. In fact, we all know you haven't had a boyfriend in a long time. So, what's the deal between you guys? When did this start?" She motions between us and leans her elbows on the table like we're to announce our engagement or something.

The lower half of the table tunes in to us. Brie is squirming and embarrassed. My jaw clenches. I can't imagine Brie not having a date every weekend, but it's a small-town problem

not a Brie problem. I've met Bianca once or twice before, but I always liked Barb better of the two.

"We're catching up while I'm in town." I put my arm around Brie in a protective move. I don't care if it causes more whispers. I want to send the signal to back off. I know some family teasing is routine, but Brie deserves to have a good Christmas with her family.

Bianca gives me a pointed brow, unsatisfied with my short answer. Let curiosity drive her crazy. My stern look seems to make her pull back and return to her dinner.

"Thank you," Brie whispers. "She never would have dropped it if I had answered."

"What are friends for?" But friends don't keep their arm around the girl next to them. They also don't relish a closer view of nearly obscure freckles. I slide my arm across her back and focus on my food.

After dinner, the adults are directed downstairs for the next game, while Mrs. Holland decorates cookies with the kids upstairs. I remember the large open basement from high school. There is a sectional and TV on one end and a ping-pong table on the other. We played Spoons down here once and our friend dove and put a hole in the wall with his head. The walls seem to have been painted since then. They are a subtle greige now, and there is no sign of the patch job I had helped my friend do as our way of apologizing.

Today, the table is folded against the wall and the sectional pushed back to keep the floor clear. Mr. Holland takes his

place on the last step of the stairs to make himself seen better. “We are going to be playing a Holland Family mash-up of relay games and *Survivor*. For this round, we’ll divide into two teams, and from there, everyone partners up with their spouse—er, date. But in the end, it’ll be couple against couple. Points will be rewarded for each round.”

It seemed no matter how we looked at it, Brie and I were on a date. I think I was over pretending it wasn’t. At least, this way, I don’t have to bite down every flirtation bouncing into my mind—in the spirit of being on a date, of course.

Brie and I are matched up with Barb and her husband, a guy named Devon, and Bear and his wife, Rachelle. The first game is team building. “Each couple must keep a hand-sized rubber ball balanced between their shoulders while crawling to one end of the room.”

It doesn’t sound too hard until he adds, “On the way back, the couple must keep the ball squished between their heads. If you drop the ball, the couple starts over.”

I’m not sure how hard it’ll be to hold a ball between Brie’s and my head.

Brad comes over to me. “Hey, you did pretty good at Mario, but this is where the men are divided from the boys.”

I smirk. “Is that so?” I might not be confident, but I can fake it as well as the next guy.

“Yep. Winner gets a pretty epic prize. Trust me when I say, you’ll want it.”

“What is the prize this year?” Brie asks, leaning around me to see Brad better. “I’ve been out of the loop.” She looks up to me to explain. “Because I’m single, I’m not on the playdate threads, and they often forget I exist.”

Brad points to our sweaters. “Is that why you were so ungenerous with your sweater money?”

“Apparently,” Brie huffs.

I had almost forgotten about the duck blazed on my chest. Brie looks pretty no matter what she wears.

“So, what’s the prize?” Brie prompts again.

“It’s a surprise, but Bianca and Jett are in charge this year, so you know it’s going to be good.”

Brie clasps my sleeve like this is an important detail I can’t miss. “Jett is a doctor and likes to show his money off.” The show-off part was followed by a frown.

“So, we *don’t* want to win?” I wasn’t about to be too intense around their family, and I was perfectly fine holding back.

Brie has my whole arm this time. “No, it means we really want to win. Besides, I’ve never qualified for a prize before since I usually help with the kids, but thanks to you, this is my year.”

I love when she gets passionate. “In that case ...”

“Sorry, Brie,” Brad says, sliding his thumbs into the loops of his jeans. “If you were on our team, you might have had a chance. As it is, you’ll be up against Katie and me at the end.”

His wife, a thin blonde with an athletic build, slugs his arm. “Behave.”

I set my hand on Brie’s, which is still holding my arm. “Don’t worry, we’ll bring our A game.”

Brie was wrong to warn me about her party. I was all over this. Amongst our team, it’s decided Brie and I will be last. Barb and Devon go first and do pretty well. Bear and Rachelle are mismatched size wise and struggle. Brie and I aren’t exactly the same size either, not nearly as close as Brad and Katie are. I dwarf Brie in height, and we have a serious disadvantage because of it. Thankfully, Brie has natural grace, and I put in enough hours of exercise to add some athleticism. Not to mention, the other team isn’t faring much better than us at this point, and it’ll be a close match for our teams as a whole.

Teamwork is crucial. I sneak my hand into Brie’s. It fits as well as I remember, maybe even better. “Ready?”

She looks up, surprised by my touch. I tighten my hold on her soft skin and pull her closer to my side—because if we are going to win her Christmas prize, we have to be in sync, and the other team can’t know our game plan. “We won’t actually be able to be shoulder-to-shoulder since I’m taller. Keep your hip next to me and push the ball against my arm. The key will be to stay very, very close. Start slow so we can match each other’s pace. Our goal won’t be speed but to not drop the ball.”

“And on the other end when we have to hold the ball with our faces?” Right now, the couples were bent over almost in

squats with their heads together and walking sideways in wide steps resembling football players in training.

“We’ll do a bear hug-walk back. The ball might slide, but we’ll keep it tight.” Her cheeks take on a healthy pink tone. I wasn’t trying to take advantage of the situation, but I imagined I would enjoy every minute. Especially since holding her hand like this is sending a wave of adrenaline through me.

Bear and Rachelle finally make it back with the ball, and Brie and I quickly fall onto our hands and knees. She isn’t close enough. I motion to her hip and she scoots closer until her side is pressed against mine.

“There ya go,” I whisper. I shove the ball between my arm and her shoulder. “Nice and slow.”

We inch forward while Brad and Katie cruise forward, putting several feet in front of us. Brie starts to speed up. “Steady, Briezy.”

I don’t know where my high school nickname for her comes from, but it does the trick.

Near the end of the room, Brad and Katie lose their ball. Katie screams and Brad lets out a not-so-family-friendly expletive. They dart back to the starting line. At this point, we are halfway, and our ball is doing great. We make it to the end of the room right before our opponents. This time, we have to be faster. I grab Brie by the waist and pull her body flush with mine. I get distracted for a moment, lost in her bright blue eyes.

Not now, Rock.

I place the ball between our heads, wishing as I lean in that it wasn't in my way. We start our sashay across the room, and I feel like we're dancing.

Brad and Katie are right behind us, but they aren't doing the bear hug method. Our speed is awesome, but I can't tell if we are faster or slower than the others. I'm starting to doubt because I see something flash in my periphery. Then I hear screaming behind us. Did they win or drop the ball?

Then all of the sudden, the ball is removed from between me and Brie, and I am shoved from behind. I fall forward, my face and my mouth colliding with Brie's. Warmth floods through me, and I nearly miss catching the wall with my hand. Brie's body thuds back against it, and I hesitate. It's like I've been seven years in a desert, and I had no idea how thirsty I am for this kiss—accidental or not. I'm not going to make a scene and embarrass her, but I lean in for a moment, and for a sweet second, I breathe in Brie Holland.

I don't expect for her to push up on her tiptoes and lean into me. I break away before I lose my head. Because even though I really don't want to, my brain registers something important. Brie might be hurt from hitting the wall. "You okay?"

"Yeah, fine." Her blue eyes blink slowly, dazed as I am. "What happened?"

Besides how I have her pinned against the wall with my body and kissed her? I reach up to feel the back of her head. Nothing is sticky or wet with blood. "I'm not sure." I step

back and register people shrieking and yelling. The noise previously dulled around me with Brie in my arms becomes more pronounced as I pull back.

“You cheated!” Bear yells. “We win!”

Barb throws the ball at Brad and nails him in the back. Brad is laughing so hard he can barely breathe and doesn't even register the slap of the rubber bouncing off him.

“Tie! It's a tie!” Braxton screams, whooping in victory.

Mr. Holland waves his arms in the air and gives an ear-splitting whistle. “Once again, Brad cheated in the family games. Brie and Rockwell would have won if Brad hadn't stolen their ball. Their team takes the victory.”

All I care about is how the chaos covered my second of indulgence. But audience or not, it takes a single second to change a man's life. And on the other side of our unexpected collision, I'm questioning everything. Tonight represents a lot of things I've been avoiding. Facing them isn't as terrible as I had made them up to be in my head. I can't believe I'm admitting this. Kissing Brie thawed a layer of ice inside me, and I'm warming to the idea of doing it again.

What seemed to be impossible before now feels possible. Is it Brie or Bearwood casting a spell over me? Since it's been slowly happening since the moment I saw her again, I'm inclined to think it's her. I glance at Brie, and our eyes meet again. I see questions and a flicker of hope. I only have one answer for her—the next kiss isn't going to be accidental. The exit door on the friend zone is blaring red. She can't still want

me in her life—wrecked as I am—but I’ve never wanted so badly to find out.

Chapter 13

Brie

DOES A KISS COUNT if your brother is the reason behind it? Because I want to simultaneously kill Brad and thank him. My heart is pounding dangerously, but I don't think anyone has ever died of an accidental kiss before. I might be at risk for hyperventilating though, especially if Rockwell keeps staring at me, his eyes dark and probing.

"I'm fine, really," I say, as my dad announces the next game. We're switching the kids' places and heading back to the kitchen. Our team suffers from drinking disgusting concoctions. When Rockwell hesitates during his turn, I might have tipped his glass up for him, catching him off guard and hurrying the gross deed along. I make up for it in the escape room challenge when I find the hidden cell phone in between the couch cushions.

The time is ticking when Rockwell thinks to try the special face recognition app provided on our mystery phone. He holds it up to the puzzle of Santa Claus's face we'd previously put

together. The code it unlocks works on the bike lock Dad has put on the door and pulls us through a narrow win.

I grab Rockwell's arms and jump up and down. He laughs and pulls me into a hug. Bear hugs me and Rockwell at the same time and whoops a call of victory. My family can be a drag when it comes to my single status, but they really know how to put on a fun party. I might not have given them enough credit in the past. Having Rockwell's arms around me might make the whole thing a little rosier too.

Is it any surprise when the two of us win the couple award? Besides how everyone wants to put an emphasis on our couple status, we slayed the games. I hand the envelope containing our prize to Rockwell.

Rockwell rips it open. "A prepaid picture with Santa?"

I snort and bust up laughing. The look on Rockwell's face is too hilarious for me to be disappointed. Yes, I would have preferred a fancy dinner out or even movie tickets, but Bianca and Jet get points for creativity.

"Thanks, Mom, for a wonderful party!" I say to her after a quick hug. She's standing guard at the front door, bidding everyone goodnight. When I turn to give my dad a hug as he approaches, I see my mom out of the corner of my eye give Rockwell a hug.

I love her for it. He might act like a tough guy, but the Rockwell I know has a heart of a gooey cookie. It's hidden pretty deep these days, but it's there.

I'm not expecting a goodnight kiss on the steps, but we linger for a long time.

"Thanks again for tonight," I say. "You really showed up."

"It was the lucky duck sweater."

I cough on my sudden laugh. "If you don't wear it to every game in the future, it'll be your own loss."

"Oh, I'm saving this baby for pajamas. I sense a grandma somewhere knitted it with love, and that's why it's so soft."

Like a sucker, I step close and rub the fuzzy duck on his sweater showing from inside his open jacket. I've touched it a thousand times tonight already, but I want the excuse to be near him. "I can see it now, a sweet grandma in a rocking chair by the fire, thinking of a lost boy somewhere in need of a sweater."

"Lost boy, huh?" Rockwell squishes his face up. "Is that what I am?" His hand catches on the bottom of my jacket by the zipper, and he gives it a little tug.

"Yes," I obediently step closer. "A lost boy who sleeps with his lucky sweater and is scared of cats."

He shakes his head, a mock glare on his face, and steps closer too, the toes of our boots touching. My heart starts skittering. Is he going to kiss me again?

"Before you can insult me any further, I'm calling it a night." His glare slips and he doesn't move.

I don't either. There's a flirtatious look in his eyes nailing me in place. I might have dreamed about it for more than half a decade. My eyes flutter closed when his head dips lower. The kiss I'm dreaming of doesn't come. I open my eyes as Rockwell steps back. There's a smile playing on his lips.

“Night, Brie. Thanks for helping me check two fun things off my list.”

I'm about to tell him about a third fun thing called kissing me when he slips inside his place. My cheeks are hot and my heart's pounding. I'm embarrassed, but I can't complain too much. The night turned out better than I could have imagined. My hope is shining pretty bright right now, but deep down, I have fears I haven't wanted to admit to. With Rockwell gone from my side, the biggest one of all begins to dim my happiness: he's still planning on leaving. Stupid fate. I feel like I'm holding my heart in the fire, waiting to get burned.

But second chances don't come without risk. It's in every story from the beginning of time. With a shaky breath, I turn my key in the knob and go inside too.

I have to believe the Rockwell I know won't hurt me twice.

Chapter 14

Rockwell

I RELAX BACK INTO the imitation leather chair behind Travis's desk, waiting for him to boot up his computer while I scroll through the docs on my laptop. "Normal people don't talk business a few days before Christmas. What's wrong with us?"

He looks over from his monitor at me. "Who said we're normal? You and I both know single guys like us have the freedom to do things differently."

My freedom doesn't sound like such a benefit to me after last night. The family vibes are lingering hard and doing a credible job at confusing me. Not to mention my pillow no longer smells like Brie, which is hugely disappointing. I can't stop thinking about her.

"Is Bearwood working its charm on you?" Travis is way too excited behind his suave grin.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I don't believe in sorcery, but maybe it's a form of altitude sickness." What other

explanation could there be for my crazy turn of thoughts?

Travis scoffs. “Altitude sickness, really?” He wheels his chair over so he can see me better. “I knew all I had to do was get you two together and the magic would happen.”

“What are you, some matchmaker?” The Travis I know isn’t a huge romantic. His flirting could convince a girl to give him both her kidneys, but he was a happy bachelor.

“Call me Yente from *Fiddler on the Roof*. I saw how happy you were in high school and how miserable you are as an adult, and it wasn’t rocket science. But also, it would be cool to have you partner up with me, and a girlfriend might persuade you to stay.”

Travis’s online business is really taking off. He has a dozen employees, and with the right investments, he would be set to retire early. Partnering with him would mean living at a slower pace than my LA job, but I wouldn’t have to live here. I think Travis realizes that too.

I roll my eyes. “I’m happy. Content, at least.”

“Right. You have a successful job. You’ve got your gym and your volunteering, but there’s no one to share your day with.”

I swallow. He’s right. He knows because he lives a similar life. The difference is, his family is whole, and he isn’t jaded about love. He’s single because he’s driven and independent. The sole factor holding him back is finding the right girl.

I wasn’t struggling on that count. Brie is perfect on so many levels. It’s part of the problem. She’s too good. Thinking about

her makes me wish I could see her fulfill some of her dreams.

“Hey, what do you know about the space for rent next door?”

Travis looks up at me from his screen. “Well, I own it.”

“You?” I knew he had real estate but didn’t put the two together.

Travis nods. “I own this whole building strip. It has Main Street appeal, so it was a good investment. Why? Thinking about expanding once you come in as a partner?”

I shake my head. I’m thinking about how perfect it would be for Brie to teach her dance classes.

The subject drops, and we put in a full day’s work. On my drive home, I mull over our earlier conversation. If I can convince my mom to move home with me, I can put this all behind me. I can chalk Christmas break up to some good memories and rekindling friendships. The easy road is so appealing.

The hard road means facing more of my past and putting some ghosts to bed. As much as I’m interested in Brie, I’m not ready to go there.

But how to convince Mom to move? She is as stubborn as I am.

Brie comes to mind. No surprise, since she’s been hovering in my thoughts all day. My earlier plan to use her to convince Mom still makes perfect sense. It wouldn’t hurt to stop by and do a little begging. And it worked as an excuse to see her

today since I didn't already have one. Yes, it meant feeding this sudden addiction to be around her, but it's for a good cause. It wasn't the hard road; it's a detour.

I make a stop at Warren's Grocery in search of a form of bribery. I find the perfect solution and hurry home. I even turn on the Christmas music station by accident and don't turn it off. I am in that good of a mood. Good ideas always give me an adrenaline rush. It has absolutely nothing to do with seeing Brie again.

I grin. Fine. It has a little to do with it. I'm not even sorry.

Chapter 15

Brie

IS THERE ANYTHING SWEETER than opening the door and finding a handsome guy on the other end holding a gift for you in his arms? I believe not.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a bribe.”

I laugh. “How subtle.”

“Can I come in?” Rockwell is too much of a man to look boyish, but those imploring eyes are cuter than any of my first graders. I’m caving before I even hear him out.

“Of course.” I move aside for him to walk by me. Our arms brush, and he pauses in his step to look at me. Those same cute eyes turn a little heated, and my cheeks catch fire. The side of his smile slides up, and he comes fully into the room, allowing me to close the door. “So, what’s this bribe about?”

“Two things, actually.” Rockwell perches on the arm of my couch. “I need to check off some more fun from my list and

hoped you would help me do it.” He holds up the gift bag in his arms.

“So, it’s not a present for me? I’m disappointed.”

He chuckles. “It’s not Christmas yet. I just picked up this bag at Warren’s because I thought if you saw it, you’d let me in.”

“That’s low.” I take a seat on the couch. “You’re using my love for Christmas to get me to do whatever it is you have planned.”

He rotates on the couch arm so he’s facing me. “Like I said, I’m here to bribe you. I need someone to come to my mom’s farm with me. Particularly someone she loves. Someone extremely nice, who tends to say the right things at the right time.”

I lift my hand palm up and open and close it like I want him to continue. “Keep talking, because if you want me to convince your mom to move, I’m going to need a lot more convincing.”

“Come with me then. You don’t have to say anything.”

I eye him. “How will my presence help you?”

He shrugs. “You’ll make me look good.”

Now I’m laughing. “You’re funny.”

“Fine.” He stares at me for a second, but I have no idea what he is assessing me for. Finally, he says, “I might be a little nervous to see the farm again. It’s been a long time.”

I don't know what I'm expecting, but it isn't this. "Wait, you haven't been out there yet?"

He visibly cringes. "Dealing with Samson was a breeze in comparison."

For five whole seconds, I see Rockwell without his walls up. His vulnerability catches me off guard, and I don't know how to respond. "Uh, sure. Yeah. I can go with you. I've always loved your family's stretch of land."

"Thanks." His simple smile is worth my agreement. "My mom has appointments tomorrow, so it'll be the day after."

My brain starts working, and I remember my calendar. He wants to go Thursday, four days before Christmas, and the day the Wassail committee meets again. "I'm helping my mom in the afternoon that day with some Wassail Night prep. We have a million snowflakes to hang. My morning is free though. Would it work to go then?"

"How about ten?"

"Ten is great."

He lifts the bag and hands it to me.

I reach inside past the tissue paper and pull out a box of popcorn. "You know me well."

"Well, you and your roommates can't eat it all because we're stringing it for a tree I bought."

I lean forward in my seat. "You bought a tree?" I was getting serious grinch vibes from Rockwell, and I blink to make sure

he's for real.

“Don't get excited. It's three feet tall.”

“Oh, I am so excited! And don't worry about my roommates. They won't be in until later, but I will protect the popcorn with my life. I will always support a worthy cause.”

He laughs. “I bought it because I knew you would react this way.”

My heart melts into a puddle on the floor. “Are you trying to romance me?” I say it as a joke, but I don't think the words through.

His smile freezes.

I cough. “I was joking.” Sort of. Blah, I'm so embarrassed.

He nods like he understands and motions to the bag again. “There's more.”

I fish inside and find string, a pack of needles, and a DVD. I leave everything in the bag but pull the DVD out. “*Christmas in Connecticut?* How did you know this is one of my favorites?”

“I got lucky since the collection at Warren's is about a foot long. You can enjoy it after you kick me out. I won't stay long.”

I hold it in my hand, debating if I'm brave enough to invite him to watch it with me. I'm not sure if he's interested ... in me or the movie. Should I leave well enough alone? Rockwell has made it clear a dozen times how he plans on cutting ties

with Bearwood and everything in it. We might have had fun last night, but I am pretty sure I'm included in what he plans to leave behind. I was last time, so why would this be different?

I glance at my notebook, the edge of it showing between the cushions where I stashed it when the doorbell rang. I had to write a list to start this whole thing and arm wrestle to check off the second box. What would it hurt for me to put myself out there one more time? I hear Gabby's voice in my ear saying, *No regrets. I want more encouragement from him than I'm bored, and I need a favor from you.* I'm so incredibly scared of being rejected. But didn't I have more to gain than lose? I clear my throat. "Are you serious about this fun challenge?"

"I guess I am. I don't slow down often enough, and Travis and my mom keep harping on me to live a little. Not to mention, I'm on vacation, so why not?"

I peel the plastic off the DVD so my hands and eyes are busy. "How about watching this with me while we string popcorn? I guarantee it will be an unforgettable experience."

His brows lift and his brown eyes sparkle. "Really?"

I nod deeply, knowing full well we watched a dozen movies together back in the day, and I need to say something convincing. "I pause after the funny parts to allow adequate laugh time."

His lips tighten like he's holding back his amusement. "How can I say no?"

“You can’t.”

We look at each other for a moment before I remember I should be doing something. I move to put the DVD in the player under my TV, acting calm and collected, when really, I am doing a happy dance inside.

When I turn, I see Rockwell pick up the box of popcorn. “Do you mind if I start these in the microwave?”

“Do your cooking skills include microwave popcorn?”

“Ha ha,” he says, tossing a pillow at me on his way to the kitchen.

I catch it and get the movie going. A few minutes later, we are sitting side by side stringing popcorn.

After I’ve taught him how to thread a needle, I confess, “You know, I’ve never done this before.”

“What? The Christmas enthusiast with her elf-like obsession for the holidays has never strung popcorn?”

I point my needle at him. “Most people buy ornaments and strings of beads these days over making them.”

“That’s sacrilegious.”

“It’s practical.”

We both laugh. After talking for a few minutes about childhood traditions, we finally get into the movie. Rockwell’s commentary is worth every second. It’s clear he still lacks familiarity with the charm of the classics. Some things haven’t

changed. It's a good thing I am a master with the pause button so I can explain to him the beauty of slapstick comedy.

Our feet are propped on my ottoman, and we've both sunk deep into our seats. Our popcorn strings are completed, so Rockwell volunteers to make more for us to eat. After he takes it out of the microwave, he proceeds to doctor up the batch with random things from my fridge and cupboard. His back is to me, so I can't see what he's adding.

"What is this?" I pause the movie for the thirtieth time when he approaches me. "What's in there?"

"Nope. Gotta try it first." He sinks back into the couch, our hips touching.

I scrunch up my nose, knowing full well Rockwell's limited talent in the kitchen. "I don't know if I'm brave enough."

He picks up a piece of popcorn. "Open your mouth."

I shake my head and grab a popped kernel of my own. "You first." I hold the kernel up to his lips, not even thinking clearly before I graze his mouth with my fingertips. He snatches the popcorn in his teeth and part of my finger.

"Ah!" I pull back my hand and cradle it against my chest.

He dives for my hand, capturing it with his own. "I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No, it just surprised me."

He brings my fingers close to his face so he can examine them. "You touching my mouth surprised me."

My laugh sounds awkward even to me, but he hasn't let go of me yet. He picks up a popped kernel again with his free hand and moves it to my mouth. "You can take your revenge."

"I'm more worried about the popcorn."

He shakes his head. "This is as gourmet as I get."

He was wrong. Rockwell personified gourmet—a quality guy with a strong work ethic, manners, and a good heart. A girl had to search long and hard to find such an exceptional man. I know I have.

With caution, I part my lips. Rockwell leans closer and sets the popcorn just inside my mouth. It feels like slow motion, his eyes on my lips and his hand reluctant to pull back. I forget to taste the popcorn because my thoughts are consumed with Rockwell and our close proximity—a mere bowl between us.

"What do you think?"

"Amazing," I mutter.

"I hoped you'd think so."

He's pleased and doesn't let go of my hand. My opinion mattered to him. I melt a little inside, even as he settles into the couch, our shoulders and arms hugging.

I almost swallow down my next thought, but our hands entwined gives me courage. "I have another fun idea for you."

"Yeah?"

"My friends and I are going to the Holly Hoedown tomorrow. You should come and bring Travis."

He studies me for a second. “Is it still mostly attended by the senior citizens?”

I grin. “That’s the one.”

His deep chuckles pull at my stomach. “Sounds like a party. I’ll be there.”

I’m deliriously happy thinking about checking off the third item on my Christmas wish list. I mindlessly reach over him for the remote and hesitate for a glorious second before I push play. He smells better than cinnamon pinecones.

Relaxing back into the couch, I congratulate myself for taking another chance. It’s not about the movie or the dance at all, but the time together. Time I feel like I’ve waited a lifetime for. I stare at my fingers tucked in his, resting on his leg. To think I could have missed this, waiting for the perfect moment. I owe my list a thank-you for giving me the push I needed.

I know we both agreed on our friend status, but whatever this is, it’s more than friends. I hope this time, our ending will be different.

Chapter 16

Rockwell

WE SHOULDN'T HAVE STARTED a second movie. Neither of us wanted to end the night. Gabby had come in at some point but said she had a headache and went to bed. Jocelyn joined us after making herself some ramen for a late dinner but fell asleep on a pillow and blanket on the floor. Now Brie is asleep on my shoulder. I should be freaking out right now, but sitting here with our hands entangled feels so right. I had forgotten how long her eyelashes are. Before I can stop myself, I push her hair off her smooth skin and tuck it behind her ear.

Her long, soft breaths are a contented rhythm against me. I feel protective of her in a way I can't explain and have no right to feel. The world is crazy out there—trust me, I know. But for some reason, Brie seems safe because she is right here next to me. I draw a circle with my thumb against the back of her hand. I'll turn off the movie and leave her with her roommates. I don't want Brie to get a kink in her neck from sleeping here, and Jocelyn needs someone to nudge her to bed too.

I reach over her to grab the remote, and my eyes catch on something sticking out of the cushion on the other side of Brie. My guess is it's a notebook. I hit the movie off and set the remote aside. The green coloring of the corner of the notebook reminds me of the first night I came by for keys. Wait. Is that her kissing notebook? Whatever it is, it must be important to her. I bet she doesn't want to lose it in the couch.

I carefully reach over her and give the corner a tug. My fingers barely grasp the front cover, and the notebook falls open as I lift it over to my lap. I plan to set it on the arm for her to find, but my eyes fall on a colorful list she has made on the first page.

My attention is immediately drawn to my name.

#1. I want Rockwell Davenport for Christmas.

My mouth goes dry and my heart pounds. I scan the rest of the list—Brie's Christmas wish list.

#2. I want him to take me to the family Christmas party, so I don't have to be lame and go alone. Again.

I mentally place a check beside it.

#3. I want him to dance with me.

I look at Brie's hand in mine and her small, graceful fingers. It doesn't matter the style of dance, Brie floats when she moves. I wonder when she danced last. I bet it's been a while. I'm a little out of practice, but I could force myself to go for her sake.

#4. I want him to kiss me under the mistletoe.

This one would take more commitment on my part, but I will happily volunteer myself for the task.

#5. I want the happily ever after we didn't get the first time.

A lump forms in my throat. I glance at sleeping Brie, completely oblivious to what's happening next to her. I don't know if I can give her this one. I feel like I've accidentally read her journal, but I can't bring myself to close it. Like a typical schoolteacher, she has the date at the top. The date of the night I arrived.

Uncanny.

I remember seeing the gel pens sprawled next to the notebook on the ottoman the night I arrived. Whether this was written before or after she saw me really doesn't matter. The fact is, I'm what she wants for Christmas. As flattering and unreal as it is, the pressure forms into a heavy weight in my chest, crushing me farther into my seat.

Without thinking, I close the notebook. I reach over her, even more carefully than before, and tuck it back into the couch where she had likely *not* lost it but hidden it when I arrived. When it's safely out of sight, I reluctantly release Brie's hand and wiggle my arm out from under her head.

Brie rouses and blinks up at me. Those dazed blue eyes hold more of my world than should be possible after all our time apart. "Am I hurting your arm?"

"No." Is she kidding me? She's hurting my heart. "It's late. You should go crawl in bed."

Her sleepy smile pulls at me. “Thanks for hanging out with me tonight.” I take in those half-lidded, innocent eyes once more, and know I have to get out of there. “Let me gather your popcorn strings before you go.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll clean up here.”

She straightens and pulls herself up to her feet. “I can do it in the morning.” She takes Jocelyn’s arms and tells her to go to bed. Jocelyn grumbles and drags her pillow and blanket into a back room.

Brie reaches for the popcorn bowl.

I stand and, without thinking, take her shoulders in my hands. I force myself to turn her away from me and give her a gentle push. “Goodnight.”

She gives me a thankful look over her shoulder, like I’m some great guy. I wish I was. I know I at least want to be the man she thinks I am. “Goodnight,” I murmur.

I tap my hand against my leg until she’s around the corner. I gather up the string and supplies, pick up any errant kernels, and rinse the bowl in the sink. When everything is right in the room, I reach for the light switch by the door. My eyes fall to the corner of the notebook in the couch.

Part of me feels like a million bucks knowing Brie wants me. I don’t know how she forgave me for leaving, but I’m so thankful she did. The other part wants to run while I can. But if I do, Brie won’t get her Christmas wish. She’s had enough

unfulfilled dreams. It almost makes me want to forgive myself to make it possible.

I rub my forehead above the bridge of my nose. I like Brie. A lot. But no matter how much I care about her, she deserves better. I can't even see my family farm. My past has really messed me up.

I hit the switch and move to the door. I need to forget about the list. Forget about dancing or kissing or whatever comes after. I need to face the family farm and get out of Bearwood.

Brie and I could still be friends.

Even as I think it, I know it isn't possible. Not just because of the chemistry sizzling between us, but because of our history. My heart knows what it likes. It's not easy negotiating with an organ.

Thinking of her sleepy smile sends me out into the night with a wistful last glance. I can't help it. If I had a Christmas list, Brie would be at the top. But the Davenports don't do the happy ending thing well. No matter what, I won't break Brie's heart this time.

Chapter 17

Brie

I'M USED TO NEVER seeing Rockwell, so I don't know why I keep waiting for him to knock on my door, or at the very least, text my phone. His car was missing out front, so I assume he's driving his mom to her appointments or is working with Travis. Which means it's the perfect day to clean out my closet.

I throw the closet doors open and smile stupidly when I see my ugly frog sweater. I stroke it like Rockwell did with his thumb to the back of my hand last night. I stare at nothing for a good five minutes, reliving every moment in my head. I normally get excited about organizing a space, but I'm too distracted. It was a hand hold, not a proposal.

I'm losing my mind. After heaping a pile of clothes that haven't seen the light of day in a while on my bed, I justify switching tasks to picking out my outfit for the dance. I want to wear something pretty that doesn't look like I'm desperate for Rockwell to keep his eyes on me but will subtly

accomplish the task anyway. I end up trying on a dozen combinations before falling on my donation pile and groaning.

Jocelyn and Gabby find me this way a moment later.

“What happened here?” Gabby wrinkles her nose.

“I’m cleaning out my closet.”

Jocelyn comes over and picks up a skirt I discarded in my changing spree. “I’ll claim this one.”

“That one stays.” I sit up and take back my skirt.

“Wait.” Jocelyn frowns. “Are you wearing three sweaters?”

I shrug, realizing my layering method to save time had not been overly effective. “It’s cold. In here. And outside.” I hug myself to demonstrate how cold I am, but they aren’t buying it.

Jocelyn raises her pencil-perfect brows and gives Gabby a knowing look. “I believe our friend here has been searching for the perfect outfit to impress our new neighbor.”

Gabby pushes the mound of clothes aside so she can sit on my bed too. “No way would Rockwell agree to go to the Holly Hoedown. He’s not a small-town hick anymore. Our entertainment is beneath him.”

A glimmer of regret taints some of my excitement. Rockwell has been to the hoedown before, but he was probably humoring me at the time. Is he dreading going?

“We aren’t hicks,” Jocelyn clarifies.

“So why are we going again?” Gabby asks.

“Because it’s tradition.” I grab my nice skirt and slip it on a hanger. “And Rockwell doesn’t put on airs because he lives in LA now. He didn’t even blink when he agreed to come tonight.” I’m telling them as much as I am myself.

Jocelyn squeals. “I knew it! You were awfully cozy on the couch last night.”

Gabby nods. “If he is coming, it’s because of you and not because of the hoedown.”

This is a good time to peel a sweater or two off to avoid answering.

“What’s going on between you two?” Gabby pries again after my second sweater is gone. She leans back on her elbows, waiting. “And don’t tell me this is about finding closure anymore. I won’t believe it.”

“I don’t know.” I’m not lying, but I also know it’s not enough of an answer to satisfy my friends. They want the nitty gritty details, and I might as well save time and tell them. “Fine. I’m about to get my third Christmas wish granted in a week and half. It’s totally normal, and I’m not freaking out.” They both give me a look like I’m crazy. I rephrase my words into an explanation they’ll understand. “You both know I love to dance. Rockwell’s agreeing to come with me means a lot.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet.” Jocelyn smiles at me.

Gabby smiles too. “You’re such a sap, and I love it, but be careful.”

I nod. “So, are you going to help me pick out something to wear, or am I going to have to wade through this tornado by myself?”

Jocelyn shakes her head. “You can’t wear anything you own. I have the perfect dress for you.”

I let her drag me to her room with Gabby trailing behind us. Gabby keeps spouting how unpredictable this whole situation is between Jocelyn’s advice about how I should style my hair. I really should have gone to them in the first place, but I was afraid they’d make a big deal about it like they’re doing right now. Did I mention, I love every second? Because I do.

They start making up outrageous scenarios about how he’s going to kiss me tonight. Jocelyn thinks he’ll steal the mike to serenade me on stage first. Rockwell couldn’t be paid a million dollars to sing on stage. Gabby thinks he’ll knock over the punch to find a reason to get me into the janitor’s closet for privacy. Their ideas get stranger and more hilarious as we go. I’m fine with any of them as long as I get my dance first. I want my list checked off, in order, please.

After creating a second small mess in Jocelyn’s room, I model a white dress for my friends. I’m shorter than Jocelyn, so while it hits her at the knee, it’s more mid-calf for me. Its subtle A-line hem and billowy sleeves are charming though. I look in the mirror at the square neck and elastic smocked bodice that hugs my figure. I have to admit, it looks amazing with my boots.

“This is the dress,” Gabby says.

Jocelyn nods. “It looks better on you than it ever did on me.”

Jocelyn makes everything look good, so I don’t believe her. “Do I wear my hair up or down?”

“Up.” They say at the same time.

I laugh and let Jocelyn push me into a seat. I’m her model for the next hour as she transforms my hair and face. Gabby takes over my nails. I wonder why I didn’t put a makeover on my Christmas list. Being pampered like this is a strong contestant for chocolate therapy. My nerves for tonight fade with the application of red lipstick matching the color on my nails. Rockwell is going to love the hoedown. It’s going to be exactly like last night but better because we’ll be dancing.

By the time we arrive at the reception hall where the dance is taking place, my nerves are back. I’m excited for Rockwell to see me all dolled up. I don’t compare to the city girls with their regular chemical peels, Botox, and perfect highlights, but my friends have made me feel more beautiful tonight than I’ve felt in a long time.

As a result, I get asked to dance right away by a man in his seventies. I hope Rockwell shows up soon.

Chapter 18

Rockwell

I ALMOST DIDN'T COME to the dance. Last minute, I decided it would be a good opportunity to apologize for crossing lines during the movie and to reset my boundaries. The plan is on track until I catch sight of Brie through the lobby doors trimmed in red and green ribbons.

Upbeat country Christmas music resonates through the oversized stage speakers, and Brie is swaying to the rhythm with her friends on the gleaming wood floor. Her white dress radiates in the subdued light, and she easily stands out in the crowd. Her hair is gathered off her shoulders, forming an adorable knot on the top of her head. Two strands fall in front, framing her face.

Travis slaps my back, startling me. "Are you stalling? Don't make me drag you in there. I'm the one who wanted to stay home, remember?"

I try to blink away the daze created by Brie. How am I supposed to redraw lines when all I want to do is hold her in my arms and tell how I really feel. My heart races. I shake my

hands, trying to get a grip on myself. I'm a nervous wreck. I'm not used to these emotions. My dormant feelings are springing alive at the sight of her.

Man, Brie is beautiful.

"I'm ready," I lie. I'm not ready. I'm falling and I have no idea where I'm going to land. My plan is weaker than I thought. Or maybe that's me. After reading her Christmas list, I know this isn't just a dance. It's a commitment. If I cross this one off, I'll want to keep going until we reach the end. Together. I swallow.

I'm still planning on leaving Bearwood.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and my chest falls. "It's my dad."

"What?" Travis asks.

"My dad is calling me." The man who taught me how to leave.

"Are you going to answer it?"

"I don't know." The pull between me and Brie is tightening, and I want nothing more than to shove my phone back into my pocket and forget about it. Dad probably wants to talk to me about his *other* family he lives with now. We talk maybe once or twice a year, and it's all I can handle. It's always a long conversation, and usually prompted by his guilt. He always ends with an apology and tells me he loves me.

I don't hate him like I used to. I've worked hard to let go of the disgust and anger. Spending time together is another story.

Forgiveness doesn't always equate to trust. I know he's trying though, and he'll always be my dad. It'll mean a lot to him to talk at Christmas time. Last we talked, things weren't going so well with his new wife, and he was down.

The call goes to voicemail, but a text quickly follows.

DAD: *Call me! We need to talk.*

I glance up at Brie. If I stay, I'll only put off the inevitable. I know what I have to do, and my dad's call is a timely reminder.

"Travis, can you go in without me?"

"Who, me?"

I nod and though it hurts to say it, I add, "I want you to dance with Brie too."

"I'm not dancing with your girlfriend."

I can't claim the privilege of that title, but I don't correct him. "I'm not happy about you dancing with her, but Brie deserves to dance with someone in her own age bracket." By the looks of it, the senior citizens are in the majority again. An image flashes in my mind of Travis dancing with Brie, and I hesitate. He's too good looking, and while I don't find him charming, I can see how he would have that effect on women.

"Try to keep some distance between you."

Travis gives me a sly grin. "I prefer to hold my women close."

I narrow my eyes, even though I know he's goading me. "A foot, at the least. If you can't fit another person between you, you're too close."

Travis chuckles. "Do you want me to stop and measure?"

He thinks I'm joking, but I'm not. "Do you have a measuring tape on you? Never mind. Download one of those measuring apps."

"Absolutely not."

"Don't look her in the eyes either."

His brows raise. "Where would you rather have me look?"

I scowl. "At her forehead."

"Next you'll tell me what I'm allowed to talk about."

"That's not a bad idea. Stick to the weather. Unless you want to put in a good word for me." I don't know why I add that, since it won't change anything. I've made up my mind.

"Why would I compliment you when I'm dancing with her?" He's annoyed, and for good reason. I dragged him here against his will, and now I'm making him dance with a girl he's not allowed to flirt with. If I hadn't found a way for him to dramatically increase his profits this morning, I wouldn't be able to get away with it.

I slap my hand on his shoulder. "Fine, don't do anything that would make me mad." I back up a few steps. "Thanks, man. I owe you!"

Once I'm outside, the night surrounds me in a blanket. My fingers fumble out a text to Brie.

ROCKWELL: *Something came up and I won't be able to make it tonight. I'm sorry.*

It's not good enough, and I know it. I'm ruining her Christmas wish. I sigh and quickly hit Dad's contact info before I change my mind. I hold my phone to my ear as I walk back to my car.

"Rock!" Dad yells into the phone. "Merry Christmas!"

His outgoing personality wins him a lot of friends, and it also won him a second family. I push my negative thoughts aside and return his greeting. "How are you?"

"I have my good days and bad days." I listen to him talk about his job and his golf buddies. He usually keeps things surface level until he's ready to talk about anything real. I respond politely, even when, predictably, he brings up his wife and two sons. I never make it to my car. The cold winter air is brisk, but it's what I need right now. I crave to feel something other than the mounting frustration.

I don't hear Dad's words anymore. I'm back in my kitchen with Mom sunk against the cabinets on the floor openly weeping. The wheels of Dad's suitcase grate against the wood on his way out the door, an eternal echo in my memory. I easily put Brie in Mom's place and clench my teeth together. I don't want the kind of power over someone where I'm capable of hurting them.

Even though I know this, I want to be inside with Brie. I hate that I want it so badly. I wish I wasn't Rockwell Davenport but someone else. Someone who isn't messed up. Like Travis. But not Travis. What had I been thinking, sending him to dance with her? My chest tightens like someone put a vice inside of me.

There's a row of windows along the side of the reception hall, and before I can tell myself how completely immature it is to spy on Travis and Brie, I'm in between the evergreen bushes with one hand cupped over my eyes as I peer through the glass.

The blinds are open, so it's easy to see inside. I partially hear Dad list the presents he bought his boys while I search out Brie. She's not hard to find again on the dance floor. My lips pull up all on their own but freeze when she laughs at something Travis says. I thought I told him to talk about the weather!

As they glide closer to the window I'm standing by, I realize how close they're dancing. It's not terrible, but there certainly could not be a person between them. I hit the window to get Travis's attention. Brie looks over at me and I jerk back. What was I thinking?

"You there, Rock?" Dad's voice echoes in my ear.

I retreat from the window and hurry to my car. "I'm here." Though I'm not sure why. I should've left the dance hall before I made an idiot out of myself.

"Good, because there's a lot we need to catch up on."

I sigh and let myself into my car. It's better this way. At the end of the day, I'm still a Davenport. Talking with Dad makes that point clear.

Chapter 19

Brie

I PRETEND TO LOOK at something out Rockwell's car window on our way to his family farm so I can steal another glance at him. I don't want to make my concern obvious, but I'm worried about him. He's got a death grip on his steering wheel, and his lips are pressed so tightly they're disappearing.

After last night, there's a weird tension between us. I'm disappointed he didn't come to the dance. Crushed, really. My list failed me. If I couldn't check off number three, I couldn't expect to get to the last one, our happy ending. I didn't want to fool myself, but my smarting heart says otherwise. Rockwell apologized several times when he came to pick me up. I suspect he's responsible for the salted chocolate caramels left on my doorstep last night too. The sticky note with my name on it was a dead giveaway. He probably didn't think I'd remember his love for sticky notes, and admittedly, the chocolates did help ... a little.

He even said I didn't have to come today if I didn't want to, but how could I say no? From the moment I saw him today,

his confident expression was missing. He said something about his dad calling last night but didn't go into details. He didn't have to. I could see the effect of the conversation in his eyes. Whatever happened, I'm sure it was more important than a silly dance with me. Either way, I can't let him face the farm on his own.

I only wish I knew what was consuming his thoughts. I want nothing more than to go back to Tuesday night when we were holding hands on my couch and so happy. My worry for him grows until I have to say something.

"The snow-dusted trees and fields are beautiful, aren't they?"

"Hmm?" He looks at me with raised brows. "Sorry, I missed what you said."

"Oh, nothing." We fall back into an awkward silence. I fix my gaze on the road for a few minutes, remembering a time when I struggled to talk about something hard and Rockwell wouldn't let it go. After a semester of high grades my senior year, I was devastated to learn that the most intimidating teacher in the school gave me my first B. I was too paralyzed to do anything about it. Rockwell's encouragement persuaded me to discuss the possibility of retaking my final with the teacher. Despite my initial refusal, Rockwell dragged me in there. He did all the talking while I cowered behind him, my hands shaking. I got a migraine afterward from the stress, but I retook my final and passed the class with an A.

I can't let him keep fighting his own battles. I turn in my seat. "I can tell something's bothering you. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Nah, I'm fine." His rigid posture says otherwise.

He's scared. He would never say it, but I can sense it. "It's okay to not be fine. It's been a really long time."

Rockwell arches his back and shifts in his seat. When he settles, his mouth relaxes along with his shoulders. "I don't know how you can be worried about me after I bailed on you last night."

"I already told you it's fine. I had a great time with Travis."

Rockwell swerves on the road. "What?"

I grip the side of my seat. Woah. Was that an accident or is Rockwell ... jealous? I attempt a small experiment. "Oh, yeah," I say slowly. "He's a great dancer."

Rockwell's frown deepens and his eyes narrow. "We can't be talking about the same guy."

Yep, he's totally jealous. This is unexpected. I want to push again, but if I keep it up, we won't make it to the farm safely. "Actually, he was a really bad dancer."

Rockwell's jaw relaxes.

I try to hide my smile. "I can see why you two are friends though. He's got a great sense of humor. I didn't notice that about him before."

Rockwell steals a glance at me. “He *is* a good friend. I hope he remembered that and behaved. Did you have a good night then?”

I nod. I forced myself to enjoy the dance after I received his text. It hadn’t been easy with all the doubting and overthinking. I try to think of something I can share that doesn’t involve my complicated emotions. “A strange guy outside of the reception hall put his face up to the window and smacked the glass as we were passing by. It freaked me out. A few of us went outside to see if we needed to call the police but couldn’t find him.”

Rockwell scratches his head. “That’s ... disturbing.”

“I know.”

After a second, Rockwell clears his throat. “He sounds like a peeper. I bet he’s running around somewhere with his foot stuck in a flowerpot.”

I smack his arm. “You can’t compare the two scenarios. Besides, I wasn’t peeping that time. I was checking on you!”

“Maybe this guy was checking on you.”

“Not likely. He was probably drunk and dangerous.”

Rockwell chuckles and shakes his head. It’s good to hear him sounding normal again. We fall into another silence, but this time it’s more comfortable. Rockwell breaks it when he says, “Thanks for understanding about me and the farm. I never wanted to come back. I wanted to write off this whole town and put it behind me forever.”

I love this town—the scenery, the people, the memories. It’s hard for me to completely understand how he could group it with what happened to his family. I want to understand though. If he’ll let me. “Has it been so bad to be back here?”

His eyes zero in on mine. “Not as bad as I was expecting, actually.” He blinks once and sweeps his gaze back to the road. “I suppose the time away helped.”

He’s talking about Bearwood, not me. My imagination is running wild again. “I bet seeing the farm won’t be as bad for you either.”

“I hope you’re right.”

He’s still watching the road, but his gaze seems much farther away. My guess is he’s reliving the past. Rockwell’s parents had surprised everyone with their announcement to divorce, but especially him. I remember hearing from my mom how they’d wanted to divorce for many years but had stayed together and acted as the happy family until Rockwell’s graduation. They hadn’t meant to tell him that very day, but they’d had a big fight, and Rockwell had walked right into it. There was a messy land battle too, which Sandy won, but Rockwell had been in the thick of it for two long years.

My mom had grown closer to Sandy since the split, and some of the things I’d heard really shocked me. Rockwell’s dad hadn’t been faithful for many years and had another woman he loved and a child too—a new half-brother. They married soon after the divorce finalized and have a second

child now. They don't live close, but Rockwell's dad has a few friends left in town and word gets around.

I don't blame Rockwell for refusing to come back. A big part of his life had been a lie. But like the town of Bearwood, I don't think I should be included in everything he turned his back on. Even if he didn't want to date after everything, I could have been his friend. I don't know how he survived those first years away. I barely did, and I had a big support group.

"Is all this snow depressing you?" Rockwell asks, stealing a glance at me.

I blink away my stupor. "No, I'm not sad."

Rockwell doesn't look convinced. "You look like you're going to cry. Is it because you know you're going to have to go out into the cold in a minute?"

"Very funny." I softly slap his arm again, but secretly I want to stroke it and tell him how proud I am that he relaxed enough to crack a joke.

Rockwell turns the car onto the long gravel drive leading to the Davenport farm. Someone's plowed it today, and the tires crunch against the snowy rock surface.

"Maybe I'm not cold, but I'm going to fall asleep at this speed. If you go any slower, your mom is going to think you're an old lady coming to visit."

His eyes widen. "At least I'm not going to be that old lady someday."

“At least I’m not that old lady right now.”

“Ha!” Rockwell shakes his head. Then out of nowhere he steps on the gas, and I squeal. We fly down the road and I grab his arm. “You’re going to kill us.”

“Better to die than to take your accusations.”

I clench my teeth and say a little prayer so we don’t slide right into the house when he finally stops. Rockwell peels in front of the house and slams on his brakes. The car does a quarter turn before it halts almost perfectly in front of the steps.

I’m breathing hard, even though I literally haven’t moved for the last thirty seconds. “I almost peed my pants.”

Rockwell laughs and takes my hand off his arm, squeezing it in the process. “Thanks for coming with me. I knew there was a reason I invited you.”

“So you could kill me?”

He laughs again and leans over the console toward me. I think he is going to kiss me, but he stops a few inches from my face. “So you could distract me.”

“I thought I was helping talk to your mom.”

He shrugs, his eyes locked on mine. “You’re a woman of many talents.”

Heat floods my cheeks. “Thanks for noticing.”

He grins and his head comes closer. I swallow, anticipation pumping my heart into overdrive. And then he unlocks my

seatbelt for me. “Let’s get this business over with so we can take another joyride.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. I clamor out of my seat. Is it wrong I’m hoping his leaning toward me with that flirty look in his eyes is part of the joyride I can anticipate? Or am I once again acting the fool by believing Rockwell is going to finally tear down his walls and let me in? I give the car door an extra hard shove like it’s symbolic of closing off my uncompliant thoughts before looking up at the Davenport house.

It isn’t what you’d guess when you think of a farmhouse. It’s got a modern cabin vibe with large, black-trimmed windows and an extensive porch. It isn’t as big as my parent’s place, but it’s probably worth more. I always thought it rivaled the houses featured in magazines. The front is one story, but the back has a daylight basement, and it’s practically all windows with a view to make even a non-outdoorsman drool.

Rockwell slows his step, and I can tell some of his previous easy manners are slipping.

I loop my arm in his. “Don’t make me call out your grandma pace again.”

He pulls his arm in, tightening me to his side. “A grandma can’t throw you over her shoulder and toss you into the pond.”

Did I mention the Davenports have their own pond? A quaint but neglected body of water full of cattails and algae. I narrow my eyes. “You can’t. It’s frozen.”

“We can carve a hole first with my super grandma strength.”

I can't hold back my laugh. "Super grandma strength?" We walk up the steps to the door. "Now this I have to see."

The door flies open. Sandy has the biggest grin on her face. "You came home! You actually came home." She throws her good arm around Rockwell and starts sobbing. The moment is so tender. Rockwell's home again. I know what it means to me, but I can only imagine what it means to Sandy.

I try to release Rockwell so he can return the hug, but he's not letting me go. Finally, he relinquishes me, and I step back. It's only then he grabs my hand instead. Goosebumps run down my arms. He does need me. All these years, I waited for him to need me. It feels pretty amazing to have him finally letting me help—even if it's just to hold his hand.

Chapter 20

Rockwell

AFTER ALL THIS TIME, I'm finally home. It's weird and I'm not sure how to feel. For a long time, this place has represented the worst day of my life. Mom pulls Brie and me inside and rushes off to make hot cocoa while we shed our coats. I stomp my feet on the rug and take in the walls of my past. Some things are different—the drapes, the rug under my feet, and the TV is smaller. But the couches are the same, the pictures on the walls of me and Morgan, and there's an overall smell of clean linen and pine.

I swallow right as Brie tugs on my hand. For a moment, I forgot she's with me.

“Let's join your mom in the kitchen. We can start talking about your plans.”

Brie knows exactly what I need. A mission. Something to keep my mind in the present. “Sounds good.”

I let her lead me into the next room even though I know the way better than she does. I know I've sworn off dating her,

sworn off deep relationships in general, and sworn off being another Davenport wreck, but right now I'm grateful to have her by my side.

We slip into the stools up against the mahogany island. I remember how excited my mom was when my dad finally finished remodeling this kitchen. The countertops are a gleaming tan marble streaked with darker veins. I was sitting right here when my parents had their big fight and revealed all their heart-wrenching secrets.

“How have you been feeling, Sandy?” Brie asks.

“A little slower this morning, until you two got here. Now I find I've got an extra skip in my step.”

Brie nudges me, but I'm not sure where to start. I'm seven years younger and feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders. I hate how my parents did this to me. I hate how they weren't honest from the beginning instead of playing pretend for so long. My mom deserved to have her life back sooner. I hate how I was the reason she suffered for so long. They shouldn't have delayed until my graduation and should've ripped off the Band-aid years earlier. Waiting allowed an unhealed wound to fester, affecting my mom and even Morgan.

Brie starts talking again. “What do you think of Rockwell's plans for you to move to LA with him?”

Mom sets a steaming cup of cocoa in front of Brie and turns to grab the second mug for me. I want to jump up to do it for her but know she'll get mad.

“I still hate it as much as the first time he asked me.” Mom grabs a washcloth and starts wiping the counter where some chocolate dribbled in a streak. “I was born out here and plan to die here too. My granddaddy bought this land, and my dad took it over from him. I want to keep it going as long as I can. It’s my way of thanking them for their sacrifice and for gifting me their home.”

“It’s a sweet way to honor them.” Brie smiles over her mug before lifting it to her lips.

I find my voice. “It is sweet, but not practical. I can’t take care of you if you stay here.”

“That’s why I have good neighbors,” Mom replies.

“Mom, you’re miles away from your closest neighbor.”

“Someone stops in nearly every day to check on me.”

“I want to be the one to check on you.” I grip my cocoa but don’t have any intention of drinking it.

“And you should be,” Mom says. “It wouldn’t hurt you to visit more than once every seven years.”

The dig hurts. “You know why it’s been so long.”

“I know. And it’s time you made peace and moved on.” She glances at Brie and smiles. “Brie is the right person to help you.”

Brie starts chugging her hot chocolate, clearly hiding behind it.

I want to laugh at her, but I can't be amused right now. I need to persuade Mom this time. "I brought Brie out to help convince you to move."

Brie chokes on her drink.

My hand goes to her back, and I take the hot chocolate from her. "You okay?"

She coughs. "Fine. I'm fine."

I jump up and find her a glass of water. "Drink this."

She gulps it down. "Thanks."

Her voice is still scratchy, and I feel a little guilty.

"See," Mom says, "you're even making Brie uncomfortable with all this moving talk. If someone has to relocate, why can't it be you? There's plenty of room here, you're working more online these days, and you'd see Brie more often. It's a win-win."

I wasn't prepared for this sudden reversal. "Uh ..."

Brie jumps in and saves me. "Didn't you say we were going to walk to the pond?"

I scratch my neck. "Yes ... I did."

"What a lovely idea." Mom takes my mug out of my way. "I'll get this cleaned up while you two talk for a minute."

Why do I feel like she's won the argument and I've lost? Again. For the moment, I don't care as much as I do about getting out of the house. Brie and I grab our coats. The cold is refreshingly brisk on my hot face. My feet move one in front

of the other toward the pond. Brie rushes to keep pace as I walk around the house and away from the barn.

“I thought that went well.”

I look over my shoulder. “In what way did it go well?”

“I didn’t die from choking?”

I chuckle and slow my pace so she can catch up. “That *is* a relief.”

“So, when are you moving back to Bearwood?” I know she’s teasing me, so I tease her back.

“Next week. I love living in my unfurnished duplex and dreaming of cats attacking my face.”

“I hear you have a pretty great neighbor.”

I know she’s trying to cheer me up. She has a knack for it. I bump my arm with hers. “She’s alright.”

“Alright enough to tell you I don’t think you’re going to convince your mom?”

I sigh, long and slow. “I worry about her. She’s so far from a decent hospital. She can’t travel as much as she used to either. I know I can come here more, but it’s not the same as her being in LA with me every day, minutes from the best doctors. I have two tickets home for the day after Christmas. I really hoped she’d come.”

“I know it’s not much, but I can come out to the farm on the weekends, and I know my mom sees her once a week for book club.”

“Thanks, it means a lot. Maybe I should move back.” My foot fumbles when the thought lands. Wow, I can’t believe I even thought that. Maybe it’s because I finally agreed to visit Dad next summer that I’m thinking I might as well throw my life around some more. I shake my head. I must be crazy. “I have a whole life I’ve built in LA. It would be hard to walk away.”

“We’ll figure out a compromise,” Brie says, reading my emotions like an open book. “Don’t worry too much yet.”

All I’ve done is worry about Mom lately. “Did you mean it when you said it’s okay to not be fine?” Right now, I feel like the poster child for not being fine.

Brie nods decisively. “We all go through hard seasons. That’s part of life.”

I shove my hands in my coat pockets. “I agree. We each have our struggles, and the Davenports are clearly in the relationship department.”

Brie stops abruptly. “Rocky, you’re not your dad.”

She doesn’t know that. I face her so I can explain why she’s wrong. “We share the same genes. We both love basketball, have the same annoying cowlick, and get stomachaches when we eat too much ice cream. Look at Morgan. She’s certainly struggled. And I’m not without my own mistakes.”

She folds her arms across her chest almost like my ideas, these weapons which keep stabbing me, don’t even frighten her. “Seasons change. Winter doesn’t have to last forever. You

can be whatever kind of person you want to be.” She shakes her head, and in a strong tone I don’t hear very often from her, she adds. “I always thought you took after your mom anyway. Don’t make me change my mind.”

I’m not expecting to fight my smile. She took all my arguments and made them look like possibilities instead of absolutes. Is it truly as simple as deciding not to be like my dad? I know I’m not just a Davenport. I’m my mother’s son too. I swallow. My winter can end. I could kiss that smart aleck look right off her face. “We’d better talk about something else. That look on you is dangerous.”

Brie starts striding forward again and I follow suit. “It is dangerous, so don’t even think of throwing me into any pond.” Brie shoves her finger into my chest. “Remember how I saved you back there? Don’t you dare try anything.”

I vaguely recall throwing Brie into my pond a time or two back in our high school summer days. Okay, not vaguely. Vividly. A wicked grin crosses my face. “No promises.”

She puts a wide berth between us, and I almost regret my threat. Being home again is hard, but being with Brie is as easy as breathing. She’s a ray of sunlight against the icy fields and a steady heartbeat infusing life into my soul.

How can I walk away from her again?

I can’t.

Chapter 21

Brie

I LAUGH WHEN ROCKWELL knocks on my door the next morning and lets himself in before I get there. “It looks like you’re getting comfortable here.” I’m elbow deep in sugar cookies, and I’m glad I didn’t have to try to open a door with my messy hands.

“I might be.” He shrugs, his easy swagger from the door revealing how truly comfortable he is. “I might also need some real company after spending the morning with Travis.”

“Don’t let him hear you say those words.”

“He knows how I feel.” Rockwell leans on the kitchen counter and grins at me.

Something’s different. After all he faced yesterday, his ready smile is unexpected. I stupidly grin back.

“So, what’s on your agenda today?” he asks.

I love how he wants to know my schedule, and I assume, plug himself into it. “Thanks to you and your help yesterday

afternoon with Wassail setup, I don't have much to do until tomorrow night."

"Except bake cookies." He motions to my flour mess.

"Oh, this isn't a big deal. It'll only take me a couple of hours to finish up here."

"A couple of hours? Sounds like nothing."

I nod. "I'd let you help except we're selling these to earn money for the after-school program."

"And they can't look like my wrapping paper job?"

I smother my laugh. "Your words, not mine."

"Can I roll the dough out for you?"

He really wants to help in the kitchen again? Either he's really bored or ... I don't want to finish my thought. I don't want to get my hopes up only to be dashed again. I know his plans to leave, but when he acts like this, my hopes start flying of their own accord. I don't even have the list to depend on anymore. "Are you sure you can handle it?"

He starts rolling up his sleeves. "Depends on how good you are at directing me." He winks and comes around the counter to stand beside me. I don't know why my pathetic heart is suddenly all seized up. It's not like I've never seen muscled forearms, been winked at, or had a guy stand next to me before. Ever since our walk around the pond yesterday, we've been pretty comfortable again together—which is why my heart is on overdrive. Needless to say, the caution tape around my feelings is losing its adhesive power.

I hand him a ball of dough and explain the thickness and size I'm looking for. He gets right to work while I carefully monitor him—I mean the dough. I tilt my head so I can see his face better. There's nothing obvious about it. Man, I'm weak.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks, meeting my intent gaze.

Nothing profound comes to my mind to cover the obvious. “Uh ...” I scan the room, looking for an idea to latch on to. I see my Kismet notebook on top of the TV. Why did I keep leaving it out? “Just that I think you should write a Christmas list.”

His eyes follow mine to the notebook. “Oh, really?”

I give a nonchalant shrug to draw his attention away from it. “It's a fun exercise.” And it worked wonders for me. “Besides, you need a few more things to do before you're stuck going to Wassail Night tomorrow.”

“Yeah, Wassail Night's not happening. I'd rather write a list.”

As long as Rockwell puts me at the top of his list. I smirk. Maybe I had better write it for him. I wouldn't want to risk it otherwise. I should be leaning into what my heart is telling me about the two of us; instead, I want proof that something's happening. Concrete proof. The list is an easy fix. I imagine how insightful it will be.

“What's the smile for? It's just a list, right?”

I straighten my face. “Just a list.”

“For stuff I want?”

“Or dreams you hope for, or even relationships ...” Shoot! Why did I say that? I wipe my hands on my apron because cleaning them off long enough for this activity is entirely worth it.

Rockwell moves behind me. “I see a notebook over here. I’ll get a paper.”

I follow where he’s looking and realize he’s sauntering toward my Kismet notebook. “Wait!” I yelp.

But Rockwell doesn’t wait.

I sprint around the counter and instead of leaping like the dancer I am, I dive like the baseball player I am not. I’m desperate to get to him before he sees my list of wishes all about him. One arm lands around his waist and the other around a leg.

Rockwell grunts at the unexpected contact but keeps moving the last foot to the TV despite me dragging every pound of my body to stop him. He picks up the notebook. “What’s the matter, Briezy? I thought you wanted me to write a Christmas list?”

I release him and snatch the notebook back.

He lets me with a deep laugh. “You’re serious about this aren’t you?”

I nod through my winded breathing. “It’s an important Christmas tradition.” Then I swat some straggly hair out of my eyes from my embarrassing tackle.

He narrows his eyes. “Wait, are you trying to hide *your* Christmas list from me?”

“What a ridiculous idea.” I rip a page from my Kismet notebook and find a pen and a book for him to write on.

He takes the supplies, amusement dancing in every annoyingly handsome feature. Oh, he so owes me the best list ever. I reluctantly retreat to wash my hands so I can get back to the cookies. I take my notebook with me, stashing it in a drawer. It’s killing me not to watch over his shoulders, but I resist.

“How many things should I write down?” he asks as he takes a seat on the couch.

I stick a pan of cookies in the oven. “It’s your list, not mine.”

Rockwell taps the pen on his jaw a few times and grins.

Why is he smiling like that? “Do you, uh, need help?”

“It’s my list, not yours,” he throws back with a teasing voice.

I smirk. He’s not very funny. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

He doesn’t though. He takes the task very seriously and stays bent over his paper for a good fifteen minutes. Occasionally, I catch him looking at me. It’s a serious, pondering look. I really wish I knew what he was thinking.

I get another two pans of cookies cut and ready to bake. “What’s taking so long?”

“I’m finished.”

My lack of patience is obvious. “How many things did you ask for? A hundred?” I dust off my hands on my now covered apron. “Never mind, come show me.”

He holds it to his heart with exaggeration. “Absolutely not.”

I’m not prepared for his answer. I try to imagine what’s on his list. A home gym? His mom moving to the city with him? My curiosity cooks faster than the cookies, and I’m burning to know. I hurry over to him. “Tell me one thing then.”

“Nope, sorry. It’s for Santa’s eyes only.”

I glare at him. “Seriously?”

His smile stretches wide. “Seriously.”

I reach for it, and he stretches his arm high in the air where I absolutely cannot get it. I’m not five, so I’m not about to jump either. But I’m tempted. Sorely tempted. It’s not like I’m on his list, so I don’t know why I care. “Well,” I say in my best dignified voice, taking a step away from him and clasping my hands behind my back. “I hope it was a fun activity for you.”

A mischievous glint flashes in his eyes. “Thrilling.”

Thrilling? What in the world does he mean by that? He’s being facetious and messing with me. I don’t take the bait and force myself back to my cookies. Rockwell assists me in prepping squeeze bottles with royal icing.

I can’t stop thinking about his list. It’s hidden safely in his back pocket, and I doubt he’s planning on pulling it out for me to see later. “Can’t you give me a single hint about your list?” I suddenly say.

Rockwell laughs before suddenly sobering. “You show me yours, and I’ll show you mine.”

I’m not expecting the tables to turn. “Uh ... mine is boring. Total snoozefest. Not worth your time.”

He shrugs. “Then this is off-limits. I put my heart wish on here.”

Heart wish? Did that phrase come out of Rockwell’s mouth? And what the heck does it mean?

“Unless you’re revealing yours,” he continues, “this baby stays with me. I’m not letting it out of my sight until Christmas. Which is too bad because I may not be a writer, but this list is more poetic to my soul than Shakespeare.”

I hold back every urge I have to fall to my knees and beg. “Keep it.” The two words come out strangled and forced, but nothing is going to entice me to give him my list.

He shrugs. “Fine. It’s your loss. Don’t try anything, either.” He raises his brows. “I mean, you can *try*, but you’ll fail.”

Does it make me normal or not normal if I admit his words sound like a challenge? I had to know his list before, but now I might actually die if I don’t.

An hour and half later, we’re finished, and my mess is cleaned up. You’ve guessed it, I’m still thinking about his list. Correction, I’m obsessing about it. He has two and a half days left in Bearwood, and I don’t think he’s concerned about leaving me. I, on the other hand, distinctly remember how lonely I was before he showed up. I’m not ready for him to

leave. And the idiot probably didn't put me on his list! Why do I care so much about a silly catalog of wants meant for the garbage?

Heart wish?

I'm losing my mind.

"You seem distracted," Rockwell says, draping a wash rag on the sink. "You're not still thinking about my Christmas list, are you?"

"Of course ... not." That was the hardest lie of my life.

"I guess I'm the only one. You were right about this being an important tradition. I don't think I've ever had a wish I wanted more." He pulls the list out again, rubbing his thumb over it like it's a winning lottery ticket and holding it just out of my reach.

I know he's taunting me. Should I tackle him again and go for the paper? I'm contemplating my odds when my roomies barge in. They freeze momentarily when they see me and Rockwell. Yikes, I'm hovering like I'm ready to pounce on him. I straighten and that seems to cue them to take over the couch. No one can mistake their excited faces. They think they're going to witness some entertainment.

"What's going on, ladies?" I say, coming over to them. My voice might not be as welcoming as my words, and my wide, pointed stare doesn't help. It's not like I don't want them here, but I am super busy trying to think of ways to see Rockwell's list and would prefer if they left again. Unfortunately, they live

here too, so there's not a lot I can do about it other than hint or beg.

Jocelyn shrugs. "We hurried home to tell you the latest Wassail drama, but it looks like you're busy."

I guess I can put the list obsession on hold for a minute for the sake of Wassail Night. "How is there drama?" I ask, my eyes disobediently flicking back to Rockwell's hand and the paper he's holding. "Everything was fine last night."

"It only takes a minute to break a leg."

"What?" Now they have my complete attention.

"Who broke their leg?" Rockwell sits on the ottoman, stretching out his long legs and crossing them at the ankle.

"Sam Henderson," Jocelyn says.

"Poor guy," I mutter just before groaning. "Wait. He's in charge of the Snowball Slam event. It's a crowd favorite. Who's the backup?"

"No one," Gabby says. "Cathy is taking her first year as president very seriously and is insisting on background checks and a history of volunteer work with kids for safety purposes. Town Hall says we can't get a background check completed by tomorrow night, aka Christmas Eve. They're short staffed."

I chew on my lip. "What about other teachers?"

Jocelyn sighs. "Everyone we've called has plans or is already helping. We're out of ideas."

"I could do it."

All eyes turn on Rockwell.

“It’s nice of you to offer,” I say, “but we don’t need a body, we need the background check and volunteer experience.”

“I heard. I can get some clearance info faxed over.”

I stare at him. It’s not like I don’t believe him, but I’m definitely surprised. “You sure? There’ll be a ton of kids, and you didn’t even want to go to Wassail Night.”

“I like kids, I like playing ball, and I’m always up for a good cause.”

I hadn’t really seen him with kids besides a time or two with my niece and nephew years ago, but hearing him say he’ll step up to help makes him ten times more attractive in my book. I look at my friends. “What do you think?”

“If you can get the paperwork sent over right away, then I say the event is saved.” Gabby is clearly relieved and Jocelyn grins, like she somehow knew all along that Rockwell had it in him.

Rockwell pushes to his feet. “I’ll get right on it.” He puts his hand on my back on his way out, and I feel a folded piece of paper between him and me.

The list.

I turn and stare up at him, but he snatches it back in his hand and winks at me. “I’ll call you later.” His playful tone pulls at me, but the flirty grin he flashes is my undoing. The caution tape around my heart is now piled in a puddle by my feet. For one sweet moment, I’m not thinking at all about the list but the

man behind it. Even with the gust of cold air from the door opening and shutting, I might need a fan to cool my face off.

When the door closes behind him, my friends squeal and tease me. I do my best to play it off, because hello, my third wish was never granted, and I'm getting mixed signals from all ends. I want to bring up Rockwell's suspicious heart wish and the possibility of finding answers for my future—our future, but they still think I'm crazy when I talk about my list.

In an attempt to change the subject, I willingly let them drag me out for some last-minute Christmas shopping. I suppose I can get something for Rockwell. On the small, nearly nonexistent chance he does something for me. I find an ornament—a real one—that reminds me of him and purchase a gift bag the right size.

As we leave the store, my phone buzzes with an email. I open it with a click of my finger and scroll through the background information sent from a place called Kids' Hope Outreach.

It includes a letter of recommendation detailing Rockwell's three years of volunteer experience with kids in their program. Her glowing compliments of how dependable Rockwell is is nothing compared to the examples of ways he's connected with the children. He's often partnered with children from divorced situations, as well as teens who've been neglected or abandoned.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from crying. Here I've been judging him on spending every free moment at the gym

when he's been a better person than I've been. I wonder if he's ever told his mom about this. I would bet money that he hasn't told anyone. I've always had impressions about Rockwell, about him being top-tier amazing. I've noticed little things about him that speak louder than words. This is one of those things. His humble, quiet service is one of the many reasons why my heart is attached to his.

I forward the information on to Cathy, the president over Wassail Night, and send a thank-you response as well to the Outreach facilitator.

We stop for dinner, and I still haven't heard from Rockwell. I discreetly check my phone every chance I get. After dinner, we head to the farm putting on Wassail Night and check on the decorations. All of us love being a part of the behind-the-scenes fun.

By the time we're back, it's nearly ten. Finally, my phone lights up as I pull in. I read the text before I get out of my car.

ROCKWELL: Sorry, I didn't call. I ended up going out to the farm to help my mom fix a few things and lost track of time. I'm toast and am headed to bed. Hopefully, I'll see you tomorrow before Wassail Night.

I'm bummed I won't see him tonight. I can't ask him about his volunteering, though he probably prefers it if I don't pry. But he might have at least brought his list. I don't have any problems with prying there. I should focus on the bright side. He wants to see me tomorrow! This makes me grin. I type a quick reply.

BRIE: I'm glad you made it out there again. I'm sure it meant a lot to your mom. Sleep well, and I'll see you tomorrow.

I head inside and collapse against my couch. Gabby ditches us for Sofia, and Jocelyn has been working such long hours lately, she stumbles off to bed. Now I'm alone, and worse, I'll have to wait until tomorrow to see Rockwell's dumb list. He'll bring it with him, right? I chew on my fingernail. Why would he bring it with him? That's not a normal thing to carry around. But after teasing me, he'd better. Oh, I would be so annoyed if he didn't.

A crazy idea hits me. I do have his house key ...

Not to mention he practically threw down the gauntlet when he rubbed the list across my back. I see his wink now as a wordless invitation and a silent dare.

My roommates aren't around to talk me out of this, which is preferable since they would check me into a mental health clinic for even considering what I'm about to do. I change into black leggings and a black hoodie before I can reason with myself.

I can be in and out in five minutes. With Rockwell's lack of furniture, it shouldn't be hard to find a single piece of paper. No need for a contingency plan because the house is a mirror of mine and there's no possibility I'll get caught. I sit on the couch and watch my phone until a half hour has passed, and I'm sure Rockwell is asleep.

I must be crazy for doing this. But no regrets, right? We are on the cusp of either dating or walking away for good, and his list could change everything. I shake off my nerves and grab the spare key to his house from my drawer. With a deep breath, I walk out into the frigid night and hurry over to Rockwell's side. All the windows are dark, which means he's definitely asleep. I look over my shoulder like someone is going to see me, but the idea is ridiculous. No one is watching me.

I put the key into Rockwell's doorknob. For once, I'm grateful Travis hasn't updated the handles to ones with punch codes because those sometimes make a beeping noise. My old-fashioned key turns the lock with perfect silence.

Once inside, I noiselessly shut the door behind me. I wince when my first step is greeted with a creak in the floor. I hold still as a statue until I'm sure Rockwell hasn't woken. My shoulders relax after a minute or two, and I turn on my cell phone light. The room is fairly empty besides the two folding chairs his mom brought over and the cutest tiny tree decorated with strings of popcorn. I notice his computer bag under one of the chairs. I lift the flap of the bag but it's empty beside his computer. I don't feel good snooping in business stuff, so I'm fairly relieved.

Walking along the edge of the room, I scan his kitchen, but there isn't so much as a fast-food wrapper in sight. I was hoping it would be here or in the family room. Do I have the guts to try his bedroom?

I stall, tapping my fingers against my leg. It would take two seconds to open his door and take a quick scan of the room. And this is his Christmas list we're talking about. Mine rocked my world, so reading his is kind of important to me.

It's decided. I'm going in. I tiptoe to his room and stealthily push his door open. Another creak. My stomach sinks into a deep pit, and I straighten myself into a skinny line against the post of his door. I wait to hear his voice call out or his body move. I start sweating.

Seconds pass.

Nothing.

More seconds.

Nothing.

I start to breathe again. I'm safe. Relief like sweet water on parched nerves flows over me. I slowly lift my phone and scan the room. The first pass takes three seconds. I see Rockwell's form on his air mattress, his arm partially over his face. My heart thuds at the sight of him. Swallowing, I scan the room again.

My light catches on something white beside his bed on the floor where his phone is plugged in.

The list.

It's the perfect size. It has to be it.

I turn off my light and drop slowly to my knees. I begin a methodical crawl into the room toward my beacon of hope.

I'm almost there. Two more feet. One. I reach out to grab it. My hand closes over paper. The same time, a hand closes over my wrist.

I scream.

Chapter 22

Rockwell

BRIE'S SCREAMS ARE ENOUGH to wake the neighborhood. It's a good thing the houses here are more spread apart than in the city, though I half expect her roommates to fly into the room ready to save her. She's lucky my tired brain registered her tiny wrist as belonging to a woman or I might have broken it.

"What the heck are you doing?" I ask, pulling myself into a sitting position.

Brie tries to wrestle her arm away from me. I'm about to release her when I notice the flash of white in her hand. The moonlight catches on it in the right second and my brain clicks again.

My list.

Everything falls into place, and I release her arm, a laugh bubbling up in my chest. But I'm not going to let her off easy. She makes a mad dash for the door, and I move to block it. In the process, I flip on the light.

Brie pulls her hood over her head and tightens it around her face.

“Brie, I know it’s you.”

She wails and slaps her knee. “No, you weren’t supposed to wake up.”

I reach over and take her hood off, her dark hair falling long over her shoulders except for a small part sticking up on top. “Did you seriously break in here tonight to see my Christmas list? Do you think you’re Santa now?”

She sheepishly says, “I’m your neighborly elf, coming to help your wishes come true?”

I’m still holding back my chuckle, keeping my face as stern as I can. I put my hands on my hips. “Really. You’re here to help fulfill my wishes?”

She straightens. “Absolutely.”

This woman. She is going to die before she admits to her curiosity.

And I’m enjoying this way too much.

“I expect a timely response. Christmas is the day after tomorrow.”

“I pride myself in being prompt.”

“Go ahead then, Briezy.” I point to the list wadded in her hand.

Her eyes widen as they slide down her arm to the paper. I can see the desire to read it is burning through her. She

fumbles and opens the paper.

There's only one thing on my list. I hope she's serious about helping me.

Her cheeks turn red as she reads out loud, "One mistletoe kiss."

"Like I said, poetic." I can't hold back my grin any longer. "I'll take my present early, if you're ready."

Brie's laugh is high-pitched and a tad hysterical. "It's late and you've had a long day. We'll chat details in the morning." She shoves the paper at my chest. "Here's your list."

I reach over and cover her hand with mine, holding it to my chest. "You worked so hard to get it, why don't you keep it?"

She frantically shakes her head. "Nope. It's yours."

I don't move our hands, despite my heart pounding beneath them. "Consider it ours." I release her ever so slowly, trailing my fingers along the back of her hand as I do.

After a visible swallow, she steps back. "Goodnight then."

"Goodnight." I move to the side to let her pass. "And leave the spare key. I might have killed you had I not recognized you. Let's not try it again."

Her smile is weak. "Don't worry. This elf is retiring."

"After I get my Christmas wish though, right?"

She flees into my family room. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I laugh under my breath as she sprints to my door. Then it hits me. I don't know why I waited so long to return to

Bearwood. I might not be perfect, but at least I finally know I would never willingly hurt Brie. Not again anyway. I was scared about following the Davenport legacy like my dad and sister, but I'm not them. I've never been them. But I needed to be an adult for a while to know for certain. I wish it hadn't taken me so long to find out. In fact, I think going home again finally made the difference.

I'm not sure why it's hard to learn things about ourselves, but it's in the searching and the waiting that the answers come. It took me seven years, but I'm glad I never gave up working on myself. I'm glad I finally know who I really am. I'm not one-hundred percent positive what to do about this knowledge, but one thing is crystal clear: I'm going to do my best to earn a second chance with Brie.

Chapter 23

Brie

IF ANYONE IS WONDERING if an entire body can blush, I'm living proof. I swear, every inch of me is hot and red when I open the door to Rockwell the next morning. So much for trying to look cute today. I spent extra time getting ready too, and not because of any planned mistletoe kiss, but because Wassail Night is special to our community.

I'm such a liar.

"Good morning." Rockwell puts his arm on the doorframe and leans into it and subsequently closer to me. "Sleep well last night after crawling around my house?"

I try to shut the door in his face.

"Okay, okay. I promise not to tease you about it."

I start to open the door again, but he stops me.

"At least for a few hours."

I try shutting the door again.

"Wait, you can't shut me out. We have plans."

I raise my brow. “If this has to do with your list, I am absolutely shutting this door.”

He gives an airy laugh before schooling his face and crossing his heart with his finger. “That’s for later.”

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment, willing my heart to slow long enough for me to eke out my response. “And what’s the plan for this morning?”

“There’s one thing I haven’t done while I’ve been here that I’ve really missed.”

“Wassail Night.”

He laughs. “No, a bear hunt.”

I blink slowly and give him a dull stare. “A bear hunt? Besides this being the wrong time of year, I have a suspicion you don’t even have a hunting license.”

“Who is the boring adult now?”

I scoff and release my tight hold on the door. “Boring? Me?”

“Relax, it’s not that kind of a hunt. My uncle works with the Idaho Game Commission, and they have a webcam on some hibernating bears. My favorite thing as a boy was to go into the woods to search for bears. I thought it would be fun to hike up to the area the bears are in. We can’t get too close, but my uncle was at my mom’s yesterday and sent a location pin on my phone.”

I raise my brows, impressed. “Very cool.”

“So does that mean I can come in?”

“I suppose.” I reluctantly step aside. I’m still so embarrassed about last night, but I’m curious about this bear hunt. “Will this take long? I want to make sure we’re early to Wassail Night. The Snowball Slam is an earlier event, and I need to get my cookies to the bake sale booth.”

Rockwell settles on the couch and pulls up a map on his phone. “We can drive most of the way and then hike a mile up and a mile back. I think we’re looking at three hours tops.”

I scoot beside him to see the map. I vaguely know the area on the screen. My dad is big into camping and outdoor stuff. I’m not a big enthusiast like him or my brothers, but I like a good hike. Even if going will mean I’m wearing a hat and ruining my hair.

“What do you think?” he asks.

I love the anticipation in his eyes. It reels me in like the suckerfish I am. “We’d better start right away.”

His face lights up like Christmas. “Really?”

“Really.”

He jumps to his feet. “I’ll go grab my snow bibs and boots I picked up at my mom’s and warm up my car.”

Not ten minutes later, we are off on our adventure. I’ve got the Christmas music blaring and my hand microphone in Rockwell’s face. He begrudgingly sings a few lines, and the trip is already made for me. Once we’re out hiking in the snow, I remember how out of shape I am. I never used to be

this bad when I danced regularly. I miss it. I miss feeling strong.

We get up to the spot Rockwell's uncle pinned to his map and glass the terrain with his binoculars until we find the location of the den. We can't see any bears, obviously, but it's still a cool experience.

On the way back down, Rockwell reaches for my hand. "Thanks for coming with me, Briezy."

Our boots crunch into the snow making a matching path behind us. "I'm glad you asked me to join you."

"Yeah, well Travis said no."

I slug his arm with my free hand.

He chuckles. "Fine, I never asked Travis. I had no intention of bringing anyone else with me but you."

"I suppose you're forgiven."

His eyebrows dance. "Do I still get my mistletoe kiss tonight?"

"I don't know what to say on that topic." I'm especially not telling him how we have the exact same thing on our Christmas lists. It's uncanny. I thought my list dead to me, but it's still functioning enough to nag at the back of my mind. I swear it's whispering, "Just kiss him," over and over again in my ear.

Rockwell's grin climbs faster than my feet, and his pearly whites are as bright as the snow surrounding us, drawing me

in. “I would settle for a kiss under a pine tree.”

I straighten. “I’m not some grocery store where you can order an off-brand kiss at will. You’ll have to wait for the real deal.”

“Is that a definite no?”

I glare at him because it’s far more appropriate than begging. Which I will not do. Yes, I want Rockwell to kiss me, but if he does, I want it to mean something. I want the commitment I’m not sure he’s willing to give. I don’t think either of us will be checking off our Christmas list kiss otherwise. I’m already falling hard, and I don’t want to get any more confused.

Rockwell’s teasing expression settles into one of sincerity. “I’m glad you’re making me work for it. It’s how it should be.”

I raise my brows. “An appropriate answer. I approve.”

He smiles, his lips pressed together. “I’ve missed you, Brie. I’m not sure I knew how much until I came back.”

“I wish you wouldn’t have cut me off.” I can’t believe I blurted those words, but once it’s out, I’m glad. I needed to say it.

“You know why I did it though, right? Even if you hate me for it.”

We’d started this conversation before but not delved very deep. “I think so?” The question in my voice is intentional. I’ve pieced several parts together in my mind, but it’s not the full picture.

“I was trying to protect you, Brie. I didn’t want to be like my dad and sister and hurt people.”

“Rocky ...”

“I’m starting to believe what you said about seasons, and not being my dad, but I needed time to prove to myself I wasn’t him.”

I wish he could see himself the way I do. He’s the guy who ignored the cheerleaders and the popular girls who flirted with him and stayed loyal to me. While we were together, he was transparent about where he was and what he was doing. “You were never that kind of person.”

“But I did leave you.”

The words hit me low in the gut, and I want to bend over, reliving the pain.

“I’m sorry, Brie. I’m so sorry.”

“It was devastating,” I look at our feet. “But we weren’t married. You didn’t cheat on me. You didn’t even string me along. You broke up with me. It hurt a lot, but breaking up with someone isn’t a crime.”

He shakes his head. “I lost your faith, and to me that is a crime.”

I don’t respond right away. I can’t deny what he says isn’t true. Because of him, I haven’t actively searched or put myself out there to find someone to date. I wanted a relationship to simply happen to me, as a form of protecting myself. I couldn’t invest in something that could fail. Not again,

anyway. I see now I should have put in more effort. My high standards weren't the problem as much as my inability to let someone prove their worth.

I'm grateful for that silly notebook. Because of a few heartfelt wishes, I didn't let my fears and insecurities keep me from chasing an opportunity with Rockwell. I can't keep hiding behind what-ifs, but not knowing the end is torture. "I admit, I'm a little scared about whatever is happening between us right now." I swallow. I didn't want to be the first one to talk about it. I'm terrified of taking a step forward and rocking whatever fragile beginning we're treading into.

Rockwell nods and quietly adds. "You're not the only one." He tightens his grip on my hand, sending a wave of warmth up my arm.

I wrap my other hand around his forearm, wanting to be closer.

A whisper of his earlier smile returns. "Is this a sign of your faith returning?"

My own lips pull into a smile. "For the record, it never left completely, but I'd say it's a definite step in the right direction."



I drop my cookies at the bake sale tent, and Rockwell and I meet Cathy. With more energy than a person twice my age should have, she jumps right into her explanation of how the Snowball Slam works.

“It’s simple,” Cathy explains, the antlers on her festive reindeer headband nearly taking out Rockwell’s eye as she turns to pick up a snowball launcher. “Use these launchers to throw the Styrofoam balls into the basketball hoop. Each ticket buys ten shots. Winners are entered to win an official NBA-size basketball hoop.”

I nudge him. “The kids only care about getting more balls in the hoop than their friends.” If you ask my first graders, they know exactly who made the most baskets last year but couldn’t tell you who actually won the ultimate prize. I wish Rockwell luck and leave him with Cathy, finding my way to the canopy with the bake sale sign. I tell myself that it’s the vast amount of chocolate on the table that has me more excited about tonight’s Wassail Night than previous years.

The event is soon underway, and from my privileged seat in front of the heater at the bake sale booth, I see plenty of rosy cheeks. People stream by me on their way to and from the orchard walk, passing between the two event barns and the row of game and vendor stalls lined up outside. Beneath the multitude of string lights and vintage-style streetlamps, an air of joy pervades. It’s by far the best night of the year in Bearwood.

I cut a few deals with my nieces and nephews and send hot chocolate to my parents who are helping with the Nativity set. I imagine Rockwell’s mom is there too since, even though she can’t sew as well as she used to, she always assists with the wardrobe. The first hour passes quickly, and I find myself anticipating Rockwell’s Snowball Slam ending. I want to walk

through the orchard with him before the Nativity starts. I have several students and past students performing, and I want to give them all my attention.

I'm grinning like a giddy teenager when Rockwell finally comes for me. Travis is with him, but as soon as he sees Jocelyn, he whispers something to Rockwell and waves goodbye to us. I wonder if those two will ever sort out their differences.

Rockwell comes around the corner of the table to my side. "Any chance you can slip away for a bit?"

"She's already made arrangements so she can abandon us for you and has been counting down the seconds." Gabby's matter-of-fact voice is accompanied by a knowing smile.

I roll my eyes. "Please, take me away from my nosy friends."

Rockwell chuckles. "My pleasure."

I cross over to Rockwell and hand him a hot chocolate. My eyes trail to the orchard while he sips his drink. I don't know how Bearwood took on the old-school tradition of wassailing through the apple orchards to bring good luck to the next year's harvest, but I love it. A group of carolers are stationed at the front of the orchard, and lights are strewn throughout the trees creating a lighted walk. It's my absolute favorite.

"You want to walk through the trees, don't you?"

I look up at him. "Am I that obvious?"

“You’re that predictable. You might miss your chance to get pictures with Santa if we go now. Can you pass up your hard-earned prize?”

“Easily,” I say with a laugh.

He finishes his hot chocolate and throws away his cup. When he returns to my side, he stretches out his hand. After our luck at Bob’s Grill and Warren’s Grocery, I’m surprised he wants to claim me in public. I’m not going to complain. In fact, I’m taking it as a step of faith of his own. I curl my gloved fingers into his and we head to the trees.

He tells me about the success at Snowball Slam, and I brag about my cookies selling out. Before we know it, we’re at the end of the tree lane, lights twinkling like stars in the trees above us.

“Want to keep going?”

It’s déjà vu back to high school and our first kiss. He’d said those exact same words. But this time, it’s like he’s asking about us, not extending our walk.

I don’t hear a long-term commitment in his words, but I’m hit with a strong realization. I will take right here, right now. Even if it’s only one more day. It’s one more memory to hold on to. “Yes, I do.”

We leave the lighted path and trek out deeper into the orchard. The music fades behind us, and the moon lights our path. I shiver, and Rockwell puts his arm around me, tucking me close.

“This takes me back,” he says.

“You and me both.”

When we’re out of sight from the others, Rockwell turns me to him. “I have something for you.”

“Christmas isn’t until tomorrow,” I put my hand out anyway, “but if you insist.”

“Oh, I insist.” He reaches into his pocket. I can’t discern what he pulls out and places in my hand. It’s fairly lightweight. When he moves back, the moonlight reveals a small piece of greenery. I lift it closer to my eyes. Yes, those are white berries. It’s *mistletoe*.

My breath catches.

Rockwell steals his arms around my waist and tugs me to him, making my heart race. “I won’t kiss you unless you want me to, but I do want to tell you how I feel.” He pauses and my world stops. “I needed time to heal, Brie, but I wasn’t mature enough to know how. I regret walking away from you. These last few weeks have changed me. I’ve been happier than I’ve been in years. I haven’t *laughed* this much in years. Being with you has been an awakening. I see things differently, my senses are sharper, and my heart ... I feel hopeful again.” He brushes my cheek with his thumb. “It’s because of you. Thank you, for everything.”

His sincere words move me, but I latch onto the end. His thank you rings with finality, like an ending to a brief fling. “I’ve been happy too.” I look at the zipper on his coat, while I

work up my courage. “I’m going to miss you when you leave.” Why do I suddenly feel like crying? There’s an ache in my chest growing faster than I can control it.

Rockwell’s hand grips the back of my jacket. “Brie.”

I can’t meet his gaze. I really will cry then. I realize now I wasn’t careful enough with my feelings. But I’m in too deep now. Curse my stupid list. When he leaves, my heart’s going to break in two.

“Brie, look at me.”

I try to still my emotions long enough to look at him. When I meet his gaze, my chin trembles. I hope it’s too dark for him to notice, but I forget about it myself when I lose myself in his eyes. They’re holding me as sure as his arms are.

“I want to be with you.”

I swallow, my heart pounding. “What about LA and your mom? We’ll never see each other.”

He reaches out and brushes his thumb against my cheek, sending goosebumps down my back and arms. “If this is what my mom wants, I have to respect her wishes. As for LA, I’ve thought about nothing else since making my Christmas list. I have a good life there, but nothing measures up to what I could have here. Please, Brie.” He hesitates, his jaw tightening. Vulnerability flashes in his eyes. “Ask me to stay.”

I must be dreaming. Does he really care about me that much? Would he really give up his whole life and stay if I

asked? My next breath comes slowly, and I swallow a lump the size of my heart. “Please stay.”

It comes out as a whisper, but there’s no doubt he heard it when a light grows on his face. He dips his head down, and I meet him in the middle, the mistletoe all but forgotten. Our kiss isn’t anything like the light brushing of teenagers or even the accidental one at my parents’ house. It’s filled with years of longing. I ache for his touch, needing it to reassure me he cares.

There are no empty promises here. Rockwell doesn’t hold back. The way he holds me tight against him to the way he tenderly sweeps his mouth across mine, I know he won’t hurt me again. If love were a kiss, we’re drowning in it.

I know I’ll die happy too.

In the distance I hear a noise distinct from the soft music, and it’s growing louder. I don’t want to pay attention. I’ve waited for this moment for too long, and I want it to last a little longer.

“Rockwell! Rockwell Davenport!”

This time, neither of us can ignore the frantic voice.

We break apart at the same time, and Rockwell turns his head toward the sound.

“Rockwell!”

“It’s Gabby.” I grab his arm and tug him back toward the lighted path. Something’s wrong. Rockwell can sense it too. In another step, we’re both running.

We find Gabby on the path, and Jocelyn comes up breathlessly behind her.

“What’s up?” Rockwell asks.

“I’m sorry,” Gabby says. “It’s your mom. She collapsed. You need to come to the big event barn right now.”

Rockwell’s face goes as hard and cold as stone.

With those few words, all the elation from our kiss is replaced with dread. I’m terrified for Sandy, but I’m also afraid I’m about to lose Rockwell a second time. My hand tightens its hold on the mistletoe I forgot I’m holding, and I send a fervent prayer for help.

Chapter 24

Rockwell

I NEVER PLANNED MY first trip in a helicopter to be for a hospital transfer. The first few hours by Mom's side are terrifying. I worry the Spokane, Washington, hospital isn't sophisticated enough to give my mom the best care she needs. The doctors assure me Mom received the right clot-breaking medicine during the most crucial hours post stroke. We don't know the damage yet, but for now, she's stable.

I collapse into a chair by Mom's bed, my mind whirling. What if she's fully paralyzed? What if she has a ministroke following this one and dies? What if I hadn't come to Bearwood? What if I'd convinced my mom to live with me in LA and she had better treatment? The unknown rails on me until my hands are shaking.

Mom is heavily medicated to help her sleep and her brain to rest, but I wish she would wake up and assure me she is alright. Hours later, in the early hours of the morning, I start to drift into a restless sleep. Before I lose consciousness, I briefly

remember it's Christmas. I wanted to spend the day with Mom on the farm. I wanted to tell her how Brie and I were dating.

My lips move slightly up on one side thinking of how happy my mom will be to know about me and Brie. Christmas won't be a happy one this year, but at least I was nearby when the stroke happened. At least Mom and I are together now.

My phone is dead, so I use my mom's to try calling my sister, Morgan. We haven't talked since Mom's last stroke. And it had been a few years before then. She doesn't answer. I'm not surprised, but it still feels like a blow. If I lose Mom, my family support is gone. I can't stomach the thought.

Late the next morning, I get what can only be described as a Christmas miracle. Mom wakes up.

“Rock.” The single word comes out slurred.

I reach for her hand. “Morning, Mom.” I choke on the words, tears filling my eyes. “How are you feeling?”

She doesn't answer, but she blinks her eyes and breathes heavily through the tube in her nose. I've read everything I can get my hands on this morning and talked with several doctors. I know not to expect too much right away. We'll have a team of therapists helping her recover this week, and after a few hours of sleep and self-pity, I'm determined to be optimistic.

“You're going to be tired for a while, Mom, so take it easy. I'm going to do whatever I can to get you the best care possible.” I mean it too. I want to be a son she can depend on.

No matter what else I have to give up, she will always be my priority.

Chapter 25

Brie

NOTHING ABOUT TODAY FEELS like Christmas. I checked my phone a million times throughout the night and slept very little. When morning comes, I can't seem to do anything but stare at the blank screen, waiting for it to ring. I shoot Rockwell another text.

Brie: Praying hard. Update me when you get a chance.

I'm praying for both Sandy and Rockwell and replaying the night over and over in my mind. After Sandy collapsed and was air-flighted, everyone gathered for an emotional Nativity performance. A community prayer was offered. Everyone in the town is rooting for Sandy.

The actual Nativity was a blur for me, but at least during those few minutes surrounded by songs of baby Jesus, I felt peace. Once it ended though, my worries started spiraling.

Rockwell could lose his mom.

I really don't want anything worse to happen, but I have no control. It kills me to feel so helpless. I try not to think about

what this means for our relationship. It's selfish to think about anything but Sandy.

Still, the nagging thoughts persist no matter how I attempt to squash them. If Sandy dies, will I ever see Rockwell again? My stomach gnaws, making me feel sick. I'm a wreck.

Gabby finds me huddled in my bed and hugs me on her way out the door. "Call me if you need anything. I mean it."

"Thanks," I mumble. "I'll be fine." It's Sandy I'm worried about.

Jocelyn comes in a few minutes later and sits by me on my bed. She takes up my brush and does what she does best and brushes my hair for me. "Are you hanging in there?"

I nod. "Sort of."

"Do you need me to stay with you today?"

"No. Of course not. Go be with your family."

She lingers, puttering around, until my dad randomly shows up.

"Come on, sweetie. The whole family is waiting for you."

I don't really want to celebrate right now, but I don't want my somber mood to ruin anyone's Christmas. I agree to go with him. Jocelyn gives me a hug, and like Gabby, reminds me that she's a phone call away.

Once I'm home, no one minds that I'm keeping to myself. They understand because they're worried too. Sandy is loved by the whole community.

About ten in the morning, I cave and call Rockwell. He hasn't responded to any of my texts, which is perfectly understandable, but not knowing is killing me. I don't get any response.

"I'm calling the hospital," my mom insists. I chew on my nails—a former pet peeve of mine—until she hangs up. "Sandy's still with us."

I want to cry with relief.

"They can't tell me how serious things are. All specific information has to be released to a close relative."

"At least she's alive," I breathe. Right now, it's enough.

By lunchtime though, I'm going crazy again and pick at my turkey and mashed potato feast, pretending to eat. I still haven't heard from Rockwell. Has anything changed with Sandy? Is Rockwell doing okay? My family is a good distraction, but some of their topics of conversation are starting to annoy me. Especially Brad's inquiries about Rockwell and me, and whether he should request time off for our wedding in the spring.

I don't even know if we'll still be dating tomorrow. His teasing drives me insane. The guy never learned when to keep his thoughts to himself.

By two in the afternoon, I text my friends an SOS. Gabby and Jocelyn kidnap me and take me home. They promise my parents they'll stay with me for a few hours and bring me back for their Christmas dinner.

Once we're on our couch with blankets on our laps and feet lined up together on the ottoman, Gabby prompts me to talk. "Tell us everything going on in your mind."

"I'm better now you two are with me, and I'm away from Brad. Thanks for leaving your family parties for me."

"We exchanged one family gathering for another," Jocelyn answers, threading her arm through mine. "We're here for you, girl."

"But really," Gabby says. "Are you okay?"

I shrug. "I'm worried about Sandy but selfishly worrying about me and Rockwell at the same time."

"You're not being selfish," Jocelyn assures me. "It's normal to experience multiple emotions at the same time. Our brains don't work in mono-feelings."

"That's profound," Gabby says. "Listen to her."

Jocelyn nods and squeezes my arm. "Yes, listen to me. You need a major distraction. Why don't you tell us exactly what has been happening between you and Rockwell this last week? You two appeared pretty cozy at Wassail Night before everything happened."

Her words don't bother me like Brad's did. The difference is the delivery. Brad cares, but he shows it all wrong. Jocelyn does it with her arm curled around me like a school counselor to a hurting child.

I shrug again. "We were making progress. A lot of progress."

“And?” Gabby prompts.

“And I like him. He meshes so well with my family, he’s as thoughtful as ever, and he doesn’t want me to stop working toward my dreams. I know he hurt me, but he has an added strength to him from what he’s been through. I should have known a relationship with him was too good to be true.” I lay my head on Jocelyn’s shoulder. “There’s no way he’ll consider staying in Bearwood now. He’ll insist on having his mom close to a good hospital.”

“Wait,” Gabby leans over me so I can see her gaze. “Rockwell is considering staying here?” Her eyes go wide, and she starts slapping my leg. “You didn’t tell us this crucial piece of information!”

“*Was* considering. There is no way he will now. This is his mom’s health we’re talking about.”

Jocelyn nudges me, forcing me to sit up. “How can you lose faith in him so quickly?”

“I’m not losing faith in him. His mom is in the hospital, remember? She comes first.” Why are they shaking their heads at me? “What?”

“You need to talk to him,” Gabby says. “You’re making assumptions without clarification.”

“I hate when you get all logical on me,” I say.

She reaches over and strokes my head. “I know I held a grudge against him for a while, but he’s proven himself to be a

stand-up guy. He makes you so happy, and that's worth fighting for."

A small moan escapes. "Joce, back me up. I shouldn't get in the way right now."

Jocelyn sighs. "Do you want to know what I really think?"

I nod, hoping I don't regret it.

"I think he's feeling alone right now with a tremendous amount of responsibility piling on his shoulders. He could really use a friend to lean on."

She's right. They both are. I groan again, this time louder. "I want to be there for him, but it's so confusing. I was supposed to see his flaws and finally get over him, but I didn't. I'm attached now. I'm a lame, romantic sap. I'm not sure if I can separate how I feel and how I should feel. I don't know how to just be his friend."

They both stare at me. Neither one can solve this for me.

I chew on my lip, thinking in circles. The space in my heart for Rockwell has only grown since he came back. And if I care so much, how can I let him suffer alone? It's not as complicated as I've made it. The answer is simple—I can't. I suddenly throw the blanket off my lap and jump to my feet. "I know what I have to do. I have to go to Spokane—as Rockwell's friend, not as his girlfriend. He needs me." And this time, I can't let him suffer alone.

They smile like I finally said something right.

Jocelyn stands and puts her arms out. I fall into them. Gabby hugs us from behind.

“Thanks. I needed this.”

“Rockwell needs a hug right now too,” Jocelyn says. “Go give him one for us.”

I nod into her shoulder. “Okay, but you have to let me go so I can get on the road.”

They laugh and help me collect a few things in case I need to stay in a hotel overnight. I throw in my toiletries, and as a last-minute decision, I pack the ornament I bought for Rockwell.

Gabby shoves in a fleece throw. “Hospitals are freezing, you’ll need this. Then she sticks in a box of candy canes along with a couple of card games. “Give the nurses some Christmas cheer and distract yourself with the games.”

Jocelyn packs my lunch box with bagels, yogurt, jerky, granola bars, and a couple of waters. “Make sure you feed that man of yours. He’ll need the energy to take care of his mom.”

The next thing I know, I’m tearing up. “You two are the best.”

I call Rockwell one more time before I leave. Still nothing. I climb in my car, adrenaline pushing me forward, and wave out my window while I drive away. It only takes me an hour and a half before I pull up to the hospital. It takes me another ten minutes to find a parking spot and actually get inside. By this time, my nerves settle in. What if he’s annoyed I’m here? What if he never wants to see me again?

I drag my feet up to the nurse's station, one hand on my backpack strap and the other wrapped tightly around my lunch box. "I'm here to visit Sandy Davenport, a patient who came in last night after a stroke." I'm not sure what information to give, and I feel like I'm rambling.

A middle-aged nurse with a round face and short black hair looks up at me. She doesn't even blink at my explanation. "Your name, miss?"

"Brie Holland."

"Relationship to the patient?"

I lick my lips. "Family friend." I hold my breath, worried she'll send me away. She types something into the computer and stares at it for a moment. It feels like an eternity.

"I need to call up to the nurses' station on her floor. Give me a minute, please."

I watch quietly as the nurse explains my desire to visit. It takes a few minutes, and I'm not sure why, but finally, she hangs up.

"Take the elevator at the end of the hall ..."

I listen carefully as she tells me how to navigate to their heart stroke center. I thank her and hurry to follow her instructions down the sterile halls before I forget them. When I get to Sandy's room, I set my hand on the handle to open the door but freeze again. I've come this far. I can't turn back now.

I swing the door open and walk right into Rockwell.

His hand catches my arm to steady me. “Brie?”

I’ve never seen Rockwell look so tired. His eyes are bloodshot, and his normally styled short hair is matted in front and sticking up in back. I give him a crooked smile, worry and insecurity likely plastered over every inch of me. “Hey.”

He gives a half-groan-half-sigh and throws his arms around me. Maybe it’s his tight hug and he squeezed the tears right out of me, or maybe it’s the relief he isn’t angry I showed up, but I’m silently crying on his shoulder.

When he pulls back, his eyes are glassed with emotion too. “Thank you for coming.”

I nod, not wanting to confess how weak I’ve been, and wipe at my eyes. This isn’t the time to talk about us. I’m here as a friend. “How is she?” I whisper. I can’t see her over Rockwell’s shoulder, but I sense she’s close.

Rockwell keeps his voice lowered too. “She’s been asleep most of the time. Her brain scans are looking pretty good, considering. Tomorrow they’ll start her therapies, and we’ll know more.”

“I’m so sorry this happened.”

“Me too.”

“Jocelyn packed you some snacks, and I can stay and keep you company or come by again tomorrow. Whatever you need.”

Rockwell finds my hand with his. “Would you stay awhile?”

My heart twists inside me, and I almost cry again. He's not promising everything will work out. But for now, it's all I need. "Of course."

He smiles at my words and tugs me into the room with him. Sandy is tucked in with an off-white blanket, and she looks so peaceful while she sleeps. I set my backpack and lunch tote on the floor in a corner and observe Sandy for a moment. I'm so relieved she's still with us and her tests are good. It's a miracle. A Christmas miracle.

Rockwell comes and puts his arms around me from behind and rests his chin on my shoulder. We stand like this for some time, both of us watching his mom sleep. It's not the worst Christmas after all. It's not the best either, but my gratitude for the gift of life patches up the achy parts of my soul, leaving me with a sense of peace again.

Chapter 26

Rockwell

I SLAP A CARD down on the small table between Brie and me. “I win.”

“Noooo!” Brie whines. We’ve played this particular game a dozen times in the last two days, and her winning streak is officially over.

“Finally.” I sink back against the olive-green leather chair and grin at Brie’s exaggerated frown. Her hair is in a braid over her shoulder, and I reach over and give it a tug. “Victory is sweet.” And so is having a moment alone with Brie. They wheeled Mom out for another MRI, and the nurse said it would be at least an hour.

“Let’s play again,” Brie demands, shuffling the cards. “I’m going to beat you so hard.”

I stretch my hands over my head. “I need a break.”

“I understand. It’s pretty exhausting watching TV and losing to me in cards all day.” Brie gives me a smug look, and I want to kiss it right off her face.

“Did you not see me obliterate you?”

She leans over the table. “I felt sorry for you.”

“Ha!” I can’t believe her. After all her whining about losing too. “Now I’m really taking a break. You need a minute to suffer in the wake of my triumph.” I stand up and give her my hand.

“You’re so mean.” She takes my hand despite the glare on her face.

After she stands, I put my arms around her and tuck her under my chin. She’s earned a hug after the long hours she’s endured by my side. Behind her the room is covered in presents from neighbors and friends. Cards line the window, colorful balloons tower in the corner, and bouquets of flowers dot every open surface. The biggest floral arrangement of all is from Morgan. She finally answered her phone, and our conversation was meaningful. She’s flying out next week to help. I’m still in awe. Another hardship has turned into a new beginning.

I breathe in Brie’s fruity shampoo while I appreciate the incredible support Mom has. The Bearwood I remember from my childhood was nice, but they were also gossipy and judgmental. Despite their imperfections, I missed seeing how much love they gave each other. The way they’ve reached out to my mom this week has me seeing the word community in a new light. I have friends in LA, but it’s a dynamic lifestyle where change and growth are the mindset. Bearwood gives me

a settled feel. I can't even complain about it not being near a better hospital. Mom has been well taken care of.

“Do you think we should take down the bear ornament I gave you?” Brie asks from her snuggled position by my shoulder. Brie told me she originally bought it so I would think about Bearwood more. But now it's to remember our bear hunt and to remind me to go on many more in the future.

“I like it there.” It's in a prominent place of honor, hanging on one of Mom's monitors.

“The nurses keep looking at it funny.”

“They're just jealous.”

She sighs. “I can see that.”

I chuckle. Only Brie could make a hospital stay bearable. Then again, she's serious about me having fun. I have a feeling she isn't going to have to talk me into having more adventures in the future. My priorities have shifted considerably this last week. In fact, I have big plans and they won't wait.

“Let's get out of here for a bit.”

Brie tips her head back. “You sure?”

I left the hospital long enough to use the shower at Brie's hotel room this morning and gave myself a shave, but otherwise I've remained by Mom's side. “You need to stretch your legs and get some air.”

Brie looks suspicious. “I need to, or you do?”

“We both do. I’ll tell the nurse to call me if I’m needed. We don’t need to be gone long.”

Bundled in our coats, we make our way to the parking garage. I drive Brie’s car for her since she hates traffic, and I’m used to it. I pull up in front of a Chinese restaurant my phone claims has the best ratings.

“How did you know?” Brie sighs happily next to me.

“Because I know you. Besides, my list of fun is well above five by now, and we need to add to yours.”

We get a booth in a private corner, and I slide on the bench beside her. I order way more food than we’ll eat because I want Brie to get all her favorites. However, I insist we take our fortune cookies on the road. I know Brie loves those things, so I make her read hers out loud to me while I pull up to a neighborhood park only a minute away from the restaurant.

She cracks her cookie and pulls out the slip of paper. “Let’s see. It says, one bad chapter doesn’t mean your story is over.” She gives me an amused look. “Kind of prophetic.”

I raise one brow. “Are you calling me a bad chapter?”

She nods. “Very, very bad. You volunteer with children and don’t tell anyone about it, you’re carving out time from your busy life to help out a friend and his business, and you care about your mother’s comfort and health more than you do for yourself. Yep, sounds like a bad case of selflessness.”

“Good thing I have a teacher as my girlfriend. You can use your red pen and help me rewrite the parts of me you don’t

like.

She grins. “I’m content that you took the ex off my title. It was the only thing my red pen was truly bothered by.”

“That’s one critique I will happily take. Want to take a walk?”

She tugs the zipper of her coat up to her chin. “I’m game.”

Once we’re outside, we make our way to a cluster of trees. It’s a winter wonderland, and on the other side of the park, a handful of kids are making the most of the slick slides on the playground. Once we near the trees, I break my fortune cookie in half. Before I can talk myself out of it, I hand her a white slip of paper. “Want to read mine for me?”

“With pleasure.” She takes the slip of paper in her hand, and I watch as her eyes read the single line. Her cheeks glow a rosy-pink hue, and she glances up at me.

I clear my throat. “Aren’t you going to read it out loud?”

Her smile grows. “It says I love you.”

I borrowed a paper this morning from the nurse’s station and wrote it out just for this moment. Any relationship expert would say my delivery is too early. I couldn’t wait another minute though. Not after spending every minute together the last few days in the hospital. Brie seamlessly went from holding my hand when I needed her, to holding my mom’s and whispering all the right assurances.

I’m not the best with relationships—an obvious fact—but I think I surprised Brie with my fortune. It’s a good surprise, I

hope, if her smile is any clue. I push aside my mounting nerves and slip my arms around her waist. Here goes nothing. “I’ve always loved you, Brie. Ever since the talent show in seventh grade when you performed your ballet piece.”

She scrunches her nose. “Did you forget I messed up and embarrassed myself during my dance?”

I shake my head. “You stumbled in one of your turns and almost fell. I don’t know why I was sitting in the front row when I’m a back row kind of guy. I held my breath even though I didn’t know you well back then. But your subsequent actions are what captured my attention. You kept going. You didn’t miss another beat. There were tears glassing your eyes, but you kept dancing *and* smiling. You were amazing. I clapped harder for you than anyone else.”

Brie shyly ducks her head, her long lashes catching an errant snowflake. “I can’t believe you remember all those details.”

I wipe off the snowflake for her, trailing my hand down her cheek. “I’ve thought about your dance frequently over the years. It’s pushed me to keep going too. Brie, you might not have fallen that day, but I did. I fell a little in love, and I’ve been falling again and again ever since. Everything about you is memorable, including you coming and staying with my mom and me this week.”

Brie’s eyes are bright and shiny. “I was scared you wouldn’t want me here.”

“And you still came. Another reason I love you, Brie. In all these years, I’ve never met someone who makes me as happy

as you do. Words can't adequately express how much it means to me that you've allowed me back in your life."

"You make it sound like it was a sacrifice." Brie steps up on her toes, bringing her face deliciously closer to my own. "I didn't care for all the waiting, but you made it all too easy for me to fall for you again. No one else makes me feel as adored as you do. How am I so blessed to be with you again? I love you too, Rocky Davenport."

I kiss her slowly, savoring the moment. After a minute, I pull back so our foreheads touch. "I want you to know, this isn't kismet."

"What?" She blinks, her eyes out of focus and completely adorable.

"It isn't kismet," I repeat. "It's a blind man in need of his eyes opened and a generous woman willing to give him a second chance."

She shakes her head, disbelief and awe lining her features. "You know what kismet is?"

I nod solemnly. "I Googled the word after accidentally reading your list, Brie."

Her blue eyes sharpen. "You didn't!"

I'm glad I told her I loved her before I confessed to my crime. "I didn't mean to pry, I promise. But I'm glad it happened. I needed a glimpse of how you felt to encourage me to act on my own feelings. And I might also be the crazy peeper at the dance who hit the window. You looked amazing,

by the way. I wanted to be with you and not stuck on the phone with my dad. I guess I took the frustration out on the window.”

Brie blinks her wide eyes, and she shakes her head. “I’m going to need a minute to process all of this.”

“I want to make one thing clear.”

Her brows fly upward. “Another confession?”

I nod. “I don’t know about love stories being meant to be or not, but I’ve learned from my parents and my sister that love requires constant effort. If we’re brought together for a reason, it’s going to be work that keeps us together. I’m confident we have what it takes this time to make this succeed. I want you to know I’m committed to you, Brie.”

I don’t expect her to forgive me right away, so I’m surprised when her face softens and she smiles again. “I have a confession too. I admit to being confused by what life had in store for me. The whole kismet thing is proof. I focused on what I couldn’t control instead of what I could control—with dance, with relationships, with everything. I don’t want to wait and see what happens to us. What we hope and work toward *is* the kind of love that is meant to be. I want that with you, Rockwell. I’m committed to us too.”

Her words tug at my heart. I wish I would’ve learned these lessons earlier, but I’m not mad about learning them alongside Brie. I like her answer so much, I dip my head and kiss her. After too brief a moment, I pull away, not because I want to,

but because I have an important follow up. “Brie, will you dance with me?”

She wrinkles her petite nose. “Here? Now?”

I nod. “It’s late, but I want to finish your Christmas list.” I release her before she can object or I can remember I prefer kissing to dancing. I pull out my phone and swipe through my music. When it starts playing, I hit the volume up all the way.

She grins. “This was on our high school playlist.”

I put the phone in the hood of her coat. “We’ll make more playlists with new favorites soon, but until then, this will suffice.” I extend my arms, and she slips into them. We’re like two sides of a Christmas greeting card, folding together at the close of the holiday season with contented sighs. “I hope you’ll keep making wishes, Brie,” I whisper into her ear. “And I hope to be the one who fulfills them.”

Raising my arm, I spin Brie in a circle before pulling her back into my embrace. Delicate snowflakes adorn her hair and envelope us in a gentle, white cascade. She smiles up at me, her soft eyes shining. Dancing while kissing isn’t the easiest feat, but the allure is too great to resist. I have too many years to compensate for. She tastes like Christmas morning, a mixture of peace, joy, and excitement. Now that I’ve discovered this enchanting move, I’m committing to dance more often. Then again, with Brie, everything is better.

Epilogue

Brie

Four Months Later

“ONE MORE STEP,” ROCKWELL tells me.

I stumble across the threshold of some sort of building and wrap my hands around Rockwell’s wrists. He’s holding my blindfold tight so I can’t peek.

“Any guesses where we are?” His deep voice tickles against my neck.

I shrug my shoulders. “It has to be in town since I can hear cars, but besides the noise, I don’t have a clue.” I sniff the air. “It doesn’t smell like a restaurant or Jocelyn’s salon, and I don’t hear any other voices. I’m stumped.”

Rockwell chuckles. “Good. It’ll make this surprise all the better.”

I have no idea why Rockwell picked me up after school today or why he’s surprising me. He’s been the best boyfriend ever, sending flowers and taking me on all sorts of creative dates. I keep telling him that I’m a simple girl, but he assures me he is making up for lost time. To be honest, this simple girl loves how he’s trying so hard.

“Almost there,” Rockwell says as he turns me to face a certain way.

Once again, I try to think of what occasion calls for this level of a surprise. It’s a Wednesday afternoon, so it’s not even a weekend. Is there something special about April seventh? It’s

not our anniversary or either of our birthdays. We had dinner with his mom on Sunday, and she was doing better than ever. I'm glad she doesn't seem to have retained any more problems from her second stroke. I know she would've said something if there was a celebration planned. And why does Rockwell keep randomly laughing? It makes me want to laugh too, and I can't even explain why.

“The suspense is killing me.”

Rockwell kisses my cheek in response, sending goosebumps down my arms. He wraps one arm around my waist, hugging me from behind right before he releases my blindfold.

I don't know what I imagined, but it isn't this. We're in an empty space except for a single round table. On top of a white tablecloth are a few dozen red roses. Petals dot the rest of the table around the vase and are strewn on the floor in between a path of candles.

My heart swells. It's magical.

Rockwell releases me, sliding his hand into my own and guiding me to the table. I didn't notice the small square box before, but I see it now and my breathing quickens. We've talked about marriage and casually looked at rings a few weeks ago, but I'm completely surprised by his timing. I've not prepared my emotions. My eyes well up with happy tears.

Rockwell's grin isn't suave like normal. It's impossibly wide, like he can't stop smiling no matter how hard he tries. He picks up the white box and drops to one knee. “Brie Marie Holland,”

I snort through my tears.

“Please try not to laugh, Briezy. I’ll never make it through this.”

I nod and push my lips together.

He clears his throat. “I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” Rockwell opens the box, but I could care less about the ring. I dive into Rockwell, throwing my arms around his neck. I think I say yes before I kiss him, but it’s kind of a blur. I’m crying, laughing, and kissing. Lots and lots of kissing.

Rockwell indulges me until we both pull apart, short of breath. “You’re really excited about this marriage stuff.”

He’s teasing me, since it’s obvious he’s as excited as I am. “Just call me Mrs. Brie Marie Davenport.”

His grin is back. “Well, Mrs. Davenport, are you ready for a second surprise?”

“The ring?”

“A third surprise then?”

I laugh. “I can’t keep up.”

“Me either, but I’m really excited about this, so let’s do our best.” He pulls away from me, and I immediately miss the comfort of his arms. He proceeds to take several steps backward.

“What are you doing?”

He stretches his arms out wide. “This is your surprise!” He moves his arms around to encompass the space around him.

“The building?”

He nods. “They just finished the flooring, and it’s all ready for renting out as a dance space.”

My mouth drops. “What? You’re kidding.”

“I’m not kidding. It’s time you fulfilled your dream. You can keep teaching if you want, or you can dedicate your time to the studio. It’s up to you.”

I can read between the lines. With both our incomes, I have room to choose. For too long, I let life dictate most of my choices. This feels like Christmas. It reminds me of my kismet notebook, and I almost laugh at how much significance I attributed to it. The list had been mine to fulfill all along. There are parts of life I can’t control, but love is an active process. I’m going to choose to love Rockwell again and again.

I blink back more tears as Rockwell elaborates on plans for walls, a substantial mirror, and a receptionist desk. Struggling to contain my emotions, I stride toward him. “Two of my dreams are coming true in one day.”

He embraces me and I kiss him again. He doesn’t need an interpreter to read what I’m saying with my lips on his. I love Rockwell Davenport.

Merry Kismet to me.

A Note From Anneka

I HOPE YOU ENJOYED *Merry Kismet*! The idea of a fated Christmas list hit me one night, and I couldn't focus on anything until the premise and first chapter were typed into my computer. Some stories grab a hold of you, and this one charmed me from the moment Brie and Rockwell met in my head.

Many of you know me as a writer of historical fiction and might not have read a contemporary from me before. Don't worry, I won't stop writing my historicals and fairytale retells. There is room in my heart for ALL the stories! I plan to continue to write books full of humor and heart across genres.

If you liked this book, please consider leaving a review! They are vital to any books success.

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Acknowledgements

DOES IT MAKE ME a good wife if I voluntarily read this story out loud to my husband on a road trip? I think it does. But it makes my husband not just good but INCREDIBLE for patiently listening, laughing at the right moments, and offering his valuable feedback. I'm one lucky girl. Thanks, Babe! Your love and encouragement is everything.

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About the Author



Anneka R. Walker is a best-selling author of historical and contemporary romance. With humor and an abundance of heart, she crafts uplifting stories you won't soon forget. She is the winner of the Swoony Award, the LDSPMA Praiseworthy Award, and various chapter contests. Her books have received praise from Publishers Weekly, Historical Novel Society, Midwest Book Review, and Readers Favorite. She graduated from Brigham Young University-Idaho with a Bachelor's degree in English and history and hopes to never stop learning. She is a blessed wife, proud mother of five, follower of Jesus,

connoisseur of chocolate, and believer in happy endings.

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