

KYRA JACOBS

Once Upon a Christmas Beauty



Bourbon Falls
Series

Once Upon a Christmas Beauty

A Bourbon Falls Romance

Kyra Jacobs



Once Upon a Christmas Beauty

Copyright© 2023 Kyra Jacobs

EPUB Edition

The Tule Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

First Publication by Tule Publishing 2023

Cover design by Carpe Librum Book Design

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-961544-08-6

Keep Up with your Favorite Authors and their New Releases

For the latest news from Tule Publishing authors, sign up for our newsletter [here](#) or check out our website at TulePublishing.com

Stay social! For new release updates, behind-the-scenes sneak peeks, and reader giveaways:

[Like us](#) on



[Follow us](#) on



[Follow us](#) on



See you online!



Dedication

*To all the singles and single-agains, may you find the courage
to chase your own happily-ever-after.*

Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Epilogue

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Bourbon Falls series](#)

[More books by Kyra Jacobs](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter One

MIA BROOKS-FRENCH STOOD before the Christmas tree inside their family bookstore the last Saturday of November, seeing red. Usually, she loved everything about this time of year—the thrill of shopping for just the right gifts, submerging herself in the season’s tastes and smells, and seeing their adorable little town of Bourbon Falls all lit up at night. But sometimes the holidays had a way of bringing out the Scrooges of the world.

After seeing the advertisement they’d received in the mail yesterday, this year’s Scrooge award would be going to fellow independent bookstore Books-A-Plenty in neighboring South Bend. Not only had they recently expanded their flyer distribution to overlap Brooks Books’ territory, but now it seemed they were hosting the same exact ornament-decorating event Mia’s family had put on each of the last five years. Even worse, they were doing it on the same day as the event at Brooks Books.

“Traitors,” Mia growled as she rearranged ornaments on the tree inside their window display. “I thought we indies were supposed to support each other, not steal one another’s ideas and customers. And this is our Bright Minds fundraiser—we’re helping bring cheer to kids at Riley Children’s Hospital, for crying out loud!”

Bright Minds was a campaign she started after a fellow teacher at their local elementary school had a child go through something no child ever should: cancer. Thankfully, after several surgeries, the cancer was successfully removed and her son had remained in remission. But watching her friend’s family make countless trips to Indy, each time struggling to put poor Sampson in his booster seat while he kicked and wailed that he didn’t want to go back, inspired Mia to help, especially during a time of year that should be full of Christmas cheer. So, they’d gathered all the town’s best

knitters, bought a boatload of special yarn, and made as many bright and cheery chemo caps as they could by Thanksgiving. The bookstore donated a matching number of new children's books, bundled them with the caps, and then drove the wrapped presents two hours south to Riley's in Indianapolis. Now, the kids had something waiting for them besides needles and procedures. It was such a hit with the families there that Brooks Books decided to make it an annual donation event.

But yarn and books cost money, which had been the motivation behind starting the ornament-decorating event. In the past, customers throughout the region had come to decorate clear glass bulbs and support their Bright Minds cause. But if those same people could go to the bigger, fancier Books-A-Plenty, where would that leave next year's kids at Riley?

Aunt Faye came to stand beside her, having just finished restocking the children's section. "I'm sure Books-A-Plenty had their reasons. Besides, if it was going to happen any year, this is the one that will hurt us the least. We were blessed to have had a few exceptional months this fall, thanks to the fundraiser. Not everyone has been so lucky."

"But stealing our ornament-decorating schtick? Come on. That's just salt in the wound."

Aunt Faye shrugged. "I'm more curious to find out who their 'special guest' will be. Clever of them to build suspense over which best-selling author will be doing a signing that weekend in addition to the decorating."

"I wish we had an amazing best-selling author lined up. Someone with a huge local following to lure the customers here instead of South Bend." Mia frowned at the gappy ornament placement on this side of the tree. Clearly, her middle sister, Delaney, had hurried through her assigned section in the wee hours of Black Friday morning. Probably, she'd been eager to get back to bed. And to Isaac. "I guess it's a good thing I hadn't made it to Hobby Lobby yet for glass bulbs and acrylic paint. But what are we going to do to raise

money for our supplies if we can't decorate ornaments? It's a town favorite!"

"We're not doing ornaments this year?"

Mia looked up to see her sixteen-year-old daughter, Brooklyn, step into the room, cheeks rosy from spending the afternoon outside helping her aunt Delaney at the lot full of freshly cut Christmas trees across the street. So far, no snow had fallen in Bourbon Falls and the temperatures had remained fairly mild. But this was Indiana, which meant that could change at any moment.

"No ornaments? Says who?" Delaney asked, emerging from the hall leading to their back entrance a few steps behind Brooklyn. "We always paint ornaments."

"Not this year, I'm afraid." Aunt Faye handed her B-A-P's flyer as they all huddled around the front register.

"Come join us for some holiday spirit?" Delaney's eyes narrowed. "Oh, I'll show them some holiday spirit all right. I should have plenty of red and green spray paint from—"

"No, Delaney," Aunt Faye said, easing the flyer from her hands. "We had our big fundraiser in the fall. Now it's time to let Books-A-Plenty have their moment in the spotlight."

"But they're right next to Notre Dame," Brooklyn countered. "So they're in the spotlight every day. I'm with Aunt Del—this stinks."

Mia nodded. "Agreed. But since their flyers have already been sent out, it's up to us to come up with something different to rival their event. Something this town can get excited about that we haven't done before. Something...I don't know."

"Yeah, me neither," said Del. "Maybe it's time for a Meeting of the Minds?"

Mia forced a smile. If anyone could successfully brainstorm the perfect new event for their bookstore, it was that group of amazing local women. After all, hosting a regional talent show that had helped save the bookstore a few

short months ago had been their idea. Unfortunately, now that the leaky roof crisis was over and Del had finally found herself a man, that same group of women had shifted their focus to finding Mia the next prospect for happily-ever-after. Which she'd done her best to avoid. But if it would help the bookstore come up with another successful event, she would endure an evening or two of their dating scrutiny.

"I'll send out an invite later," Mia said. "We can have it at our house Monday evening. Brooklyn and I were already planning to get the house decorated this weekend. Weren't we, sweetheart?"

Brooklyn, her nose buried in her cell phone, didn't respond. Mia sighed. Maybe cranking up some holiday music while spending some quality decorating time together would get Brooklyn to unplug and reengage for a while. Mia understood that teens operated differently than when she was this age, but all tech and no talk didn't seem like the best idea—something she and her daughter sparred about occasionally.

Del gave her a wink from across the way. "I think that's a great idea. You get the house ready, and I'll stock up on snacks and booze—er, beverages. Don't want to give Mrs. Harper an excuse not to come."

"Nope," Mia said. "We're gonna need as many minds as possible to come up with a doable event on such short notice."

She looked to the Bourbon Falls annual chamber of commerce calendar hanging behind the checkout counter and its listing of dates beneath a picture of their town's beloved historic train depot blanketed in snow. Two weeks—that's all the time they had to work with. And while Aunt Faye didn't seem too concerned about the Bright Minds funds they might miss out on because of the event overlap with B-A-P, Mia refused to sit back and doing nothing.

But what to do?

Her worries were interrupted by the bell over the front door tinkling as a customer walked in. A quick glance at the

clock showed Mia it was five minutes after closing. Shoot, they'd gotten so wrapped up in their conversation that they'd forgotten to flip over the OPEN sign and lock the front door.

Hopefully, whoever it was wouldn't stay long. Mia now had a house to clean and decorate, on top of grading papers and planning for her third-grade classroom's upcoming holiday party. She left the others to change the sign and lock the front door, hoping to offer a subtle hint to whomever had just walked in.

As she rounded the new releases table, however, Mia had second thoughts about hurrying their newcomer away. He was tall and lean, with chestnut hair and matching stubble on his chin. Jeans hugged his lower body in all the right places, and with no coat on, the way he had the sleeves of his Henley pushed up revealed toned forearms. Sunglasses hid his eyes, and for the briefest of moments, she wondered if he was some kind of celebrity, hiding from the paparazzi.

Especially since this guy could have easily played the stunt double for Ryan Reynolds. The nose wasn't quite right, though, she decided as she drew closer. Probably, he'd just been sparing his eyes from the brutal, early evening sunset.

Probably-Not-Ryan stood in the entryway, his gaze slowly scanning the store. *Looking for something or just curious?* Either way, she didn't plan to let him stay long.

"Welcome to Brooks Books. Is there something I can help you find?"

"Actually, I believe you just did."

His smile widened, and Mia felt her knees go a little weak. She could only imagine the kind of trouble a smile like that could get a girl into. As opposed to dating as she'd been since her divorce three years ago, there was something about this man that made her momentarily rethink her position on the matter. That hint of spice in his cologne wasn't helping matters, either. She tried to do a subtle ring check, but his left hand was just out of view.

“Oh?” she asked, wishing he would take off those darned sunglasses so she could get a clear view of his face. Or that he’d carry her off into the sunset. Either would be fine with her in this moment.

Whoa. When was the last time a man had made her feel like that? And from across the room, no less?

“Yes, you see, I was looking for someone.”

Please be me. Please be me.

He removed his sunglasses, and Mia swallowed hard. He’d been sexy with those shades on but was even more striking with them off. Perfect skin stretched across high cheekbones, while that stubble on his chin beckoned her closer. His eyes quickly claimed her attention, though, with their unusual light-brown coloring and flecks of green.

Flecks of green?

Oh no.

There was only one person she’d ever known with eyes like that. Eyes she hadn’t seen in nearly two decades and would have been perfectly content to never see again. Surely, fate wouldn’t drop that arrogant, cocky, overconfident jerk from college into her happy little corner of the world with everything else she had going on right now. She hoped—no *prayed*—she’d guessed wrong. That it was somebody else, anyone else.

“Hello, Mia.”

Nope. There’d only ever been one man who could say her name and send her toes curling and hands fisting at the same time:

Alexander Wellington.



ALEX WATCHED MIA’S smile shift from genuine to forced, reminding him the task ahead would not be easy. Not that he expected it to be, as big a jerk as he’d been to her all those

years ago. But ever since seeing her on television this fall, he hadn't been able to get the woman off his mind.

Oh, sure, he'd tried. Added additional stops along his usual autumn, eastern customer check-in route for Wellington Equipment & Trucking. Spent more time than necessary working on bids and proposals. He'd even attended a silent auction at one of his mother's charity organizations, just to avoid being home alone with his thoughts. But nothing had worked.

So, he intentionally made a detour as he passed by her hometown tonight, to say what needed to be said. Only then could he truly fulfill the promise he'd made this summer to his dear friend Tom—to live a life with no regrets. And his regrets with Mia were many.

The visit was also a chance to finally prove to himself that the ridiculous crush he'd had on her in college was long gone.

“Why, hello, *Alex*. What brings you to our humble little corner of the world?” She passed him with her chin in the air to flip over the OPEN sign on their front door. “And five minutes past closing, no less.”

Ouch. He'd said two words and already she was trying to get rid of him.

“Actually, I was passing through the area and remembered your family had a bookstore here.” He shrugged. “Thought I'd stop by and check it out.”

“Really.” Mia folded both arms over her chest. “I'm rather surprised you even know what a bookstore is—it almost implies that you actually know how to read.”

At that, he couldn't help but smirk. “Read and write, actually. In fact, I make it a point to stop in as many bookstores on my travels as I can. You know, to see if my books made it to their shelves or not.”

“Oh? Did you hire someone to write your memoir?” She glanced briefly toward a cluster of wooden shelves behind her.

“I’m not sure we have a section for wealthy jerks of the Midwest.”

Yep, still the same spitfire she’d been back in college. And just as beautiful. Her hair was a little longer than it had been back then, her makeup more subtle. But oh, how those curves still called to him, and her stormy blue eyes slayed him like no other.

The attraction is all in your head, buddy. All in your head.

“I sensed that type of book might be a tough sell,” he said, smiling. “So, I decided to write something a little more interesting. Turns out, there’s quite a market for books featuring American bourbon distilleries. At least, that’s what my agent tells me. So far, only the first two have hit bestseller status. We’ll see what book three does next summer.”

Her jaw dropped, the look absolutely priceless. Rarely if ever had he seen Mia Brooks rendered speechless. However, as entertaining as it was, Alex knew gloating over his newfound fame wouldn’t help further his cause for stopping by. He drew in a deep breath before continuing but was interrupted by a second woman who appeared around the corner.

“Hey, Mi. Did you get rid of our—?” She came to an abrupt stop, her bright-blue gaze darting between the two of them. “Everything okay, Sis?”

Though her hair was much shorter than Mia’s and lighter in color, the family resemblance was striking. No doubt this was one of her younger sisters. He also had no doubt that she was sizing up the situation and debating to what extent she needed to intervene. Alex offered her a gentle smile, hoping to disarm her.

“Of course, Del. I’m just giving Mr. Wellington directions out of town.”

Damn, she really was trying her best to get rid of him.

“O-kay,” Del said, her gaze still wary as she walked away.

That left Alex and Mia alone once more. He kept his distance, not wanting to test his luck on the crush aspect, especially as irritated as she seemed to be by his appearance tonight. It was time to say his piece and head out. But despite spending the last week rehearsing what he might say if he found her here tonight, Alex found himself struggling to string a full sentence together.

“So...it’s been a few years, huh?”

She gave him a flat look. “Yes. Listen, Alex, as much as I’d love to chat, we’re actually closed now, so—”

“I’m here to apologize.”

Finally, his brain decided to get back on track. *Come on, speech, don’t fail me now.*

Mia’s eyes narrowed. “For what, exactly?”

She wasn’t going to make this easy on him. As awful as he’d been to her back in the day, he probably deserved that. Alex looked to the floor, drew in a deep breath, then met her gaze once again.

“I know that I said and did some things that were mean and mostly uncalled for back in college.”

“*Mostly?*”

He offered her an apologetic smile. “Let’s just say I was wrestling with some issues and didn’t handle it as well as I could have. And for that, I’m sorry.”

He’d hoped she would look surprised or maybe even relieved. Instead, Mia remained stoic as she continued to stare him down. After several seconds of the silent standoff, panic crept into Alex’s chest. Would she refuse to accept his apology, even after so much time had passed?

“Why are you really here?” Mia asked.

That was an answer he wasn’t ready to give. “To apologize.”

“Yes, but why now? All of that happened nearly twenty years ago. And don’t even try to tell me it’s been eating at you all this time.”

“I saw you on television a while back.” Which was true, though only a part of his reason. “One of our local news reporters did a live report from Bourbon Falls, highlighting your big fundraiser. Congrats, by the way. It sounded like the talent show was a rousing success.”

Her right shoulder lifted and fell. “We did all right.”

The lights in the back of the store faded to black. Alex took the hint: His time here was up. A small part of him actually felt relieved.

“Anyway, I should probably get going, seeing as you guys are closed and all.” Alex fished a business card from his back pocket. “If you ever want to talk books or feel like catching up, feel free to drop me a call or a text. I promise I’m not that big jerk anymore.”

After a moment of indecision, she stepped forward and took the offered card. “Best-selling author, huh? What are your books about again?”

“It’s a travel series, featuring American distilleries from different parts of the country. Book one highlighted distilleries of the Northeast, book two of the Southeast. I’m just finishing book three, which shines the spotlight on distilleries in the Midwest.”

“Wow. That’s actually sort of interesting. Congratulations on your latest accomplishment.”

“Thank you. I’m actually on my way to South Bend. The manager of Books-A-Plenty contacted me a few weeks ago about doing a book signing for their holiday event.”

Mia’s face darkened. “Of course they did.”

And just like that, her demeanor went from almost civil to loathing him again. No matter, he had said what needed to be

said. No more sitting around regretting that he hadn't tried to make things right. It was time to head out and cut his losses.

“Well, come again when you can't stay so long, and safe travels to wherever you're headed.”

She stepped past him to push the front door wide, the scent of cinnamon and vanilla suddenly teasing his senses. In a blink, Alex was that same, smitten nineteen-year-old drowning in an attraction he didn't know how to navigate.

So much for his theory that enough time apart could smother any crush.

He swallowed hard, rooted to the floor and unsure of what to do next. Beg for the forgiveness she wasn't granting? Make a run for it?

Haul her in for a kiss that would leave no doubt as to how he'd always truly felt about her?

“Good night, Alex.”

She wanted him to go, but indecision moved him for the door at tortoise speed. He had everything to lose and nothing to gain by walking away. Then again, she'd never been his to lose.

Alex paused before her, waiting in silence until her stubborn gaze reluctantly met his.

“I meant what I said, Mia. I was young and stupid and... and I'm sorry.”

Mia studied him for a long moment, then blew out a sigh.

“Yes, you were young. And stupid!” Alex took a step backward out the door, surprised by the outburst. Mia followed, poking a finger into his chest as they moved. “And cocky and arrogant and—”

She stopped, scanned the sidewalk around them, and winced as she spied an older couple outside the next shop staring. Mia offered them an appeasing smile, then squinted toward a nearby streetlight wrapped in multicolor lights. When

she spoke next, though quieter, her tone still carried a frustrated edge.

“But if it’ll help you sleep better tonight, then whatever, apology accepted. Good luck with your book signing, and Merry Christmas.”

With that, she stepped back inside and pulled the door shut behind her. The lock clicked into place, and the only woman who’d ever truly stolen his heart disappeared once again into the depths of Brooks Books. Alex stood beneath a giant artificial snowflake, trying to process all that had just happened.

First, his theory about that crush had, unfortunately, been disproven.

Second, she’d forgiven him.

Mia Brooks, the last person on the planet he deserved forgiveness from, had just granted it. Maybe it was because he never expected it to happen or never thought he’d build up the nerve to face her again, but something unexpected happened to Alex in that moment. The trip he’d hoped would bring him closure instead had filled him with an entirely new and unexpected longing:

A second chance to win her heart.

Chapter Two

OF ALL THE people she ever would have guessed might walk into Brooks Books, Alexander Wellington might have been dead last. Especially the way they'd parted at the end of her freshman year of college.

There'd definitely been no love lost between them.

"So, did you get *Mister* Wellington's number?" Del asked, eyes bright with curiosity. She and Brooklyn had slipped their coats off and were now helping Aunt Faye put sale stickers on several small stacks of books stockpiled on a nearby table.

"No. Well, yes, actually, since it's on his business card." She dropped it onto the checkout counter and started closing down the cash register. "Not that I'd ever call him."

Her sister frowned. "Why not? The guy was a real hunk. Also? I'm usually pretty good at getting a read on people, and I have to say that man was totally into you."

"Okay, first, you're terrible at reading people," Mia said with a laugh. "Plus, that guy was maybe the biggest jerk on campus back when I was in school. I know you're all itching to get me back into the dating world, but he is *not* someone you want to saddle me with."

Brooklyn picked up the card. "It says he's a best-selling author."

"And you didn't invite him to stay longer?" Aunt Faye asked. "Sweetie, weren't you just saying you wished we had a best-selling author for our Christmas event?"

Mia snorted. "Yes, because Books-A-Plenty already has one booked. The same one that just stopped in on his way to South Bend to meet with them."

“So that’s why he stopped by? To rub it in our faces?” Del’s shoulders dropped. “Man, he really is a jerk.”

“Actually, he was here to apologize.” Mia looked toward the entryway, suddenly feeling the tiniest bit of remorse for having been so short with him. She hadn’t expected him to look and sound so...repentant.

“For being a jerk or because he was signing for the enemy?” Del asked.

“Delaney,” Aunt Faye chided. “Books-A-Plenty is not our enemy.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. It just has a better ring to it than ‘traitorous fellow independent bookstore.’” She winked at Brooklyn. “So, which was it, Mi?”

Mia turned back, grimacing. “For being a jerk. Only, I wasn’t expecting it, and tonight I was probably the one acting like a jerk.”

“Sounds like maybe you *should* give him a call.” Del wagged her brows. “You know, to make things right and convince him to come here for a signing instead of B-A-P.”

Call him? Oh heck no. The last thing Mia needed in this crazy busy holiday season was extra drama in her life. Besides, handsome as ever or not, Alex Wellington could never be her Prince Charming.

“No thanks. I mean, I already agreed to forgive him.” Wasn’t that why he stopped by? To clear his conscience? “And as much as I’d love to, I don’t think it’d be right to steal Books-A-Plenty’s main act.”

Aunt Faye paused her price tag work. “Forgive me for asking, but what exactly happened all those years ago that could possibly still be haunting him? Please tell me he didn’t ___”

“No,” Mia said, quick to push that thought from their minds. “Alex never did anything inappropriate. In fact, we got along great when we first met.”

Memories long forgotten of that first year in college washed over her. Her nervousness at being away from home for the first time. The thrill of freedom that distance had brought. The homesickness. The excitement.

The boys.

Oh, what a fool she'd been for going steady with Greg when she headed out that fall—campus was so full of relationship opportunities. But she'd fallen hard for him back in high school, and he for her. By the end of summer after her graduation, they were sharing dreams of a future together. Maybe he'd planted those seeds because he'd already had a year away at school and had seen what all was out there. She'd been so trusting and naïve back then. At times, she still was—a character flaw she'd been working to correct after finding Greg in an upstairs closet with his office assistant during an open house three years ago.

I really hope the future buyer had their carpets cleaned before moving in.

She shook her head, refocusing on Alex. Well, the pre-jerk version of him, anyway. “We met at a volunteer function the end of my first semester. He tagged along with Drew Owens; Robyn came with me. The four of us hit it off and spent a good deal of time together second semester. We'd have study sessions or go grab pizza and a movie. Robyn and Drew were soon dating; everyone knew I was already seeing Greg.

“Then Alex got a call from his mom just before spring break, saying his grandmother was gravely ill. He paled and dropped onto a nearby bench. I tried consoling him, even pulled him into a hug, trying to give him a little boost of strength. He'd clung to me for a moment, then mumbled a thanks and strode off. The next time I saw him, everything had changed.”

“Maybe you embarrassed him,” Brooklyn said with a shrug.

Not as much as he embarrassed me. “I'm not sure.”

“Did you try to talk to him?” Aunt Faye asked. “Ask him what was going on?”

“Yeah. I had to practically jog to catch up with him after class. Even then, he wouldn’t look at me or acknowledge my presence until I stepped in front of him. At first, I just wanted to make sure he was doing okay and offered to lend an ear because I’d been through something similar losing Mom. But he went off, furious that I dared to suggest I knew what he was going through.”

The memory continued to play out in her mind.

“But I care about you, Alex.”

“Really? Did it ever occur to you that maybe you care a little too much?”

She’d recoiled, confused by the look of betrayal in his eyes. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You don’t know anything, Mia. My mistake for thinking some silly, small-town girl ever could.”

Even now, that comment still hurt. All she was trying to do was be kind—what was so horrible about that?

“Seriously?” Brooklyn asked, bringing Mia back to the here and now. “What a jerk.”

Del’s eyes narrowed. “Agreed. Please tell me you told him off.”

“Well, at first, I was shocked. And embarrassed. When his buddies started snickering, I said, ‘My mistake for thinking some rich, city kid actually had a heart,’ and hurried off to my dorm room.”

“Let me guess,” Aunt Faye said. “He didn’t chase after you.”

“Nope. Didn’t talk to me again the rest of the semester, either. Needless to say, I was glad to transfer to Grace College after my first year and not risk any more awkward encounters.”

Like tonight.

“I thought you went to Grace College all four years?” Brooklyn asked.

Aunt Faye resumed her pricing work, careful not to meet Mia’s gaze. “No, your father convinced her to change schools after that first year.”

Mia shrugged. “It saved me a lot of money, commuting from home instead of living on campus down in Indianapolis.”

It had also kept her away from temptation, she supposed. Was that why Greg had proposed to her as soon as she got back that summer? He’d said it was because he missed her, having dropped out of school himself to pursue his real estate license. Looking back now, though, she had to wonder.

Mia expected some kind of snarky comment from Del, who’d had reservations about Greg from day one. But for once she held her tongue, perched on a stool near the register, gaze unfocused over the store. Was she thinking back to those days, too? Back when they were all still learning to navigate life without their mother, and their youngest sister, Hannah, was still in town? The ache she knew would never leave tugged at her heartstrings.

It was time to change the subject before they all got melancholy.

“So, yeah, it was a big surprise to see him here tonight. But do I plan to call him? No, I think we’re as right as we’re ever going to be. Besides, what I should really do is get Brooklyn and me home. We’ve got a big weekend of tree trimming and house decorating ahead of us. Don’t we, sweetheart?”

Brooklyn forced a smile. “Yeah. Fun times ahead.”

Panic tugged at Mia. First the ornament-decorating event was canceled; now Brooklyn was acting like she no longer looked forward to their traditional Christmas activities. Was nothing sacred anymore? Goodness knew, Mia was having a hard enough time accepting that this would be the first Christmas Eve and Christmas morning without her daughter.

Oh, the joys of divorce.

“Careful, Little Miss Teenager,” Del said, giving Brooklyn a gentle nudge. “Your mom’s had a rough night. Maybe you could humor her and at least try to find some holiday cheer.”

“Fine.”

Finished with their stickers, everyone exchanged hugs and made their way to the back door. Once Aunt Faye was safely in her car, Del walked around to give her niece one last hug. Del shared one more with Mia as Brooklyn climbed in the car, then started for her big silver truck. Halfway there, she stopped.

“You liked him.”

Mia froze, her hand on her Equinox’s door handle. “What?”

“That’s why it hurt so bad when he was a jerk to you.” Del turned back to meet her gaze. “But something tells me there’s a whole lot more to the story than we know.”

“Del, I told you everything I know.”

Her sister nodded, gaze shifting to the streetlights beyond their back alley. “Would you have gone out with him, do you think? You know, if he hadn’t transformed into a mega jerk?”

“No.” Mia had pondered this very thing years ago. “I was already seeing Greg.”

“And if you hadn’t been?”

Mia laughed. “And what if the moon was made of cheese. Let it go, Del. I sure did.”

With that, she climbed in her vehicle and turned over the ignition.

“Mom, where’s your purse?”

She hung her head. One unexpected ghost surfaced from her past and her whole routine got out of whack. “Guess I left it inside. Hang on, I’ll be right back.”

Brooklyn frowned. “Why does everyone always keep telling me to hang on? It’s not like I’m going anywhere without you.”

Mia climbed out of her car, clueless as to where that had come from. One thing she knew for sure, though, was that no one could pay her to go back to being a teenager. No way. Too many insecurities and struggles to wade through while you tried to figure out who you were.

And too many moody boys who were sweet to you one minute and royal jerks the next.

Has Alex changed? she wondered as she located her purse. He said he’d been going through some stuff. Maybe she’d just caught him on a really bad day. Or maybe he’d grown up since then. Goodness knows, she sure had.

I sure didn’t show him that tonight, now did I?

Mia blew out a huff. She’d acted like a jaded teenager earlier, not the way she’d want him or anyone else to remember her. As much as she hated to admit Del might be right, giving him a quick call to apologize wasn’t such a bad idea. She made her way back to the checkout counter in search of his business card.

But it was gone.

“*Delaney!*”



ALEX EASED INTO one of two empty seats at Sweet Mash Diner’s rail, taking in the sights and sounds of a place Mia had spoken fondly of all those years ago. It was a little embarrassing, him remembering something like that. But then, wasn’t that common of people with their first loves?

He’d definitely blown it with her all those years ago, spouting off at the mouth instead of begging her to choose him over that schmuck Greg. If only Alex had been able to control his temper back then, if only he’d known when to listen instead of rant. He’d come so far since those days, his

customer-focused career helping shape him into a more patient, kinder soul. He just needed to find a way to show her that. Unfortunately, he wasn't sure continuing to randomly drop into her family's bookstore was going to get him there.

He grabbed a menu that'd been wedged between a cluster of nearby condiments and scanned its contents, hoping food would help fuel some ideas.

"Don't bother," said a voice from behind him. "It's Saturday. All the regulars know to get today's chicken and dumplings special. Homemade, and quite possibly the best you'll ever have."

Alex turned to find Mia's sister easing into the open seat beside him. Had Mia had a change of heart after all? A quick glance past her sister dashed that hope; she was alone.

It figured. Mia would never let him off the hook that easily.

"Thanks for the recommendation." Alex tucked the menu back into where he'd gotten it from. "So, which one are you—Delaney or Hannah?"

She studied him, smirking. "Good memory for someone who supposedly hated my sister's guts back in the day. I'm Del. And if you don't want to upset Mi again, I'd maybe not bring up Hannah Banana in front of her. Sore subject—she hasn't been around here for a few years."

"Duly noted. And for the record, I never hated Mia. Though, I'm sure there was a time she probably hated me."

"Probably."

Before he could think on that response for long, a middle-aged woman approached from behind the counter with two glasses of ice water in hand.

"Do not make me call and tell Isaac you're stepping out on him tonight, Delaney," she said.

Alex raised his hands in surrender. "No, I—"

Del laughed. “Are you kidding? Isaac’s the whole reason I’m here. Somebody’s craving your cobbler again, Gina.”

“Sugar, you’re going to have to watch that man of yours,” Gina said. “He’s going to get soft in the middle if he keeps this up.”

“Don’t worry, I make sure he burns off those extra calories.” Del winked. “Also, my friend here will have the Saturday special.”

“Did not need to know that first part.” Gina walked away, shaking her head.

“Sorry, sometimes the best way to prevent a rambling conversation is to make people blush. But knowing Gina, she won’t be gone long. So, tell me the real reason you stopped by the bookstore tonight.”

Alex took a drink of water to give himself time to craft a suitable answer. As a longtime businessman, he sensed an opportunity waiting in the wings. Now he just had to play his cards slowly and carefully.

“What did she tell you I wanted?”

“To be forgiven for being a jerk back in college.”

He arched a brow in her direction. “Then you already know why I stopped by.”

“Yeah, but that’s too easy of an answer. And too random.” Del studied him for a moment. “I think there’s more to it than that.”

Alex lifted his glass, wishing it held a few ounces of his favorite amber liquor instead of water. He swirled its contents, the ice cubes bobbing in the current. “Is that so?”

“Ugh, you guys are two peas in a pod. You want me to guess? Fine, here goes: I think you had a crush on her years ago. Probably a big one if you stopped by after all this time to up and apologize. I mean, how could you not have liked her—she was pretty and intelligent and had the world’s biggest heart. In fact, she still does.”

Alex remained silent, allowing Delaney to spin their tale her way. It wasn't exact, but close enough to the truth that he wouldn't deny it. Nor was he yet certain that he would admit to it, either.

“But then you found out she was already going steady with Jack Wagon, and it pissed you off. So you said some things you shouldn't have, and she stormed off without another look back.”

Gina returned with his dumplings and a to-go container for Del.

“You can put the cobbler on my tab,” Alex said, the aroma of tonight's house special making his mouth water. If it tasted half as good as it smelled, his trip here tonight wouldn't be a complete bust. “In fact, something tells me I should just go ahead and add it to go for me as well.”

“Good choice,” Gina said. “I'll box it up when I pack up your leftovers.”

“Oh, I doubt I'll need a doggy bag for this.”

Gina grinned. “I wouldn't be so sure.”

“Thanks for that,” Del said, tipping her head to the carryout order. “So, how close did I get?”

Damn, there was no dancing around answers with this woman, was there?

“Close enough.”

“That's what I thought.” She eased back in her chair, arms crossed. “So, what are you going to do about it?”

Stalling, Alex took a bite of his dinner and closed his eyes, savoring the perfectly balanced mixture of seasonings. Now he understood why it was a local favorite. It wasn't often a restaurant could pull off a texture that wasn't too thick or too runny but just right.

“Oh my God. This is—”

“The best you’ve ever had? Told you so.” She allowed him to finish another bite before smacking him in the arm. “Focus, Alex. What’s your next move?”

“With dinner?” He was teasing, of course. The dark look he got in response made him chuckle. “I don’t know, to be honest. My apology wasn’t very well received.”

“Mia isn’t always quick to forgive. So, maybe you need to do more than apologize.”

“Maybe. Got any suggestions?”

A devious grin stretched across her lips. “Sure do.”

If memory served, the younger Del had an ornery streak a mile wide. Some things apparently never changed. “Would these suggestions be Mia-approved?”

“Definitely not, which is why they’ll totally work.”

Alex laughed. “How can you be so sure? I mean, I’ve already screwed up with her once. If I’m going to put myself out there, I’d like to hope there’s at least some small chance of success this time around.”

“You seem like the kind of guy who goes big or goes home. So, we’re not going to waste time sending a bunch of random, vague texts to slowly rebuild your relationship.”

The more she talked, the more he liked her way of thinking. “We’re not?”

“Nope. We’re going to throw her into the pond, headfirst. Only, it’s nearly wintertime, which means she’s going to need a big warm blanket to help her thaw out. That part won’t be easy, but I promise you, it’ll be worth it.”

Alex took another bite of his dinner, liking the idea of being Mia’s big warm blanket. And if Delaney’s plan worked and all went well, it would most definitely be worth it. In fact, for Alex, it’d literally be a dream come true.

“You’re not worried that you might be throwing your poor sister into shark-infested waters?”

“No, because all the sharks around here know that whoever so much as leaves a scratch on my sister will face my wrath.” Del leaned forward, her gaze locked with his. “I know people who know how to make people disappear, capeesh?”

She tipped her head toward a table nearby where a group of heavily muscled firemen sat, devouring the Saturday special.

“Noted. You sure seem like you’ve got this all figured out.”

“I do. Of course, if I help you, Alex, you’re going to have to do something to help me in return.”

And there it was—the catch. He should have known she wasn’t just doing this out of the kindness of her sisterly heart.

“Which is?”

Delaney’s grin grew to Cheshire cat size. “You ditch signing books in South Bend and sign at our shop that day instead.”

That was it? Giving up the author gig he’d fished for with the sole purpose of having an excuse to swing by Brooks Books? Alex didn’t care if there wasn’t a soul who showed up for the relocated signing—for him, writing was never about the money. His agent, however, would not be happy about the last-minute change. She’d get over it, though. Eventually. Hopefully.

“Deal. So, what do I do next?”

“Eat,” Delaney said as she got out her cell phone. “And leave the rest to me.”

Chapter Three

MIA PULLED INTO her detached garage after making a quick stop at the elementary school to drop off some supplies for a craft they would be working on in class next week. Brooklyn had been mostly quiet on the ride home, attention glued to the never-ending attention suck that was TikTok, while Mia silently wrestled with Del's parting comment about Alex.

"You liked him. That's why it hurt so bad when he was a jerk to you."

She'd never admitted it aloud to anyone, but yes, it was probably true. Only, instead of acting on that attraction or accepting it for what it was, her young mind had put up a roadblock of guilt founded on a sense of responsibility to stay committed to Greg. But they'd only been dating, not engaged.

Ugh, if she'd been wiser then, more assertive, she could have put the brakes on her relationship with Greg like Robyn had suggested and given Alex a chance. Or anyone else a chance, for that matter. Look at what sticking with Greg had gotten her: divorced in her thirties, doing the single-mom thing on one income with a mortgage and an aging vehicle. Thank goodness for child support—without it, on her teacher's salary, she'd really be in a world of hurt.

Mia shook her head. It did her no good to dwell on the past. After all, she was doing fine on her own. No, better than fine. She'd been blessed with a wonderful daughter, whom she lived with in their beautiful house nestled amid family and friends in her favorite place on the planet. There were no regrets worth holding on to. What was done was done, the past best left exactly there: in the past.

And that's precisely what she planned to do, just as soon as she sent a text to her good friend, and former college roommate, Robyn Owens.

You're never going to believe who walked into the bookstore tonight: Alexander Wellington.

It was mere seconds before Robyn responded. *No. WAY! How'd he look? Does he still have his hair?*

Mia grinned as she followed Brooklyn inside. It was such a thirty-something question. *Yes, looked handsome as ever. Said he wanted to apologize for being an ass that day.*

She didn't need to elaborate on "that day" with Robyn. Her roommate lived it right alongside her and held Mia later as the tears began to fall.

'Bout damn time.

Agreed, Mia texted.

Maybe you two will get a second chance at love.

That stopped Mia in her tracks. *Robyn, there was never a first chance. Also? I'd be perfectly content to never see the man again.*

And she meant it.

Didn't she?

Mia set her phone aside and got busy heating up leftover chicken casserole. It wasn't gourmet by any stretch, but the new recipe had proven edible. She cooked because she had to, not because she enjoyed it, and was the first to admit she wasn't all that good at it, either. Thank goodness her daughter wasn't a picky eater.

They had just finished eating when Del walked in through the back door with a carryout bag in hand.

"Who's ready for dessert?"

"Me!" Brooklyn said. "What'd you bring?"

"Cherry cobbler from Sweet Mash."

First the swiped business card, now this? Her sister was definitely up to something. "What's the occasion?"

Del laughed. “You can thank Isaac and his ridiculous sweet tooth. Well, and Alex, who happened to be there when I was placing my order for Isaac.”

“How convenient. Seems you didn’t have to steal his business card after all.”

“I didn’t steal it. I merely helped tidy up the bookstore.” She pulled the card from her pocket and set it on the counter with a wink. “There, now it’s yours for safekeeping.”

“Great. I’ll be sure to guard it with my life. So, what else did you two talk about besides dessert?”

“Oh, a little of this, a little of that.”

Mia’s eyes narrowed. “Uh-huh.”

“I also asked him the one question you didn’t.”

Oh lord. “Which was?”

“If he’d do a signing at our store instead of Books-A-Plenty.”

Okay, that wasn’t where she thought this was going. “No kidding? What’d he say?”

“Alex seemed fine with it, but he said he’d have to run it by his agent. She sounded a little controlling.”

“Wow, that’d be great. But don’t you think B-A-P will be mad?”

“A better question would be, do I care?” Del snorted. “They stole our ornament idea no matter what Aunt Faye says, and that’s not cool. Those kids at Riley need our hats and books.”

Mia held her tongue as she rose to grab dessert plates and extra forks. It wasn’t that she disagreed with Del, but sometimes her sister charged ahead with ideas like a bull in a china shop. The last thing their aunt would want was a war brewing with another independent bookstore. Also, wasn’t Alex supposedly on his way to B-A-P tonight to meet with

them about this signing? What did he plan to tell them, *I'm having second thoughts?*

Del's cell phone launched into whatever country lyrics were her current ringtone—they could thank Brooklyn for teaching her that—and she pulled it from her back pocket.

“Speak of the devil.” She tapped its screen to answer the call. “Hey there, your agent working late tonight or what?”

Mia turned with plates in hand and saw Delaney's smile falter.

“Wait, what? Hang on, the reception sucks in here.”

Which, sadly, was true. Brooklyn complained about it often. Del made for the front room, leaving Mia and her daughter to exchange shrugs.

“You know,” she said as she dished up the cobbler, “Alex was good friends with Mr. Owens back in college. In fact, that's how Robyn and her hubby met. The education department put on a volunteer Christmas gift-wrapping event to help raise money for a local literacy program in exchange for the gift wrapping. Alex showed up with Drew, and Robyn with me. Crazy, huh?”

“Yeah,” Brooklyn said. “I'm just trying to picture Mr. Owens actually talking and stuff.”

Mia chuckled. Drew Owens had always been a soft-spoken guy. His wife, on the other hand, had no trouble speaking her mind. It was one of the things Mia admired most about her best friend: having the courage to tell people like it was.

“Oh, he was quiet, even back then. Maybe that's why he and Robyn have been so happy together. They balance each other out.”

“Did you and Alex date, too, or were you already seeing Dad?” Brooklyn asked.

“Oh no, we never dated. I started seeing your dad when I was still in high school.”

The night of the gift-wrapping event, though, was the first time she'd silently wondered if the long-distance dating thing with Greg was really such a good idea. Robyn had tried to convince her to hit the pause button before leaving Bourbon Falls for school, but Mia had stubbornly remained committed to their relationship. She took pride in making it work, and talked on the phone most nights with Greg.

In fact, the first night they didn't talk was the night of their volunteering event. Mia chose to call him the next morning instead, too exhausted to stay up for a late-night chat. Which, in all fairness, was true. But there had been more to her not wanting to call, some guilt she'd been wrestling with.

Even now, she could still remember lying in the top bunk of her and Robyn's shared dorm room, staring up at the ceiling and replaying the day with her new friends. Drew, the softspoken accounting major and expert wrapper. Alex, the outgoing business major who'd never wrapped a gift in his life. Several others who'd snipped and taped and laughed the afternoon away. She was thrilled to have made more friends that day, but for some reason her thoughts kept returning to Alex—the first guy she'd ever met who found wrapping gifts as magical as she did.

Did he still, or had adulthood taken the magic out of the season for him like it had so many others?

“Well, that was Alex,” Del said, walking back into the kitchen. “He can't seem to get out of town tonight.”

“Why is that?”

“Apparently, he hit a deer on 331 just north of town.”

Mia dropped her cobbler spoon. “Oh my gosh, is he okay?”

“Says he is, but his vehicle is supposedly in rough shape. I said I'd call Hank on my way to pick him up.”

Being in a small town certainly had its perks—like being on a first-name basis with the local tow truck driver.

“That’s thoughtful of you.” Mia paused. “Do you think I should maybe be the one to pick him up and take him to a rental place? That might make up for me being kinda prickly with him earlier.”

“I thought about that but decided this way was probably better. Me going will buy you a little more time.”

Mia frowned as her sister headed for the door. “A little more time for what?”

“Getting the house ready. All the rental places will be closed this late, and clearly the poor guy is gonna need a place to stay. The Bourbon Falls Motel has been closed for months, and of our two houses, yours is the only one with a spare bedroom. So of course I extended the offer on your behalf.”

“Aunt Del!” Brooklyn cried.

“What? You just heard your mom—she wants to make up for being a grouch with him earlier. This will give her plenty of time to do that.”

“You didn’t,” Mia said, calling her sister’s bluff.

Because she had to be bluffing. She absolutely had to be.

A devilish grin spread across her sister’s lips.

“Delaney Suzanne Brooks, this is not funny!”

Del blew her a kiss and disappeared out the back door.

Oh my God, she’s not bluffing.

Mia looked around her kitchen, dishes from dinner still strewn about the countertop and their dessert half eaten. But the cobbler could wait. Delaney, as usual, was charging ahead with some well-intending scheme, and Mia was not about to have Alexander Wellington walk into a messy house.

An irrational thrill raced through her. No, that had to be fear. And a healthy dose of fury. She and her meddling little sister would be having words later about this. *Words.*

Mia pointed to the front of the house. “You work on the living room and powder room; I’ll tackle the kitchen and guest room.”

Brooklyn frowned. “But Emily wants to—”

“No buts. We’ve gotta clean this place up, stat.”



ALEX PARKED HIS Land Rover behind a large greenhouse at Oak Barrel Farms, the landscaping company Del co-owned, hoping this plan of hers would work. If Mia found out they’d lied about the accident, she’d be furious with the both of them. Her sister, she would eventually forgive. But him? No way. They’d be done for good, and that’s the opposite of what he was going for.

He’d called and spoken with the manager from Books-A-Plenty along the way, claiming a schedule conflict had arisen for the second weekend in December and that he would need to cancel his signing. They’d sounded genuinely disappointed but asked him to keep them posted in case his plans changed. He’d promised he would and disconnected.

That was the first lie of the night. The second would be bigger, though. Much bigger. And far more important for him to be able to pull off if he wanted a chance at getting his foot in the door with Mia. He grabbed his things and locked up, then scanned the darkness around him. Karma watched for its chance to get even with big jerks, and right now he was sure starting to feel like one.

“Will you quit with the worrying already?” Del said as he climbed into her silver heavy-duty Ford pickup. “Mia never comes back here, and even with the leaves off the trees up front, our buildings hide this spot from the road. Trust me, she’ll be none the wiser.”

“I hope you’re right. That woman spits fire and brimstone when she’s mad. I still have nightmares from the last argument we got into.”

Del laughed, the sound musical and calming. “She mentioned you went off on her, but I can only imagine she dished it right back tenfold. Trust me, I’ve been on the receiving end of her wrath more times than I can count. Thankfully, we’re blood, so she’s got to forgive me.”

The implications of Mia’s option to not forgive nonrelatives hung in the air between them for an awkward moment. Alex watched Del’s headlights wash over the Rover as she steered for the road and contemplated telling her to stop and let him out. There had to be a better way to try to win over Mia.

Don’t be an idiot. Only fools smack a gift horse in the mouth. Stop being a chicken and start thinking of ways to make this work. The Rover will be fine.

“Okay, so we keep our story straight, what have you told her so far?”

Del turned onto the main road, empty aside from them. “Just that you hit a deer north of town on 331 and your vehicle was supposedly in bad shape. I didn’t tell her what you drove. That way, in the point zero-zero-one percent chance she does see it sitting back there, she won’t know it’s your Land Rover. Then I said I was calling the tow truck driver on my way to pick you up.”

“How’d she take the news?”

“Like I expected her to—she thought I was kidding about you staying with her at first. Then she used my middle name, which happens only when she’s on the brink of furious.” She shrugged in the glow of her dashboard lights. “So, yeah, she took it like a champ.”

“Great.”

“Eh, don’t sweat it. It’s me she’ll be mad at for a few days, not you. Anyway, I told her the rental places were closed and you needed a place to stay. Her house has a guest bedroom, mine doesn’t. Well, it did, but that’s been converted into Isaac’s office.”

“Isaac?”

“My boyfriend. He’s awesome—crazy smart with computers, funny, loves watching sports. Though he’s still rooting for all those silly New York teams.” She shook her head with a sigh. “We’ll convert him eventually. If you stick around long enough, I’ll be sure to introduce you two.”

In the glow of her dashboard lights, Alex saw contentment settle over Del’s features and felt a jab of envy. He’d watched so many people over the years find love and happiness. Had even given it a try himself after grad school, but it hadn’t panned out the way he’d hoped.

“So, is this Isaac a rebel like you?”

She slowed and rolled through a four-way stop, angling for town. “Pfft, no. But that’s a good thing, I suppose. He and Louie keep me grounded.”

“Louie?”

“His bulldog. Sooo adorable and chunky. Oh, and he’s deaf, so if you come over, do *not* let him get loose. Do you know how hard it is to catch a roaming deaf dog?” She looked to him suddenly. “Oh, shoot—I didn’t even think to ask if you had pets at home that need fed!”

Alex shook his head. “Nope, no pets at my place. We’re good.”

In truth, he’d wanted a pet for some time. With work, though, he was simply on the road too much for that to be feasible. He’d considered getting a cat or one of those cool birds that would sit on your shoulder and nuzzle your beard, but so far hadn’t been able to talk himself into either.

Hmm, did getting a pet fall under the “no regrets” mantra?

Del slowed as they entered town, making two turns before pulling into the driveway of a modest two-story Craftsman home. He couldn’t decipher its exact colors in the moonlight, but its siding was darker than the trim around its windows and front door. The lot seemed tiny compared to the ones in the

subdivision where he'd grown up, though the detached garage set past the house implied the backyard was likely deeper than the front. Christmas lights had been strung along the columns and rails of its broad front porch, and an inflatable snowman bobbed on the front lawn in the night's slight breeze. Though, without snow, Frosty looked a little out of place.

Alex couldn't help but smile. Mia had always loved Christmastime. No doubt she was dying for the white stuff to arrive.

As if on cue, the front door opened and out stepped Mia, hands jammed into the pockets of an unzipped coat. Alex couldn't get a read on her mood, her face in shadow from the bright porch light behind her as she glanced up and down the street. Was she angry? Excited? Irritable?

Was he doing the right thing?

And again, his conscience told him to shut up and roll with it.

"Oh, and in case you've never lived in one, small towns never sleep and always talk. If you keep things on the down-low, we'll avoid sparking rumors that might tarnish Mia's squeaky-clean schoolteacher reputation. And not being fodder for the town rumor mill makes her a happy lady."

With that, Del hopped down out of the truck.

Damn, it would have been nice to have started this conversation a little sooner. Keep things on the down-low? What did that even mean?

He exited the truck, making sure to grab his laptop bag. If he lost that in the shuffle, he'd be screwed. Mia came around the passenger side and pulled the door open to peer into the truck's small back seat. As her cinnamon and vanilla scent hit him anew, Alex struggled to think of something to say.

"I really appreciate you offering me a place to stay."

"Technically, Del offered you a place to stay. It just happened to be at my house." She drew back on a grimace.

“Sorry, it’s...been a long day. No suitcase?”

“Nah. This was supposed to be a quick trip north and back. The, uh, deer wasn’t a part of my original plan.” Never had truer words been spoken.

“Oh, I already grabbed his coat and duffel,” Del said as she rounded the back of the truck.

Mia arched a brow in his direction. Okay, so yes, he kept an overnight bag in his Rover most days. Being the regional VP for Wellington Equipment & Trucking sometimes meant hitting the road on a moment’s notice. He offered her an innocent shrug. She offered him a flat look.

“Will you two come on already?” Del said. “It’s freezing out here.”

“Shh,” Mia whispered. “Ears.”

“Ears?” Alex followed the women inside.

Mia shut the door before answering. “Mrs. Harper, she lives next door. I swear, if there’s even the slightest hint of a rumor, that woman can hear it from half a mile away. Which is why I don’t like to give her reason to get her bat ears perked up.”

“Aw, you gotta throw her a bone once in a while, Mi,” Del said. “Margaret lives to chase a good story down.”

“Hey, Mom? I got the bathroom finished. You should have seen the *huge* spi—” Brooklyn froze one step out of a nearby hallway, her cheeks pinkening.

“Please tell me you got it,” Mia said. Brooklyn nodded, still wary. “Good deal. Now, Brooklyn, this is Alex. Alex, this is my daughter, Brooklyn. Del, you already know. And spidey, well, it sounds like he’s probably sleeping with the fishes now.”

Alex may not have had any kids of his own, but he had a handful of cousins up near Chicago with kids ranging from twenty-eight to six months. Usually, he saw the whole gang only at weddings or baptisms or summer cookouts. It wasn’t

often, but if there was one thing he'd picked up from being around his large, extended family, it was that teens today did not like to be put on the spot. Or to get pulled into long conversations with strangers.

"Heya, Brooklyn," he said with a tip of his chin.

Her cheeks darkened further but the wariness dimmed. "Hey."

Del excused herself, claiming to need to get up early for work the next day. Maybe she really did, but the wink she gave Alex as she left implied her bigger reason was handing over the reins for Operation: Imaginary Bambi. As he watched the door close behind her, Alex knew this was it, his time to shine. To be charming, suave, and—

"Is that another spider?!" he cried, scrambling to climb the first step of the staircase just past the front door.

Mia smirked as she took off one shoe and splattered the leggy invader. "You do realize spiders can climb stairs, right?"

He stepped back onto the ground level, leaning away from the staircase. "Oh, a-are there more upstairs?"

She and Brooklyn exchanged a grin. "Tough to say. We tend to see them more down here because they hide in the firewood pile. Lucky for you, there's no fireplace on the second floor."

Alex's gaze shifted to the unlit fireplace. If they started a fire now, would it burn all the other spiders away or draw them closer to the warmth? Maybe the best option was to just burn the entire house to the ground, to make sure they got them all.

"Of course, if you're worried more might appear, I can always drive you into Warsaw and find you a nice, bug-free hotel room."

"No. No, I'm good," he said, more to himself than anyone. "It's all good."

Damn, of all the things this house had to have, it was spiders.

“All right. But if you should change your mind, just let me know.” She winked. “How about I give you the grand tour? If we’re lucky, the rest will be spider-free.”

Alex smoothed his sweaty palms over each thigh. *Stupid spiders.* Yet another minor detail Del managed to leave out of her story. Was this already Karma starting to bite him in the rear?

Well, too bad, Karma, because I’m not giving up on winning her over yet.

He offered Mia the best, non-panicked smile he could muster. “Let’s do this.”

Chapter Four

MIA LED ALEX on an abbreviated tour of the house, which basically meant showing him everything except her and Brooklyn's bedrooms. She felt it wise to avoid that end of the first floor. Still working to get over her past hurts or not, the man smelled delicious, spicy with a hint of cloves. He also looked delicious. It was a dangerous combination to resist, but resist she must. What would the town say if one of their elementary school teachers had a fling with some random out-of-towner?

Then again, it wasn't like Alex was a complete stranger; she just had a seventeen-year gap in her knowledge about him. If he was going to be staying with them, it would probably be a good idea to get to know the new him a little better. Plus, questions would make for polite conversation. That sounded much more forgiving than what she really wanted to ask him:

What the hell had gotten into him the day their friendship imploded?

"So, do you still live in Indy?" she asked, pausing the tour in her kitchen to give him a moment to look around.

"I do," Alex said. "Well, that's my mailing address, anyway. I've spent a lot of time on the road the past five years. During the warmer months, I think I sleep in hotel rooms more than my own bed."

"That sounds miserable."

He shrugged. "It's part of the job."

"For your writing?"

He leaned against the kitchen table they rarely used. "Actually, the writing started *because* of all the time I spend on the road. I oversee sales and customer support for the eastern division of Wellington Equipment and Trucking.

Basically, we sell big trucks and all the equipment that goes along with them. I grew up watching my father work his way up in his father's company. He often took me with him on his travels, and I loved experiencing new places and meeting new people. As I got older, I started working for him on summer break, learning from the best on how to take good care of our customers. After I got my MBA, he reassigned me to a sales position, overseeing the northeast territory. When those sales figures jumped and the former division head retired, I was promoted to take his place."

"So, work had you stressed and you started drinking bourbon?"

He chuckled. "Not exactly. I've always enjoyed a good bourbon, but to get myself out of the hotel rooms, I started visiting bars in the towns where I stayed and asking for their recommendations. Soon, I was getting connected with distillers and learning all about their techniques. The distilling process fascinates me, so I decided to put my interests to good use and wrote a book."

"Whoa, you have time to do your job *and* research and write?" Mia shook her head. "That's impressive. Some days, I can barely keep my head above water with just one job. I can't imagine working two."

Alex smiled. "But you do have more than one job—you help at the bookstore, and you're a single mom. From what I hear, that's far more demanding than my writing is."

"It can be." She glanced toward the hall leading to Brooklyn's room, where her daughter would likely be holed up until Alex left. "It's also the most rewarding job I'll ever hold. Do you have any children, Alex?"

"Oh no. Kids were never a part of my plan. Or my ex's."

So, he had been married once upon a time. She wanted to know more but didn't want to pry. Goodness knew, she'd gotten tired of answering those questions herself after Greg left.

Alex stepped toward the windows facing her backyard and peered through the blinds. With his attention diverted, she took a moment to drink in the view. His sandy blond hair was a little shorter than he'd kept it in college, the top longer than the sides. Now that he was in her well-lit kitchen, she could see flecks of gray at his temples, the glimmer of it in the scruff along his jawline. Add in the laugh lines around his eyes, and he was quite the looker for a guy in his thirties.

Oh, who was she kidding? Alex had always been a looker—she'd just tried her damndest back in the day not to look very closely. Tried—and failed.

“Don't get me wrong,” he added, turning to face her once again. “I've got nothing against kids. I'm just not so good at connecting with them.”

“Ha, join the club.”

“Well, you've got a teenager. No one's good at connecting with them, from what I hear.”

“Del is.” The confession slipped out before she could edit.

“Ah, but that's what aunts and uncles and cousins are for,” Alex said with a wink. “Being the ‘cool’ ones in the family.”

She hadn't thought of it like that, but there was some truth to his words. Growing up, she'd always thought Aunt Faye was way cooler than her father. Maybe that was because when her aunt moved back to town and into the family farmhouse, she was the first nontraditional spot of sunshine they'd all had since their mother's passing. As time went on, she also never enforced the “no getting down from the table until you eat your veggies” rule. And goodness knew Del didn't enforce much of anything where Brooklyn was involved.

Maybe Delaney and Isaac needed to hurry up and start a family so Mia could finally be the cool aunt. Of course, that would probably be the moment Hannah came back into town and stole Mia's glory. If she ever came back.

Wanting an escape from where her thoughts had gone, Mia motioned for the front room. Time to wrap up this tour so she

could call it a night and put this crazy day behind her.

“Any more spider sightings?” she asked as she led him to the front staircase.

“Nope. So far, so good.”

The tension in his voice made her grin. There was something endearing about a man unafraid to show his weakness—intentional or not. It also helped remind her he was human. Knowing he’d come from a well-to-do family in Indianapolis had been intimidating at first, and then again after their big blowup.

But I promised to forgive him for that. Now it’s time to also try to forget it.

“You’re sure Brooklyn won’t mind having me here?” he asked as they made their way upstairs.

“She’ll be fine.” At least, Mia hoped so. If she wasn’t, she could take it up with her beloved aunt Del. “Now, before you see our guest room, I have to warn you—it doubles as my classroom test lab. I tried picking up as best I could on short notice, but...”

“Test lab? That sounds high tech.”

Mia laughed. “More like high *mess*. It’s where I weed out the Pinterest fails from successes. Better to test craft ideas here than at school and end up with twenty third-graders covered in glitter and glue.”

“So, you stuck with elementary ed, huh?”

“I did.” She led him from the landing and stopped at the doorway to her crafting room. “Anyway, it’s not much, but hopefully, it’ll work for you while you’re stuck in Bourbon Falls.”

Alex stepped forward, his gaze slowly scanning the space. She’d never found this room anything but fun and magical in the past, her “creation station” for future classroom projects. But standing here, trying to see it through his eyes, Mia began to worry. The twin-sized bed was covered in a worn,

patchwork quilt her nana had made. The desk was secondhand, as was its mismatched chair, neither in pristine shape. She'd never minded, but would he?

Maybe she should have changed out the quilt for something more masculine. Or thrown all the craft supplies on top of the desk into a box and tucked it away until he was gone. Or—

“It’s perfect.”

She met his gaze, surprised at the warmth she found there. And zero judgment.

“Seriously, I would have killed to have a room like this as a kid.”

“But this is *my* room,” Mia said with a laugh, heat rising in her cheeks.

“It’s all part of the job, right? Planning and testing? You might as well have fun in the process.” He walked to the desk and scanned its contents. “I mean, look at all the great stuff in here—construction paper, markers, crayons. Glue sticks. Wait—do I spy colored pipe cleaners, too?”

She nodded. “There’s even more stuff in the drawers. If you use it in a craft, it’s probably in here.”

“I bet you’re everyone’s favorite teacher. How could you not be when you let them play with all this cool stuff?”

The heat in her cheeks intensified. She looked to the desk with a shrug. “We do have a lot of fun in my classroom. Kids seem to learn more when they’re smiling.”

He stepped closer, a smirk on his lips. “You’ve never been an easy person to compliment, Mia.”

The way her name rolled off his tongue sent a pleasant shiver through her, and she wasn’t quite sure how to feel about that. Nor about the way that spicy cologne was beckoning her to step closer and draw in a long inhale. It hadn’t been like this when they were younger. Things had been simpler then. Platonic. Off-limits.

But now...

No, she refused to let her thoughts go there. Alex may look and smell scrumptious, but he was here for only a day. No sense in letting her imagination run wild over someone who didn't plan on sticking around. Besides, what would it do to her reputation if rumors started circulating about her having a weekend fling with her daughter under the same roof?

"My students show their thanks through hugs and laughter, that's really all I need," said Mia, keeping her voice light. "Speaking of which, I have papers to grade. Why don't we go downstairs and collect your things so you can get settled in for the night?"

"Sounds good. I have some work to do as well."

Mia led the way back to the living room, grateful to escape the guest room's small space. Seriously, that cologne should come with a warning tag. Distracted by her thoughts, she reached for his duffel bag the same time as him.

"I've got it," she said.

"Please, allow me. I've already taken up too much of your time tonight."

He smiled that amazing Alex smile and slung the bag over his shoulder. Then he pulled her into a warm hug and pecked a kiss on her cheek. "Thank you again for your generosity, Mia."

She froze, surprised by the unexpected contact. When was the last time anyone had kissed her on the cheek? And whoa, had he just kissed her?

For once, she wished she was more like Del, able to jump into whatever called her with reckless abandon. Because what she wanted right now more than anything was a real kiss from the boy she'd had a secret crush on back in college. The boy who'd grown into one fine specimen of a man.

"Hey, Mia?"

"Yes, Alex?"

Shoot, why did her voice have to go and sound so breathy all of a sudden? Maybe that was okay. Maybe he'd take the hint and plant a real one on her lips. Oh man, she hoped he would take the hin—

“Is it, uh, normal to have random people looking in your windows?” he asked.

Oh no.

Mia stepped out of their embrace and turned to find her eighty-three-year-old neighbor peering in from the front porch. Though Margaret Harper had retired from her post as a newspaper journalist twenty years ago, her role as the head of their local rumor mill would likely never cease. Nor, did it seem, would her role as self-appointed matchmaker for the Brooks girls. Margaret wagged her silvery brows and gave them both a thumbs-up.

Mia hung her head with a sigh.

“Welcome to Bourbon Falls, Alex.”



MARGARET HARPER WAS a trip.

After half-heartedly declining Mia's invitation to come inside, she quickly changed her mind and shuffled into the living room to introduce herself to Alex. Then she proceeded to riddle him with a dozen fast-fire questions, the last pertaining to his “intentions” there with Mia. Which, of course, he didn't dare admit. But he played along with her interrogation, entertained by it all.

“Margaret, please,” Mia pleaded with a groan. “Alex is just a friend from college who had a spell of bad luck tonight. He needed a place to stay, and we have a spare bedroom.”

“Of course you do.” Mrs. Harper's silver puffball of hair nodded in agreement. “Bout damn time you used it, too. Word of warning, young man: those bedsprings may squeak a bit. To my knowledge, they haven't been used in quite a while.”

With a wink, she bid them goodnight. Mia mumbled something to her as she ushered her out, then leaned against the closed front door with a sigh.

“I’m *so* sorry you had to endure that inquisition. Margaret is as curious as a cat.”

Alex laughed. “I’d say she asked so much because she cares.”

The elderly woman’s mind seemed as sharp as her tongue, dropping quick zingers about Mia’s ex—whom she clearly *didn’t* care much for—amid her questioning. Hopefully, Alex passed whatever test she’d just administered so she wouldn’t feel the need to spend the rest of the weekend playing Peeping Tom.

“Del and I adore her and her two sisters in town, too. They’ve been great mentors to us over the years. But sometimes neighbors just get a little too involved, you know?”

He nodded, but in truth he didn’t know. Alex didn’t have neighbors who looked out for him like that back in Indy. In all fairness, he hadn’t been home enough to develop relationships with them.

“Anyway, thanks for being a good sport. I doubt she’ll bother us again before you leave tomorrow.”

“She was no bother, really.”

He looked away, still unsure how to bring up that there were apparently no car rental places around here that were open on Sundays. *Must be a small-town thing.* Del had admitted to the oversight in communication on their way over to Mia’s, but she’d left before broaching the subject with her sister. Part of Alex wanted to tell her now, to get everything out in the open. The other part sensed she might take it better if he pretended not to know. Then, when they looked up the store hours online tomorrow, he could be just as surprised as she was.

More lies. This definitely wasn’t his usual MO. But he was relying on Del’s advice now: what Mia didn’t know couldn’t

hurt her. Surely, her sister would know best. Besides, if she was that eager to get rid of him tomorrow, he could call an Uber supposedly to pick him up and take him to a bigger city that had a rental place open.

“Anyway, I really need to get started grading those papers,” Mia said. “You should have everything you need upstairs, and there are extra towels in the main bathroom for your shower. Feel free to take whatever you want from the kitchen—what’s ours is yours. And if you need anything that you can’t find, just holler.”

“Thanks again for giving me a place to stay, Mia. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Really, it’s only one night—no big deal. Besides, this is on Del, not you. She’s a sneaky one, sometimes.”

Alex felt a rock settle in the pit of his stomach. Had he made a mistake, trusting Del so easily when she offered him a way to get closer to Mia? Unfortunately, it was too late to back out now.

He headed upstairs to the guest room and set his laptop on Mia’s crafting desk. Though dark outside now, he could picture how cozy a space this was when daylight poured in from the front-facing window. He sat in her chair and pictured her reaching for this supply or that, trying to perfect her next classroom project.

Was she happy being a small-town elementary school teacher, or did her heart long for more? Bigger schools? Grander adventures?

His thoughts wandered to his own career. Working sixty to seventy-plus hours a week, year after year, hadn’t bothered him until learning that one of his favorite customers in Evansville was battling stage four colon cancer. Watching Tom Garrison whittle away before his eyes had been a wake-up call: Life was short and there should be more to it than work, work, and more work—a concept Alex was still struggling to adopt.

Though Tom had gone into early retirement to enjoy what days he had left with his family, Alex had kept in touch with him, gleaning life lessons from the sixty-three-year-old. He texted him now, praying he'd had a good day.

How you holding up, buddy?

Still breathing, so I'm calling it a win. Status update?

Alex grinned. Yes, they had shared a conversation or two about his regrets with Mia and the longing for her that'd resurrected after seeing her on television this fall.

Initial meeting was chilly, but her sister encouraged me to keep trying. Staying close tonight, will try again tomorrow.

Atta boy, Tom texted. And remember, with women, honesty is the best option. Lay all your cards on the table. If she walks, it's on her, not you.

Honesty. Alex looked around the guest room he didn't truly need. It was probably best to leave all this out of the conversation. *Will do.*

Feeling melancholy, he made a quick call home to his parents. His mother answered and was dismayed to hear about his "car issues" but relieved to hear Alex was all right. She promised to pass the news along to his father and wished him safe travels back.

Alex disconnected and set his phone down, needing to put some distance between him and the lies. What he envisioned would be one, had now snowballed into several. How many more would there be before it was all said and done?

However many I need to win her over.

Yes, best to keep his end goal in mind. It would all be worth it if his time in Bourbon Falls led to the relationship he longed for with Mia. Besides, tonight's lies were nothing more than harmless fibs.

After reading and responding to a handful of work emails, he shifted gears and dug into his author emails. *Spam. Spam. So much spam!* While hitting delete repeatedly, he remembered needing to email his agent to give her the heads

up that he was switching book-signing locations. He sent Sally a note, adding not to ship anything to South Bend. Five minutes later, his phone pinged with a new text.

What do you mean you've switched locations? I already have three-dozen copies of each book on the way!

Alex cringed. *Then ship a few dozen to Brooks Books in Bourbon Falls, Indiana, and I'll reschedule my signing with B-A-P. If they're not game, I'll drive up there and pick them up myself.*

Fine, but do not change locations on me like this again. You don't want to get the reputation of being difficult to work with, Sally texted.

Alex grinned. As someone whose paycheck relied on him being easy to work with, Sally's lecture wasn't needed. Instead of pointing that out, he simply texted back, *Okay.*

Crisis avoided, he returned to clearing out his inbox. Buried under a dozen promo spams was a new email from his editor, passing along that the publisher had requested he increase the number of featured distilleries in his current book to an even ten. Damn, the last thing he wanted as his work year was winding down was to increase his writing workload. Alex had been hoping to spend more time with friends and family, not be chained to his computer.

But wait—hadn't he seen something about a new distillery on his way into town? If it was close and worthy of making his highlight reel, that would give him even more reason to come north and visit. And he knew just the person to ask.

Alex headed back downstairs and was greeted by soft strains of Christmas music coming from the kitchen. He spied Mia sitting at the table, several small stacks of papers before her along with markers, her cell phone, and a pad of stickers. Her hair was now clipped in a high twist, and reader glasses were propped on her nose. In the time he had gone upstairs, she'd gone from beautiful to sexy librarian. He paused at the entryway to admire her, but a creaky floorboard gave him away. Mia looked up, did a double-take, and bobbed the pen in her hand.

“Oh! Hey, Alex. What’s up?”

His mind went blank as her stormy blue gaze locked with his. This—this was why he’d had to push her away all those years ago. Because when Mia was around, all other thoughts had a habit of disappearing. He just wished he had handled it differently. Hidden his feelings instead of exploding at her. Or transferred schools. Or begged her to choose him over Greg.

“Alex?”

He shook his head and refocused on the here and now. “Sorry, I was hoping to pick your brain for a moment.”

“Sure, go for it.”

“I just got word that my editor wants me to feature one more distillery from the Midwest in my next book. Is there a new one nearby? I thought I remembered seeing a sign on my way into town but couldn’t remember for sure.”

Mia’s face lit up. “We do! My friend Max Williams and his family own the Topsy Barrel Pub downtown, and they opened a distillery a few years back. Topsy Barrel Bourbons. They do a lot of infused flavors to differentiate between them and other brands on the market. People around here can’t get enough of them.”

“Wow, that good, huh?”

She shrugged. “Honestly, I can’t say. Bourbon’s a little stronger drink than I usually pick, but Del and Isaac swear by Max’s brews. I’m sure he’d love to talk with you—they’re always looking for ways to get the word out about their products.”

“I’m definitely intrigued. Think you could get me in touch with him?”

“Sure.” She picked up her phone. “What’s your number? I’ll text you his.”

“Does this mean you didn’t hurry and put my cell into your phone the minute I gave you my business card?”

Her cheeks flushed a dark scarlet. “Uh...”

“I’m teasing, Mia.” Grinning, he rattled off his number.

“Got it.” She tapped away on her screen. “And now you’ve got Max’s number. Shoot him a text—he’s probably working tonight. Maybe you two can plan to meet up tomorrow before you head out of town?”

She set her phone down and picked the pen back up. Someone wanted to work, not socialize. Alex reined in his desire and offered her a smile.

“Maybe so,” he said, again sidestepping the opportunity to admit he had no intention of leaving town until Monday morning at the earliest. “Thanks for this.”

“No problem.”

Though he’d love to pull up a seat and talk with her a while, Alex didn’t want to overstay his welcome. She was busy grading papers, so that’s what he would let her do. For today, anyway. He thanked her again for Max’s number and returned to the guest room. Besides, he had work of his own to do.

Like devising his strategy for convincing Mia to give him a chance this time around.

Chapter Five

MIA DID NOT sleep well that night. At first, it'd been because her thoughts had been hijacked by the ridiculous idea to sneak upstairs and have a secret, one-night stand with her handsome houseguest. That thought had been sufficiently extinguished, however, when he'd started pacing the floor above her. And tapping a pen or something on her crafting desk. And humming—badly off-key. By midnight, she'd come to a simple conclusion:

She needed him gone.

It was no small relief when her alarm went off at seven thirty the next morning, Mia being more than ready to get this show on the road. Her plan was to get up, shower, and make a pancake and fruit compote breakfast—something to warm everyone's stomachs before heading to church and then sending Alex off. It was also one of the few meals she could make well, and one that Brooklyn loved. After taking in a stray last night, which resulted in Brooklyn hiding in her room the rest of the evening, Mia felt the need to make things up to her daughter.

Besides, the faster Brooklyn forgave her, the faster they could put up their indoor decorations and Christmas tree. Mia lived for tree trimming, and it would make the house that much cheerier—something she needed this year, since Brooklyn wouldn't be waking here on Christmas morning. So, come hell or high water, that evergreen would be in her living room and fully decorated by nightfall.

She took her time showering, then dried her hair and put on makeup before heading to the kitchen. Whether Alex was leaving today or not, the poor man didn't need to see her au naturel. She paused upon stepping out of her bedroom, confused by the smells now greeting her nose.

Was that coffee and...bacon? Where had *that* come from? Sure, Del popped over many a morning and helped herself to the Keurig, but Mia couldn't remember her ever stopping over with bacon.

Wow, she must be feeling really bad about sticking us with Alex last night. Maybe she's come to offer him a lift to the rental place, too.

Smirking, Mia continued on, prepared to give her sister all sorts of grief over the lack of sleep she'd caused. Then more unexpected sounds joined her confused senses: the creak of floorboards next to the sink, something sizzling on the stove, and a fork scraping against one of her metal mixing bowls. Del was really going all out on her apology breakfast this morning.

But as she stepped around the corner, a sufficiently snarky comment on the tip of her tongue, Mia drew to a halt. It wasn't Del she found in her kitchen; it was Alex, dressed in jeans and a dark T-shirt. Bowls, ingredients, and wrappers littered her entire expanse of countertops, the same ones she'd worked so hard to unclutter just before he arrived.

And was that her favorite pink apron tied around his waist?

"Good morning," he said, his smile warm and inviting. "I wasn't sure what time everyone would wake, so I tried getting a head start on breakfast. Would you like some coffee?"

Mia just stared, trying to process it all. There was a stranger in her kitchen, touching all her things, after likely looking through all her cupboards. Part of her found that irritating, and the rest of her wanted to kiss him for sparing her the effort.

"Uh, no. Thank you. But Alex, you didn't have to do all of this. I'm the host. Meal preparation should be my responsibility."

His smile widened. "I figured you would say that. But the way I see it, I was the one to impose on you, so the least I could do is make you ladies a hearty breakfast."

"Well, that was very thoughtful of you."

She went to the refrigerator to retrieve milk and her chai tea concentrate, trying to ignore the mess. Mia liked to clean as she cooked; Greg had liked to cook and then not lift a finger to help with the cleaning. It was yet to be determined what Alex would do.

“Where did the bacon come from?”

“Hoosier Foods. I did a quick inventory of ingredients before I went out on my morning run.” He gave the hash browns a skilled spatula flip. “Picked up some orange juice while I was there, too.”

“You jogged five blocks with groceries in hand?”

“Nah, I walked with the groceries. Well, at least the first block. Then Margaret pulled up in her Ford Contour and gave me a lift the rest of the way.”

Mia dropped into a seat at the island. “Please, tell me she didn’t.”

“Can’t believe what pristine shape that car of hers is in. She told me all about it, of course, then asked me a million questions about my stay last night. Don’t worry, I didn’t spill the beans.” He waggled his brows.

“*Alex.*”

He laughed, the sound warm and inviting. “I promise, I didn’t say anything one way or another.”

“Ugh, that’s even worse.” Mia propped her elbows on the counter and dropped her head into her hands. “That woman can take the tiniest breadcrumb of information and turn it into an entire bakery before lunchtime.”

Her phone would start blowing up any minute now. Shoot—she’d left it on her nightstand. The influx of texts and calls had likely already begun. She could practically hear the rumor mill reverberating from here.

“Maybe throwing her a crumb from time to time is a good thing. Keep her preoccupied while you’re free to go about your day.”

Mia leveled a flat look at her houseguest. “Clearly, you don’t understand how this works. Mrs. Harper will send a text to her two sisters, who will send texts to their friends, who will send text to *their* friends—many of whom are also my friends—and suddenly I’m sitting on fifty text messages asking who the hottie is staying at my place.”

He turned from the hashbrowns he was tending. “You think I’m a hottie?”

“I—” She clamped her mouth shut, before she dug that hole any deeper.

His grin broadened, darn him.

Also, duh. Of course, she thought he was hot. Who didn’t?

“Well, I say let them talk,” Alex said, sliding a serving onto a plate. “You and I both know exactly what happened upstairs.”

“You mean, what *didn’t* happen.”

“Which was?”

He met her gaze, the innocent look in his eye taking the briefest pause as something darker and more animalistic lit his features.

“Anything,” she whispered. Clearly, she had wasted a prime opportunity to have a one-night fling with the gorgeous man who stood before her, cooking her a five-star breakfast, no less. If he did all this after zero sex, what might he have served if they’d burned the midnight oil? Lord, she was an idiot. “Not anything at all.”

“The day’s still young.” He winked, and suddenly Alex was back to his normal, chipper self.

Which almost made things worse.

Snap out of it! You did the right thing last night. He’s just getting in your head!

Yes, of course that was it. Easy enough to do, when she had gone from regular—albeit mediocre—sex with Greg to

absolutely nothing these past three years. All the more reason for Mia to get rid of Alex and this temptation and fast, before her hormones overrode all rational thinking. As he turned back to add more food to the plate, Mia made a beeline for her cell phone. Time to do some web searching to find out when the nearest rental place opened so she could wash her hands of him for good.

“Aren’t you hungry?” he called after her.

“More than you know,” she muttered under her breath before responding, “Be right back!”

Mia swiped her phone from the nightstand. Only five texts so far, four of which were from Margaret and the last from Robyn.

What is this I’m hearing that Alex stayed at your place last night? And you DIDN’T THINK TO TELL ME?!?!?

Yep, word had gotten out. She texted back that nothing happened between them, and she’d fill Robyn in at church. Then Mia started back toward the kitchen, pausing at Brooklyn’s door. Hopefully, the town gossips would only harass her and leave her daughter out of all this. On a sigh, she gave the wood a gentle rap.

“Breakfast time. If you want some bacon before it’s gone, I’d—”

The door cracked open, and a wary Brooklyn peered out, her hair its usual morning rat’s nest. “Did you say...bacon?”

“Yep. Alex has all sorts of things cooking. You going to join us?”

“Maybe.” Her gaze slid toward the kitchen. “Fine. I’ll be out in two.”

Mia continued toward the kitchen, a smug grin on her face. Surely, she could handle being alone with Alex for another two minutes. After all, most of that would be spent coordinating drop off times at the rental place. She could hardly wait.

“Everything okay?” he asked as she settled back into her seat at the island.

“Yep, just had to make sure Brooklyn wasn’t going to sleep too late and miss your wonderful breakfast before church.”

“Great, because I might have gone a little overboard.” He turned around with yet another plate of food in his hands and grimaced. “I’m not used to cooking for three.”

“You made French toast, too?”

“I remembered you saying how much you loved it, back in our IHOP days.”

He remembered what she liked to eat? Not even her ex could remember that, and they’d been married for thirteen years. Maybe she shouldn’t be in such a hurry to get rid of Alex.

“Why do you have that weird look on your face?”

Mia turned in her seat to find Brooklyn entering the kitchen, eyeing her like she’d shaved her eyebrows or something. That’s when she realized she probably was making some sappy face over Alex’s admission. She smoothed her features and sat up a little straighter. “We were just reminiscing is all.”

“Oh good. For a second, I was worried something had gone wrong with breakfast.”

“Nope,” Alex said. “I’ve got all sorts of good stuff here. Tell me what you’d like, Brooklyn, and I’ll make you a plate.”

“Sweet. I’ll take some of everything, thanks.”

“You got it.”

While Alex worked on serving Brooklyn, Mia searched on her cell for the nearest car rental location. It was that or sit and stare at his butt, looking adorable beneath the tie to her pink apron. And it’d be her luck to have Brooklyn catch her staring. Instead, she searched and scrolled.

Perfect, there were five locations within thirty miles.

“Ermagurd, this French toast is amaaaaazing,” Brooklyn said with her mouth full, syrup dribbling out one side.

Mia gave her the “mind your manners” look all good mothers had mastered, then went back to her search. Location one, only twelve minutes away: closed on Sundays. Well, that was a bummer. Location two, also closed. Same for location three. Clearly, these had to be the small fish in the sea.

“Mia?”

“Hmm?” She spared a brief glance up from her phone.

Alex had picked up a fresh plate. “What would you like to eat?”

You. She gave herself a mental smack and him a grateful smile. “A little bit of everything would be great, thank you.”

Need him gone, she sang silently to herself. *Need him soooo gone.*

“By the way, I texted your friend Max last night. You were right. He said he’d be happy to chat with me about his company. Maybe we could swing by there together before I head out of town?”

“Yeah, no problem.”

Funny, for once seeing Max—her secret crush since the second grade—didn’t sound nearly as appealing as usual. Maybe it had to do with Alex standing in her kitchen, looking all sexy and domesticated. Though, since Max was happily married, having her childhood crush diminished was probably a good thing. Finally, something positive about Alex being here.

That didn’t mean, however, that she wanted him to stay.

Mia scrolled on to location number four. No go.

Sweat broke out along her brow. Surely, some place had to be open on Sundays! She spun from the others, held her breath, and tapped on the fifth location in her search. This one

had a handy “hours of operation” listing right inside the search. She scrolled slowly, hoping to improve her odds:

MONDAY–FRIDAY: 7 A.M.–8 P.M.

SATURDAY: 7 A.M.–NOON

SUNDAY: CLOSED

Defeat seeped into her bones. There would be no getting rid of Alex in the next few minutes or even next few hours. He had nowhere to rent a car, and she wasn’t wretched enough to throw him to the curb. But how to break it to him that he’d be stuck in Bourbon Falls for another day?

She turned back to the others and found Alex and Brooklyn in a debate over the proper temperature to serve maple syrup and an overflowing plate of breakfast goodness sitting before her. Gah, she felt terrible having to be the bearer of bad news.

“I don’t know. I mean, I’ve only ever had it served cold,” Brooklyn said. “Or maybe room temperature. But never warm.”

Mia poured cold syrup over her stack, refusing to be fussy. Or to have to wait another minute to try these perfectly coated, golden-brown masterpieces.

“Funny, I’ve only ever had it warmed. Next time, you can try some of mine.”

Next time? Why was Alex suggesting—?

The light bulb in her mind flickered to life.

Alex had a laptop. And a cell phone. And he’d put all this effort into making them a veritable feast, which could only mean one thing:

“You knew the rental places were all closed today, didn’t you?”

Alex’s cheeks fanned red. “Not at first, no.”

“They are? Sweet!” Brooklyn cried. “Now you can make these for breakfast again tomorrow!”

He looked from Brooklyn to Mia with a sheepish grin. “How could I possibly say no?”

So wait, now Brooklyn was all Team Alex? Apparently, Mia had worried about her daughter being mad about him staying here for nothing. But as he served Brooklyn another piece of French toast, Mia silently wrestled with his rental shop confession. Why hadn’t he mentioned it as soon as he knew?

Maybe she should give him the benefit of the doubt. Probably, he hadn’t found out until very late last night or super early this morning. After all, he’d probably had his hands full with submitting an insurance claim. That didn’t make the task of rearranging her day any easier, though.

“Is there anything else you need to tell me, Alex?”

His smile slipped. “No. Why?”

“Eh, I’m just not a big fan of surprises. Hard to plan that way.”

She picked up her fork, forced a smile, and began mentally rearranging her schedule for today. Again.



WHILE MIA AND Brooklyn headed to church, Alex stayed behind to finish cleaning the kitchen. He’d made the mess, and he should be the one to clean it up—his mother would have grounded him for doing otherwise growing up. In a perfect world, he and Mia could have tag teamed the cleanup, maybe stolen a few kisses when Brooklyn wasn’t looking. But this morning things were far from perfect after Mia realized he hadn’t been up front with her about the rental shop situation.

He was definitely skating on thin ice, and that was without her knowing there’d been no Bambi. It made that warning of hers about hating surprises all the more worrisome. Tom’s comment about women preferring the truth tugged at his

conscience, but he pushed it and his own worries aside. Confessing now would get both him and Del in hot water, and send him packing for sure. The best thing he could do right now was stay the course.

With the kitchen spotless, he headed back upstairs to continue his research on Topsy Barrel Bourbons ahead of his meetup with Max. He'd been skeptical after Mia disclosed that the distillery was still relatively new to the bourbon scene. His search results, however, had been pleasantly surprising.

For starters, Topsy Barrel Bourbons had one hell of an amazing website.

He skimmed through the site's content a second time, now that he was sufficiently caffeinated: a brief history of the town, what inspired Max Williams to take a stab at crafting his own bourbons, and the many infusion options. The latter impressed Alex most. For such a small operation, Williams certainly had an ample infusions list—definitely worth checking into. If his offerings tasted as good as they sounded, Topsy Barrel Bourbons would make an excellent addition to his book.

Question was, would the small-town distillery still be in operation by the time his book released? Sadly, he'd seen so many go under before their five-year anniversary.

Alex jotted down some notes, then sat back in his chair, eyeing the nearby bed. Comfy or not, he hadn't slept very well last night. His mind had been too busy, his thoughts pinging from one thing to another.

Mia. The gentle creaking of the old Craftsman home. His editor's request. The web of lies he'd spun. More Mia.

The perfect solution would have been to steal downstairs, crawl into her bed, and scratch his seventeen-year itch. Sex was always great for taking his mind off everything, if only for a while. Though maybe that was part of the reason he couldn't sleep—because what he'd longed for all these years was so close and yet still so far out of reach.

His phone buzzed with a new text from Tom. *Status update?*

Alex grinned. *Breakfast was a hit.*

You're stalling. Now get your ass out of the kitchen and tell her already.

Hell yeah, he was stalling. What did Tom really expect him to do? Kneel down before Mia and admit the entire reason he'd been a massive jerk to her that day back in college was because he'd fallen for her and had been heartbroken to find out she was weeks away from receiving an engagement ring? That he'd made such a big scene to push her away because he couldn't stand the thought of being so close to what he couldn't have, day after day? And that all these years later, he still regretted taking the noble course instead of trying to steal her away for himself?

That'd go over well. She'd kick him straight to the curb.

Rather than broadside her with a confession about years of pent-up emotion, Alex wanted to ease into things with her. Start with a simple date, maybe dinner over at the town's awesome diner, and see where it took them. This time, he was determined not to blow it.

And that look on her face when he hinted about what could have happened between them upstairs? Priceless.

He still had a chance with her if he played his cards right.

You can't rush perfection, he texted back to Tom.

On a grin, he crawled back into his guest bed, planning to rest his eyes until the girls got back from church. Would they have a long service? Stay after and talk with friends and family? It'd been years since he'd attended church with his folks, theirs now of the mega variety—thousands of members but very few who he'd developed real connections with. He closed his eyes, thinking back to his youth and the smaller congregation they used to be members of. His mother, the social butterfly. His father, always working the crowd...

“Alex?”

He bolted upright to find Mia standing in the door of the guest room smirking, one hand on her hip.

“Oh, hey. Back already?”

“Already? It’s after noon. Guess I know why you didn’t answer my text now. For a minute, I worried you’d slipped on a glitter bottle and knocked yourself out.”

On a smirk, she scanned the room, as though checking for any actual glitter misconduct. Smirking was better than scowling, he thought as he dragged a hand down the side of his face. Ew, drool. He subtly swiped that away.

“Nope, so far, I’ve successfully resisted playing with your craft supplies. How was church?”

“Good. Sermon was on forgiveness. Scary how our pastor always seems to know what I need to hear.” Her gaze shifted to the window, narrowed, then refocused on him. “Anyway, I thought I’d see if you still wanted to meet up with Max before I get busy doing other things.”

Can I be one of those other things you’re doing? He ducked his head to hide a grin. “Yeah, that’d be awesome.”

After a quick freshening up, Alex followed Mia out to her vehicle. Man, he hoped Topsy Barrel Bourbons would be a great fit for the last open slot in his manuscript. Then he could buy a few bottles to go, do some sampling back home, and get his write-up done and edited by the end of the week.

If, that was, he could manage to focus. It was nearly impossible to do when Mia’s vanilla and cinnamon scent was nearby.

“So, you looked up his company last night?” she asked as they climbed into her aging Equinox.

“I did. They have a surprisingly great website, full of all sorts of helpful information.”

A proud smile lit Mia’s face. “Del’s boyfriend, Isaac, designed it. That guy’s a web design genius, and it’s not even his primary job. He’s created websites for several companies in town now, including a redesign for our bookstore’s site.”

“He sounds like quite a catch.”

“We didn’t think so when he first moved to town. In fact, Del and Brooklyn dubbed him Harry the Hermit because he kept completely to himself.” Mia shook her head with a grin. “Eventually, she lured him back out into the real world. Now they’re smitten, and I couldn’t be happier for them. Oh, and Louie, of course.”

“Louie?” Alex asked, pretending he hadn’t already had this conversation with Del.

“Isaac’s bulldog. He’s a chunk, and totally adorable.”

They made it downtown in no time but had to loop around the block twice to find an open parking space, the only available one, more than a block from the Topsy Barrel. When Alex asked if it might have been faster to walk, Mia shrugged.

“Maybe so. I didn’t expect it to be quite this busy so early in the day. But I’m more excited to see so many people over at Del’s Christmas tree lot!”

Mia pointed across the street, and sure enough, there was Del, standing by a makeshift checkout counter surrounded by beautiful, fresh evergreen wreaths.

“So,” he asked, playing dumb yet again. “Del works for Oak Barrel Farms?”

“Actually, she co-owns it with Chase Redding, one of our local firemen.”

That, he didn’t know. “Wow, good for her.”

“Yeah, they’ve done a great job of growing their business. She and Chase went in together on it after she got back from Purdue. He works with my dad at the station every third day, then at OBF on his free days. He’s over...there, see him? Helping load a tree into the back of that pickup?”

Alex leaned around her to spy a guy wearing a flannel jacket and stocking cap. Sandy blond hair peeked out from beneath its edges. “Was he disappointed? You know, her falling for Isaac instead of him?”

“Chase?” Mia opened her car door on a laugh. “Hardly. That kid was around our house more than his own growing up. Dad took him under his wing, so Chase is more like the little brother we never had. Well, to Del and me, anyway. The jury’s still out on how Hannah feels about him.”

Alex exited the vehicle and followed her down the sidewalk toward the Topsy Barrel Pub. “Oh, I’d nearly forgotten you had another sister. Does she live near you and Del, too?”

The smile slipped from Mia’s face. “No, she left town years ago.”

Shoot, Del had warned him at the diner not to mention their youngest sister. He’d never met the girl, but vaguely recalled there being a decent age gap between them. Whatever her reason for leaving, Mia didn’t sound pleased about the decision.

Ahead of them stood their destination: a two-story building, its brick façade painted brown. A blue neon sign hung over its door, the words *Topsy* and *Barrel* flashing at offset intervals. As they reached it, Alex stepped ahead of her to get the door. His father had been a stickler when it came to manners—something that had served him well as a salesman on the road. Funny, how a simple act could brighten someone’s day. Even now, the gesture brought a fresh smile to Mia’s face.

Inside, it was quickly apparent that Bourbon Falls had a history tied to the railway system and to bourbon. Booths were made from old railroad ties, while the four-seater tabletops in the center of the room were carved from bourbon barrels. Several signs hung around the space, offering directions or distances from here to Bourbon, Kentucky. Behind the bar, a wide chalkboard displayed a listing of available craft beers and bourbons. It was a cozy touch, but the cooler item was what was mounted on an elevated miniature rail platform about it:

A beautiful, breadbox-sized model train engine, coal car, passenger cars, and caboose.

“Cool, huh?” Mia said. “The bar’s been here forever, long before they started the distillery.”

“Definitely. Where does he keep the stills? In the back or somewhere else in town?”

“Next door, actually. Max bought the property at a tax sale a few years back, making everyone in town happy. It’d sat vacant for ages, its parking area overgrown with weeds. He built a small tasting room beside the stills, with a huge window between the spaces so people can see the distillery in action. The locals, though, just order their drinks from in here.”

She waved him forward. “Come on, let’s see if we can’t track Max down. I’m sure he’ll be happy to give you the grand tour.”

There were a few booths with patrons on the far side of the room, and a few gentlemen watching football at the rail, but otherwise the bar was empty. Perfect. Surely, Max Williams could spare a few minutes of his time to talk before business picked up.

“Hey, Lola—where’s Max?” Mia asked of the lone waitress filling sodas behind the bar.

“Home. Crazy, right? Can’t remember the last time he was off on a Sunday.” She hitched a thumb toward the bartender, unloading clean glasses at the far end of the bar. “But Grant needed Wednesday off to do something with his son, so Max swapped shifts with him this morning. Something I can help you with?”

Mia looked to Alex, who shook his head. “That’s okay, we were just stopping by to say hi. Any idea when he’ll work next?”

Lola’s gaze ping-ponged between them, a grin dawning on her face. “He should be in tomorrow by ten, prepping for the lunch crowd. Maybe you could swing back then.”

“Great, thanks so much,” Alex said, offering her a smile to hide his disappointment. Then again, moving his time with

Max to tomorrow meant more time with Mia today. Now to find a way to spend at least some of it together, just the two of them.

As they stepped back outside, Alex's phone buzzed with a text alert. It was from Max, fifteen minutes too late.

Sorry, had a last-minute shift change. Working lunch shift tomorrow if you'll still be in town?

Alex showed the text to Mia. "Well, at least he's still interested in talking."

"Oh, I'm sure he is. Sorry Max wasn't in today like you'd hoped, though," she said as they climbed back to her car. "Guess that means you'll just have to join in on the fun back at my place."

"Oh?"

Yes, his mind totally went there. It was Mia talking about fun and her place. How could it not?

"Oh, yes." She snapped her seat belt into place, hand lingering between them for a moment as a mischievous gleam lit her eyes. "Possibly the most fun you'll have All. Season. Long."

Oh, baby. Alex shifted in his seat, trying to get comfortable in the jeans that were starting to feel a bit tight. "I'd be down with that. So, you...me..."

"And wood." She arched a brow.

Yep, definitely had that going on right now. "Okay."

"Lots and lots of"—Mia chewed her bottom lip then leaned closer—"artificial wood."

Artificial? He must have misheard her. "Sorry, come again?"

"Ar-ti-fi-cial wood." A grin suddenly split her face. "It's what my Christmas tree is made of."

She winked, and Alex realized this time he'd been got.

Touché, Mia. Touché.

Chapter Six

TODAY HAD DEFINITELY not gone as planned. Mia had agreed to be accommodating, to give Alex a roof over his head for a night, but that whole “no rental places open on Sundays” deal had left her unsettled. Then there’d been the hundred and one questions asked of her discretely before, during, and after church this morning about the rumored guest staying at her place. Now her idea of leaving him with Max for a few hours to talk bourbon so she could have some time with Brooklyn to put up their tree had gone up in smoke. She was back to square one, having to accept that Alex was going to be a part of the equation today. Clearly, the universe wasn’t having it any other way. But putting up the tree on Thanksgiving weekend was a tradition, and by golly, it was going to happen.

So, Mia had Alex help her drag the boxed artificial tree and ornaments out from under the stairs. Then, while Brooklyn queued up some holiday tunes, Mia headed to the kitchen to make homemade hot chocolate. With three of them there, they should be able to decorate at a leisurely pace and she should still have plenty of time to prep her weekly school plans.

And the Brooks family still needed to come up with an alternate activity for the bookstore’s Christmas fundraiser. Sure, it’d be awesome if Alex could do his signing there, but they still needed to come up with something family friendly that could be fun for people of all ages. Reluctant as she was to have a Meeting of the Minds, especially now that everyone knew Alex had stayed overnight, gathering the town’s best thinkers was what their fundraiser needed most.

Her gaze shifted to the kitten-themed calendar hanging on the fridge, where December’s adorable, jingle bell-adorned mascot was peeking out of a brightly colored gift box. Thirteen days. That’s all the time they had to come up with an amazing, new activity to draw in a crowd and collect money

for next year's books and yarn. And purchase any necessary supplies for said activity. And advertise it. And—

“Hey, Mom?”

Mia, reaching for her mother's favorite wooden spoon, twisted to find Brooklyn peering in from the hall. “What is it, sweetie?”

Alex mumbled something in the other room, and Brooklyn looked back with a laugh. “Um, remember how you always said you wanted to get a real tree but Dad kept telling you no?”

She arched a brow at her daughter. Where on earth had *that* come from?

“Yes...”

“Well, now might be a good time to think about getting one.”

“*What?*”

Mia shut off the stove, moved the cocoa to a cool burner, and hurried for the living room. There, amid a jumble of fake evergreen branches, stood Alex, his sleeves rolled up and face red. Upon seeing her, he shifted the section of tree in his arms behind him with a grimace.

“I'm so sorry. I-I couldn't find the directions.”

At her stunned silence, he hung his head and lifted the tree's middle section into view. The top portion looked normal enough until he spun the trunk in his hand. That's when she spied two of its longest branches dangling in unnatural directions.

Mangled, unnatural directions.

Mia gasped softly. “Alex, what did you do to *my tree?*”

He offered her an embarrassed grimace, which sent Brooklyn doubling over with laughter. The sight gave Mia pause. How long had it been since she'd seen Brooklyn laugh

so hard? Despite the calamity unfolding in her living room, Mia found herself grinning.

“Does this mean I’m not in the doghouse?” Alex gave her a wary look.

Mia sighed. “To be honest, you probably did us a favor. I always hated that tree but refused to get another one until this one gave out. I guess it’s time was just prematurely up.”

Alex dropped the branches and stepped forward, looking genuinely repentant. “I’ll replace the tree, I promise. Any kind you want.”

“Any kind?”

She looked from the mess of fake evergreen fringe to Brooklyn, who’d never known the magic of having a real tree. Of how the scent of fresh evergreen could fill your home and make it *feel* like Christmas. Growing up, Mia’s family always went to a Christmas tree farm outside of town, wandered through their collection, then chopped one down, and drove it home. They made an entire day out of the pilgrimage and the decorating that followed. It was one of her favorite childhood traditions.

Maybe it wasn’t too late for it to become one of Brooklyn’s, too.

Mia’s gaze shifted to their mantle clock. Yes, there would be time if they hurried.

“Then I think it’s time we paid Aunt Del a visit.”

The trio piled into her vehicle, still warm from their failed trip to see Max, and headed downtown once again. They arrived at Oak Barrel Farms’ makeshift Christmas tree lot fifteen minutes before closing. Thankfully, a parking space near its orange plastic snow fence entryway was empty.

Mia stepped out of the car and drew in a deep breath as she watched Brooklyn head toward the entrance. Ah, freshly cut pine. Was there any scent that encapsulated Christmas better?

She scanned the lot and was relieved to see it empty, save for an older couple making their way to the small white tent that served as the checkout station. As they drew closer, she saw that it was Mr. and Mrs. Rivers, a beautiful evergreen wreath in the missus' hands. Brooklyn continued ahead, but Alex stayed back, sticking close to Mia. To him, this space probably looked like any other small-town tree lot. To Bourbon Falls, though, it was so much more.

Once upon a time, this lot was home to a small, one-story wooden building that had served as many things over the years: a dime store, a flower shop, a tobacco store, a barber shop. Fire claimed the building in the early 2000s, leaving the beloved lot looking forlorn. At least it did until a local family cleaned it up and set up a tiny ice cream stand on it one summer. With its central location and delicious, inexpensive offerings, the stand was an instant hit. To this day, in the warmer months, the lot was home to the town favorite Frosty Falls, and in the winter was rented to Oak Barrel Farms for their Christmas tree sales.

“Aunt Del, you’re never going to believe it!” Brooklyn cried, jogging up to give her aunt a hug.

Del pecked a kiss to her niece’s cheek. “What’s that, Little B?”

“Alex killed our tree!”

Beside Mia, Alex hung his head anew. Mia couldn’t help but laugh.

“You monster,” Del said, grinning. “So, Mi, does that mean you’re finally here to shop instead of volunteer?”

“It sure does. Do you guys have anything left that would fit in my living room?”

“Hmm.” Del turned in a slow circle, eyes narrowed with concentration. “Hey, Chase? Did we sell Whitey?”

“Whitey?” Alex whispered.

Mia looked to him with a shrug.

From a few rows back, Chase's knit cap—a gift from Aunt Faye—poked into view. “Nope, he's still back here.”

“Perfect.” Del looped her arm through Brooklyn's. “Right this way, milady.”

Soon they were all standing before a tree barely taller than Alex. A rather straggly-looking tree. Mia gave her sister a skeptical look.

“So, this is ‘Whitey’?”

Del planted a hand on one hip. “Okay, first? Don't look at me like that. You know I name all my favorite plants.”

“It's true,” Chase said. “This time of year, it's always some silly Charlie Brown tree that wins her heart.”

Mia nodded. “Well, this one definitely fits the bill.”

“Ah, but you're not looking at its best side,” Del said.

Brooklyn edged closer to Mia and whispered, “I'm not sure this one *has* a best side.”

“I heard that. But, as you know, looks can be deceiving. Watch and be amazed, o ye of little faith.” Slowly, Del spun the tree in its portable base. Fuller, gorgeous branches came into view, their needles varying in color from blue green to nearly white. “Also, I know where you always set your tree in the living room. You've got a huge corner to hide this tree's thinner side, which will allow its fuller side to really shine.”

“Turned like that, it's gorgeous,” Mia said. “And you're right, I wouldn't have given this tree a second glance.”

“Most people don't. That's why I put my favorites back here. Safekeeping for the most special customers.” She winked.

“But why ‘Whitey’?” Brooklyn asked.

“Because it's a white fir,” Chase said. “Your aunt can be a real dork sometimes.”

“Watch it, pard. So, Mi, what do you think? Is Whitey joining the family this year?”

Her heart swelled at the sound of that. “How much?”

“I told you I’d buy,” Alex said as Del turned to fish for the tree’s price tag.

Mia frowned. “But you shouldn’t. I mean, after all, it was our fault for leaving a rookie assembler unsupervised.”

“Oh, now I’m definitely buying.”

He bumped his shoulder into hers. She bumped back. It felt like the good old times for a moment, before life and adulthood and a big stupid fight had gotten in the way. It wasn’t until Del reemerged from the branches with a tag in hand and gave Mia a smirk that she realized she and Alex were still standing close together. She took a subtle step away. No sense in putting any ideas in her sister’s head, even if his spicy cologne still smelled divine.

“Hmm, looks like with the family discount, someone should still be able to buy me a fabulous Christmas present.”

“Lucky you,” Mia said with a laugh. “We’ll take it.”

Chase hoisted the tree over one shoulder and headed for the wrapping station while Del found them a tree stand to borrow since the one they had at home didn’t have a basin for water. Mia tried sneaking her credit card into Del’s hand at the checkout station, but Alex snatched her credit card, tossed it to Brooklyn with a grin, and handed his own to Del instead.

Well, she’d tried. But if he was going to insist on buying this tree, she wasn’t going to complain. Being a single mom on a teacher’s salary equated to lots of bill paying and not much else. This nonpurchase was one she was sure to enjoy.

Alex helped Chase load the tree onto the Equinox’s rooftop luggage rack while Del followed them out, hanging the CLOSED sign across the entrance as they went.

“Hey, you’re pretty good at that, Mr. Author Guy,” she told him. “You’re welcome to come back and volunteer anytime.”

Alex laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The Christmas lights strung along Main Street flickered on, a reminder that the day was quickly fading. Mia gave her sister a hug, Chase a wave good-bye, and climbed into the car with Alex and Brooklyn. Darn, she’d really hoped to be done with the tree by now. Instead, they still had to get this thing home, inside, and standing straight before they could even get started.

Why hadn’t anyone invented a weekend pause button yet?

“Everything okay?” Alex asked, brows tugged together.

Mia glanced at Brooklyn in the rearview mirror, a broad smile on her daughter’s face as she texted on her phone. Today hadn’t gone at all as planned. But then, she hadn’t expected it to be this full of excitement, either. Maybe going off-script once in a while wasn’t so bad after all.

She returned her gaze to Alex. “It will be if you promise not to break this tree, too.”

He winced.

Brooklyn laughed.

And despite the hot mess today had been, Mia found herself smiling the whole way home. Maybe letting her guard down a bit wasn’t such a bad thing after all.



ALEX FOLLOWED MIA out into the starless night to help “dispose” of her mangled artificial tree—in other words, cramming it into her garbage can before trash pickup the next morning. They’d waited until after dark, Mia hoping to attract less attention from the neighbors. Apparently, Bourbon Falls had a strict policy against putting trees out with the trash. While Alex suspected the rule was intended to prevent residents from placing spent, *real* trees on the curb after Christmas, he refrained from saying as much. If she was insistent that he help her after an evening of laughter and tree trimming, then that’s what he would do.

Heck, after the amazing evening he'd had here, he'd do nearly anything for her in this moment.

"This way," she whispered. Mia grabbed the smallest section of tree and ducked a little as she walked. "And not too loud. Privacy fence or not, if Margaret hears us, she'll get her floodlight out. Then the whole neighborhood will know something's up."

Grinning, Alex scooped up the section of tree that had been his downfall earlier and followed her in a half crouch from the back porch to the town-issued waste bin beside her detached garage. And yes, he was totally looking at her cute little ass as they went. Truth be told, he'd been sneaking looks at it all night. Easy to do when she kept bending to pick ornaments from their storage boxes and then stretching on tiptoe to hang them in just the right places.

But it wasn't just the view he'd enjoyed these past few hours—it was the entire tree-trimming extravaganza. There'd been homemade cocoa, so much better than those silly store-bought pouches he used to buy. Then there had been branch trimming and stand fitting, strands of lights testing and stringing. Ornaments and garland, music and laughter. Brooklyn had even handed him the angel to put on top of the tree. At first he'd felt a bit awkward, the intruder in their holiday routine who knew nothing about which ornaments worked best where. But the women had been patient teachers and their yuletide joy contagious. By the time they'd finished, his holiday spirits were filled to overflowing.

Mia was right—there was no better time of the year than Christmas.

After the tree had been trimmed, they'd ordered a pizza from Bourbon Barrel Pizza, shared favorite stories of Christmases past, and now everyone was getting ready to call it a day. Which, as Mia insisted, was the best time for them to come out here and "do their deed."

The backyard was dark, their path dimly lit by what little light stretched from a single bulb hanging over the home's side

entrance. The longer they were outside, though, the more his eyes adjusted to the dark. They paused at the trash bin, then Mia carefully lifted its lid and eased her portion of the tree inside. Plastic, artificial needles screeched down the insides of the bin until they reached the bottom. She looked around, then motioned him forward to do the same with his section of tree. Thankfully, the container was mostly empty, and Alex was able to squeeze his into the remaining space.

“What a perfect night,” Mia whispered, her gaze scanning the quiet neighborhood. “Good food, old friends, and my favorite holiday traditions. The only thing that would have made it better is a little snow.”

“And maybe me not breaking your tree.”

She grinned. “Nah, like I said before, you actually did us a favor.”

Alex grinned back. So long as she was happy, he was happy.

“I’m not sure that last piece will fit,” he whispered, casting a glance back at the remaining pile.

“No worries.” Mia silently closed the bin. “I can sneak it into the bin tomorrow night, after it’s been emptied.”

Tomorrow night, when it was back to real life. No more playing house with Mia and Brooklyn, just him back at his villa in Indy, *alone*. That was a word that’d never really bothered him before. Tonight, it sounded far less appealing than usual.

He felt his smile slipping and turned toward the house, not wanting Mia to see.

“Alex, wait.”

Mia caught his arm. Still crouching, he turned back to ask if she’d changed her mind about the last section of tree—and found his face inches from her. Her cinnamon and vanilla scent washed over him, and suddenly the restraint he’d maintained around her all weekend vanished.

She started to speak.

He silenced her with a kiss.

Mia went stock-still, and for a moment he feared he'd crossed a line he shouldn't have. But dammit, he needed to do something to show her just how much this weekend had meant to him. How much her forgiveness and hospitality had meant to him. Even as an author, he knew sometimes words simply weren't enough.

Her hand rose to cup his cheek, and Alex nearly toppled over with relief. Only then could he relax and enjoy their first kiss. Her lips felt like Heaven, so soft and full. So...right. Alex circled his arms around her waist, savoring her touch, her warmth.

"Forgive me," he said. "I've been dying to do that for about seventeen years now."

Mia snorted softly, her gaze finding his in the dark. "Sure you have."

She didn't believe him. No matter. In time he would show her exactly how much she'd meant to him all those years ago, and how much she still did.

"But thank you," she said.

"For the kiss? Anytime. Seriously."

Mia laughed softly. "No, not for the kiss, though thanks for that, too. I meant for being such a good sport tonight—I know not everyone makes such a big production out of decorating a silly tree. Sorry that we kept you from working on your book."

"Are you kidding me? This was the most pre-Christmas fun I've had since our gift-wrapping fundraiser back in college."

Mia's smile broadened. He kissed her softly.

"Besides, writing is something I do to keep away the lonely. You and Brooklyn made sure I felt anything but that today."

“I’m glad. Honestly, I wasn’t sure how this was going to go. She’s been kinda moody lately, frustrated with her father and struggling with chemistry. Today was the happiest I’ve seen her in a while.”

A shiver rattled Mia, and Alex pulled her closer, hoping he had enough body heat for the both of them. He’d been roasting inside but hadn’t brought it up, too busy having fun to mention it. Now he was glad for the warmth, hoping it might extend their alone time a few more minutes.

“Can I ask you something?”

Her eyes grew wary. “Maybe.”

“Are you seeing anyone?”

Mia smirked. “I should hope not, since I just kissed you.”

“Fair enough.” That answer was as good an excuse as any to steal another kiss. “Any reason in particular?”

“That I’m not seeing anyone?” One shoulder lifted and fell, her gaze shifting to his chest. “I just...don’t want to land in another dud relationship, you know? Everyone thinks I need to hurry up and get back out there, but why rush into more potential heartbreak?”

Alex nodded. He’d been in the same place emotionally once upon a time. His marriage to Caroline had seemed like a good match at first, especially after finding out she hadn’t wanted kids either. Unfortunately, not too long after handing her his heart, he’d come to realize they were both more married to their careers than one another. Their parting had been amicable, but he’d been in no hurry to try again. Nor had any relationship after her really stuck. Perhaps it was because the woman in his arms had been his gold standard all along.

“Oh yes. Definitely better to just sneak kisses by trash cans with random strangers.”

Mia gave his arm a swat. “You’re not a stranger!”

“Correction: better to sneak kisses by trash cans with random past acquaintances.”

“You’re a nutcase,” Mia said, laughing softly.

“A nutcase who would love to see you again next time he’s passing through the area if you’d be open to it.”

He held his breath, watched her consider the idea. Maybe it would work out, maybe it wouldn’t, but he was beginning to think he’d go mad if they didn’t give it a try. After a moment, her gaze found his once again.

“I’d like that.”

A wave of relief mingled with excitement washed over him, and Alex drew her into a tight hug. “Me, too. I’ve missed you, Mia. More than you know.”

She snuggled closer, her cheek resting on his chest. “Oh, Alex, look!”

He followed her gaze toward the lone bulb outside her back door. At first, he saw nothing. But then a tiny fleck passed in front of it. Then another. And another.

It was snowing.

“Looks like you got your wish,” he said.

“Now the evening really *is* perfect.”

Another shiver rattled her. It was time to get them back inside before she caught cold. He tucked her under his arm and angled for the back porch. “So, what do you think? Maybe I could stop by next weekend, grab dinner together at the Sweet Mash or—OW!”

Pain shot through Alex’s half-numb left foot. He looked down to find he’d missed the turn in the sidewalk and had kicked a large rock tucked into her landscaping. Biting back a litany of expletives, he released her to tend to his throbbing toes.

“Are you okay?” Mia asked.

He whistled through the pain. “Hopefully, I will be in a min—”

Light as bright as the sun washed over the backyard.

“Who’s out there?”

Alex cringed. Beside him, Mia had frozen.

“That better not be you, Danny Eichert,” Mrs. Harper called. “So help me, I will call your mother *and* the police this time!”

“We’d better get inside before the cavalry arrives.”

Mia cupped his cheeks, planted a quick kiss to his lips, then tugged him toward the door. Broken toes or not, their trip outside had gotten Alex exactly what he wanted. Now to see if they could somehow actually make this long-distance thing work. Discretely, of course. He’d hate to ruin a schoolteacher’s squeaky-clean reputation.

The back door slid open as they were rounding the back porch. “Hey, Alex? Your phone’s ringing—uh, why are you guys walking like that?”

“Shh,” Mia said. “Alex stubbed his toe.”

“Brooklyn, what’s all the commotion about?” Mrs. Harper called.

Alex grimaced. “I think the cat is about to be out of the bag.”

“It’s all good, Mrs. H—you can kill the light. Mom and Alex were just taking out the trash.”

Darkness fell upon them once more as soft laughter rang out from the two-story behind them. “Sure they were, kid. Sure they were.”

Chapter Seven

ALEX HOBbled HIS way upstairs to return his father's call and get cracking on his edits. It was that or drag Mia into her room and scratch this damn itch, which he knew he couldn't do with Brooklyn here. That kiss they'd shared in the dark had been the cherry on top of an amazing weekend and left him wanting more. Much more.

But, no, he was going to do this the right way. Date first, sex later. He'd waited far too long for this opportunity to let desire trip him up now. Since she'd just agreed to give this chemistry brewing between them a chance, he was going go full steam ahead to try to win her over. If that meant courting her for the next few weeks before taking things further physically, then so be it.

He had no doubt his first time with Mia would be well worth the wait.

Alex dropped into the office chair at his temporary desk and kicked off both shoes. Thankfully, his wounded toes were only red, not black and blue. So far, it didn't seem anything was broken. Since a trip to the ER didn't appear to be in his future, he picked up his cell. He hoped nothing had blown up badly enough at work for his old man to be calling on a Sunday night.

"Hey, Dad, sorry I missed your call," Alex said. "What's up?"

"We missed you at dinner tonight, son. Is everything okay?"

Alex frowned. "Uh, yeah. Did Mom not pass along my text about the Rover?"

"No," his father said. "Did the power windows stop working again?"

Alex scratched the stubble on his cheek. He had remembered to call his mother last night, hadn't he? Yes, he remembered telling her he'd had issues with the Rover, feeling guilty about the lie, and her wishing him safe travels back. Maybe she misunderstood. Darn, now he was stuck trying to come up with something fast to tell his father.

If he told too many more lies, he was really going to struggle keeping them all straight.

"No, I had some new warning lights come on, decided not to chance it. Thankfully, an old friend from college lives near where it happened and has been letting me crash at her place until everything opens tomorrow." There, that sounded semi-legit. "Did Mom really not tell you any of this?"

There was a short pause on the other end of the line. "No, but she's been gone most of the weekend, helping with the Lions Club charity event. Maybe she tried to tell me last night when she came to bed but didn't realize I had already fallen asleep."

Alex chuckled. That was so like his father—out the minute that man's head hit the pillow. "Well, sorry to make you worry. Next time I know I won't make it back for dinner, I'll call you both."

They talked shop for a few minutes, Alex giving a quick overview of the stops he planned to make this week, before the topic of Christmas came up.

"We'd like you to join us in Florida for the holidays this year," his father said. "We've already booked the condo on Siesta Key. Say you'll come."

Alex ran his hand along the desk's surface, noting the many marker bleed-throughs and paint splotches. "I don't know, Dad. I was kinda thinking of staying north this year and seeing all that I usually miss."

"You'll see snow for months after Christmas. What else could you possibly miss by coming south with us?"

Mia. Alex grinned. “Let’s just say my attention has recently been diverted.”

“Oh? Well, bring whoever she is along. There’s plenty of room.”

He looked to the door. “Not sure that’s an option, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

His father badgered him a few minutes more before telling him to think about it and disconnecting. Nathaniel Wellington had never been an easy man to tell no—that’s how he’d gotten to be where he was in the trucking industry. It didn’t mean Alex bowed to his father’s every wish, though. That wasn’t how future CEOs operated.

He shifted his attention to editing after that, making his way through a chapter and a half before a knock at his door pulled him from his work. Eleven o’clock? Where had the time gone? Relieved to find the pain in his foot mostly gone, Alex made his way to the door and found Mia there with milk and cookies in hand.

“I thought you could use a late-night snack.”

“Wow, thank you,” he said, accepting the gifts. “Careful now, you keep doing things like this and I’m not going to want to go back home.”

She grinned, lingering just inside the doorway. “Maybe I’m just trying to convince you to make good on your offer to come back again sometime.”

“You don’t think I will?”

Mia shrugged. “You’re a busy guy.”

“Ah, but smart busy guys know there are times when they need to be unbusy.”

She laughed. “Wow, if you’ve figured out that age-old mystery, feel free to clue me in. I always seem to have too many plates spinning at once.”

Alex gently pulled her to him, nuzzling beneath her ear. “Maybe you just haven’t had enough unbusy time lately.”

“Oh, there’s no maybe about it,” Mia said, her voice breathy. Needy.

Alex hadn’t planned to take things any further with her tonight, but who was he to not help a woman in need? He nipped her earlobe. “We can fix that, you know.”

“We can?”

Alex traded talking for showing. He kissed his way to her lips and gave them a small nip. When hers parted in surprise, he deepened the kiss. Her fingers curled into his shirt, pulling him closer as a needy mewl escaped her. Alex ran one hand into her hair and the other to the small of her back, holding her in place as he devoured her. He’d planned only to take care of her, but maybe if they kept things quiet—

“Hey, Mom?”

Mia’s eyelids flew open. She cleared her throat and turned her face toward the door. “Be there in a minute!”

Her fingers released his shirt, and a blush pinked her cheeks as Mia tried smoothing the fabric. “Sorry, I got a little carried away.”

“I rather like it when you get carried away.”

“But I shouldn’t, not when I’m on Mom duty.”

He nodded, trying to be understanding though his body was not excited about returning to talky mode. Except, he could sense she was about to leave him alone again, and he wasn’t ready to see her go. Heck, he wasn’t ready for any of this to end.

“Okay, but just so you know, I can be very quiet. Complete stealth mode. She’d never even hear me sneak down the steps after midnight.”

“Too bad I’m not that kind of girl.” Mia smirked, then leaned closer to whisper in his ear, “And I’m not always

quiet.”

Alex swallowed hard. If this was all part of her “convince him to come back” strategy, although not needed, it was definitely working.

She took a small step back with that sexy smirk still on her face and hitched a thumb to the hallway. “I should, um, let you get back to your edits. ’Night, Alex.”

“Good night, Mia.”

He watched her go, difficult as it was, but respected her for putting Brooklyn first. Alex hadn’t dated anyone with children before, so this was a new environment for him. Only time would tell if they could make this work, but he was all for giving it a try.

With a sigh, he raked a hand through his hair and dropped back into the office chair, gaze shifting to the milk and cookies she’d delivered. His ex had never brought him milk and cookies when he was working late. But then, he’d never gone out of his way to do something sweet like that for Caroline, either. They’d both been more focused on work than on each other.

It was a mistake he’d sworn not to make again.

Alex snagged a cookie and visited the Topsy Barrel Bourbons website once more, to prepare for tomorrow’s meeting with Max Williams. It was all about balance, or so he’d been told. So, he would work now to free up time to play later.

How hard could it be?



MIA WOKE EARLY Monday morning, determined to get her head on straight and back to her normal routine. Thankfully, the melatonin she’d taken before bed had successfully lulled her to sleep. It was that or listen to Alex pacing and humming well into the night again. Or take him up on his suggestion to sneak around the house and pick up where they’d left off.

Which she would absolutely not do. Not with Brooklyn in the house.

But you and Greg used to have sex when your daughter was home.

Mia gagged a little at the thought of intimacy with her ex—a normal reaction, she'd been told by several other divorcées—and dismissed that argument. They'd been husband and wife. She and Alex had barely just become friends again.

Friends that might soon become more.

No, she couldn't let her thoughts go there this morning. If she did, no one would get out of the house on time. Tempting as it was to call in a rare sick day, she refused to do that to her students. Besides, was she really ready to take things further physically with Alex so soon?

She'd told herself these past few years that she didn't need a man. Didn't need hugs or kisses or intimacy. *And I'd been doing just fine on my own, thank you very much.*

Until Alex kissed her.

One single kiss from him had been her undoing. Is that what midlife abstinence did to a person? Now all she could think about was getting back into his arms and picking up where they'd left off.

Which was dumb. Dumb, dumb, dumb. They had just reconnected, and she wasn't truly ready for that next step. Better to take things slowly, especially since he seemed content to do so. It would allow time to rebuild some of her confidence that'd been stolen by Greg leaving.

Besides, whether Alex would really stay good to his word about coming back was yet to be seen. For now, she had children to teach and a charity event to whip into shape before time ran out—things she should have spent more time working on this weekend but had been too preoccupied by Alex's presence.

And smiles. And kisses.

He'd looked handsome as ever when he joined her and Brooklyn for breakfast, a white T-shirt under a soft flannel with its sleeves rolled up, showing off his muscular arms, and dark jeans that fit him so perfectly they were probably illegal in three states. Mia tried not to notice, of course, but quickly failed, the image teasing her thoughts the entire drive over to the Sweet Mash. That's where he intended to do some work before meeting up with Max at ten, then call the dealership, secure a rental if needed, and be on his way—a thought that left her sadder than it should.

Though he'd been the one to ask if she'd be open to seeing him again, all she could think as he walked away was, *what if he doesn't come back?*

Despite the initial chaos, having him there had brought back some of the laughter and silliness that'd been missing in their home these past few years. Some fun. And yes, a bit of romance, too.

That had been missing far longer than the rest.

As she went to ease back into the flow of traffic, Mia realized Gina was watching her through the diner's large picture window, a huge knowing grin on her face. Curses, Margaret must have gotten on the horn about catching her and Alex in the dark last night. Mia smiled and waved, and Gina gave her a wink.

Yep, she knew. The only question that remained was how much did the rest of their town know?

Dread filled her as she made her way to the elementary school. Would the other teachers grill her for details? Would the principal call her into his office and give her the lecture on not tarnishing the school's reputation like he had with their prior art teacher?

Thankfully, neither happened. Yet.

Ugh, this—this was why she'd been in no hurry to date. Because dating would bring rumors and gossip and attention

she didn't want. Especially if it led to her being left again.

She hadn't been able to be completely honest with Alex last night, when he'd asked her why she wasn't seeing anyone. Yes, part of it was because she wasn't in a hurry to get into another dud relationship. But mostly she was scared of being cheated on again. Of learning that the person she thought she trusted most in the world was actually the person she should have been trusting the least.

Three years, she'd been working to restore her faith that there were honest men out there, who wouldn't cheat on the ones they loved. And she was mostly there. But it was a whole lot easier to *say* she believed they existed than actually having to trust someone new.

Was Alex even someone she could really trust, especially with him (1) being so incredibly handsome, and (2) living an hour and a half away?

Of course, if he left town today and couldn't find his way back, all this was a moot point.

But he sent her a text at lunch, giving her the heads up that he'd sent her a Facebook friend request. Okay, that was a good start, right? Then he gave her reason to believe he'd be back in town at least one more time: to get his car. Unlike him, it was staying in town for repairs. He'd be back at the end of the week, though, to swap it for his rental.

The end of the week—that was doable. It gave her time to devote toward all the projects she had in motion, plus it gave her time to start mentally preparing for this leap of faith she was taking, actually starting to date again. She prayed it wasn't too soon, and that it wouldn't come back to bite her in the butt.

Man, she really didn't want the whole town giving her those pitying glances again.

She managed to push him from her mind for the afternoon, but the daydreams started again the minute she got home. The kitchen still smelled like him. So did the guest room. Mia

cleaned the downstairs but left the upstairs alone. No one coming over for their Meeting of the Minds would bother going up there.

Though it did get her thinking—should she get the guest room ready again in case he wanted to stay over this weekend? Brooklyn would be at her dad’s, after all. There wouldn’t be any need to sneak around—

“Fill ’er up, buttercup.”

Mia blinked away her daydream and topped off Margaret Harper’s mug of hot cider. It was now seven o’clock, and she had a kitchen full of Bourbon Falls’ greatest brainstormers. They were also some of her favorite people on the planet: Del, Brooklyn, and Aunt Faye, her bestie Robyn Owens, Gina Pickett from the Sweet Mash, and the town’s three elders known affectionately as The Sisters: Margaret Harper; her younger sister and self-professed hippie, Nancy Harrington; and their youngest sister and retired baker extraordinaire, Barbara Thompson.

“You need me to add an extra shot in there or did you bring your own?” Del asked.

Margaret produced a silver flask from her pocket. “I never leave home without it.”

Brooklyn appeared in the cider line next, watching Margaret resume her seat at the table. “Why does Mrs. Harper always add something to her drink?” she murmured.

“She says it helps her think,” Mia said.

“Then she sure does a lot of thinking.”

Del grinned. “Don’t we know it.”

“So, what’s all the hubbub about, Mia girl?” Gina asked. “Supply chain problems for the upcoming ornament event?”

Nancy waved her off. “Forget the ornaments. I want to hear all about this handsome mystery man you kept under your roof all weekend.”

Mia shot a dark look to Margaret, who simply shrugged.

“Not my fault you don’t always close your front curtains.”

“Maybe I need to stop opening them,” Mia said. The resulting smirk on Margaret’s face suggested she’d find other ways to peek inside. “But if you must know, yes, an old acquaintance from college ran into a bit of car trouble while he was passing through town on Saturday, so we offered him a place to stay until the mechanic opened this morning.”

“And?” Nancy leaned forward in her seat, eyebrows raised.

Mia subtly tipped her head in Brooklyn’s direction. “And nothing. The three of us spent some time together this weekend, and Alex left this morning.”

“Ooo Alex,” Barbara said. “Even his *name* sounds handsome. What’s he like?”

“Funny. He broke Mom’s tree,” Brooklyn said with a grin. “You should have seen the looks on both their faces. But he felt bad about it, so he took us to Aunt Del’s tree lot and bought us a real one.”

A round of *awww*’s sounded.

“What?” Mia asked. “He made a mistake and wanted to make it right. It was the responsible thing to do.”

“Oh, I’ll bet he wanted to make it right all right,” Margaret murmured over the brim of her mug.

Mia sighed. She should have known these ladies wouldn’t let her skip talking about her weekend with Alex, especially after Nosey Nelly who lived next door had likely been giving them all the play-by-play.

“Replacing my tree was very kind of him. Now, can we get back to discussing the real reason I asked you all here?”

“Are you going to see him again?”

Leave it to Aunt Faye to ask the one question she couldn’t dodge.

“Maybe.” Mia eyed the group, each now wearing silly grins. “There, happy now?”

“Not until he comes riding in on his noble steed to carry you off,” Margaret said. “Figuratively, of course. I don’t want you moving away and let some young yahoo move in next door.”

Mia looked to the ceiling, silently pleading for strength from above. “No one’s moving, and no noble steeds are headed this way. Now, next order of business: we need a new fundraiser idea for our bookstore event in two weeks.”

“What’s wrong with the ornament idea?” Barbara asked, frowning.

“Books-A-Plenty stole Mom’s idea,” said Brooklyn. “And is doing it on the Same. Day. As. Ours.”

Gasps rang out.

“Can they do that?” Robyn asked. “Steal your idea?”

“They can do whatever they want,” Mia said. “There’s no law against poaching someone else’s good idea, underhanded as it may feel. But since we’ve done the same thing the past five years, I suppose now is as good a time as any to try something new.”

“But everyone loves decorating their own ornaments,” Gina said. “Young and old.”

“I know, and I hate the idea of changing, but unless we go and rob South Bend of their stash so they can’t do the event, we’ve got to come up with something else that can still bring people to the bookstore and be family-friendly.”

“You know my vote,” Margaret said. “I’ll drive the getaway vehicle.”

Del gave her a fist bump.

“No stealing,” Mia warned.

“Spoiled sport,” Margaret grumbled.

“What about cookie decorating?” Barbara asked. “We could bake a couple hundred sugar cookies, freeze them until the day of the event, and then let families buy and decorate as many as they want.”

Mia shook her head. “The elementary school’s already doing that event the Friday before.”

“How about an all-male revue?” Margaret asked. “Maybe your new man could be the feature act.”

This time it was Robyn who leaned forward to share a fist bump with her.

Brooklyn frowned and leaned closer to her aunt. “What’s an all-male revue?”

Del whispered the answer, and Brooklyn made a face. “Eww, you want that at our bookstore?”

“Absolutely not,” Mia said.

Del laughed. “Fine. What about wreath decorating? We could probably even cut some small branches for kids to decorate.”

“I’m voting no on that idea. We’d have sap and pine needles everywhere,” Aunt Faye said. “We need something less messy. If only we could do story time and sell a few hundred gallons of hot chocolate.”

“Or host another talent show,” Del said.

Talent—that was it!

“What if we had Santa come in to do a reading of *The Night Before Christmas*? We could provide cookies and hot chocolate for the kids, and suggest a freewill donation,” Mia said.

Del nodded. “Traditional—I like it. And don’t forget: for the adults, we’re trying to line up a best-selling author to do a book signing.”

“Really? Wow, that’s definitely thinking outside the box,” Robyn said. “But what big author could we possibly convince

to come all this way right before Christmas?”

Del said, “Here’s a name you may remember: Alex Wellington.”

Robyn’s jaw dropped as she looked to Mia. “No kidding?”

“No kidding.”

“Now we know why you let him stay here this weekend,” Margaret said with a wink. “I always knew you were one smart cookie.”

Mia shook her head. “No, that was all just coincidence. Handy, but just a coincidence. What’s even cooler is that Alex writes about all these different distilleries across the country, and he’s trying to connect with Max to see if Topsy Barrel Bourbons will fit into his next book.”

“I like him already,” Nan said. “You get your new beau to sign books; Barbara and I will work on the cookies.”

“What about me?” Gina asked.

“You’re in charge of the hot chocolate,” Mia said. “And making sure Margaret gets nowhere near it.”

Mrs. Harper shrugged. “Fine, I’ll just stick close to Alex and run off any competition of Mia’s that might walk in the door.”

Competition?

As the others laughed, Mia worked to keep her worries in check. Did she have competition down in Indy? Did he already have other women waiting in the wings? Mia didn’t know. For now, she’d just have to trust him until he gave her a reason not to.

Hopefully, that reason wouldn’t arrive.

Chapter Eight

MIA DROPPED BROOKLYN off at the high school Tuesday night, then circled back to pick up Margaret Harper. Tonight was the school's annual winter music concert, with both the band and show choir set to perform. Mia had planned to go alone, as the rest of her family was working at their respective jobs, but Margaret had volunteered to come along.

Well, more like volun-told. She refused to have Mia go alone after learning Greg and his family all planned to attend. Mia had insisted she would be fine, that participating in school functions as a split couple was gradually getting easier, but Margaret wouldn't hear of it.

After living beside her for over a decade, Mia had learned that arguing with the woman was a lost cause.

"You're late," Margaret said, easing into Mia's Equinox.

Mia, ever punctual, frowned. "The concert doesn't start for forty-five minutes."

"Exactly. How will we get to people watch if we're not there before everyone else?"

Shaking her head, Mia steered for the school. Was this what it would be like if she was still single at Mrs. Harper's age? So bored and eager to get out of the house that people watching at their high school was a highlight of the week?

Her mind drifted back to Alex, afraid to daydream about their future. Probably best not to get her hopes up too high. Still, she couldn't help but wish he'd been here. If nothing else, the look of shock on Greg's face that she'd brought a date would have been entertaining.

The drive back to Bourbon Falls High took only a few minutes, and soon she was hurrying after Margaret who seemed bound and determined to be one of the first spectators

to arrive. Seats with a clear view of both where the band would perform and the main entrance to the auditorium were soon selected, and the ladies shed their coats and settled in.

Margaret assessed Mia's outfit and smirked. "I knew it."

Mia scanned her patterned red sateen shirt and black cardigan, looking to see if she'd spilled something from their hurried early dinner on herself. "Knew what?"

"You two *are* a thing."

Mia stopped her fretting and sighed. "Alex and I are just longtime friends reconnecting." *So far. Mostly.* "And why do you say that?"

Margaret's grin widened. "Because you're wearing a silky blouse."

"So?"

"So, you only wear that fabric when you're feeling confident."

Mia rubbed the hem of her shirt between her fingers and thumb. Did she?

"Also, you're wearing lipstick. Which is a waste, if you ask me, since your man isn't even here."

"Maybe I just wanted to feel a little more pretty tonight?" Mia said.

"Or maybe you're just practicing putting it on again before—oh, great, Numb Nuts is here."

Mia followed Mrs. Harper's narrowed gaze to the auditorium's entryway. Sure enough, there was Greg, his toothpick of a wife, Becky, and Greg's mother and father. Hopefully, the newcomers would just choose seats toward the front of the room. Much to her chagrin, the entourage headed their way.

"Be nice," she told Margaret as Greg drew closer. "You may not have to deal with him much, but I still do."

“I’m too old to play nice. Besides, now that he doesn’t live next door, I gotta get my digs in whenever I can.”

Mia pinched the bridge of her nose. “Please, promise me you’ll behave tonight. It’s almost Christmas.”

“Killjoy,” Margaret grumbled. “And what’s with Betty Boop’s outfit? Did she finally mature beyond the skinny jeans phase?”

Mia’s gaze shifted reluctantly to Becky, a.k.a. her replacement. Younger and thinner than Mia, she generally did arrive to school functions in clothing styles far too similar to what the teens were wearing. Tonight, however, she was dressed in a forest green baby doll dress, cream-colored tights, and knee-high leather boots. The dress’s bodice accentuated what little Becky had up top, but hung loose below that.

“Maybe she strayed from her vegetarian diet and is feeling bloated.” Mia put a hand over her mouth. “I should not have said that.”

“We were all thinking it,” Margaret said, offering her a fist bump.

For once, Mia returned it.

“Evening, Mia. Mrs. Harper,” Greg said in a chipper voice, taking the seat next to Mia as the rest of his family filed into the row.

The whole freaking auditorium is empty, and he has to sit right next to me?

“Gregory,” said Margaret, the word dripping with irritation.

Mia threw her a warning glance before turning to face her ex-husband. “Hey there. Brooklyn will be happy you all could make it.”

She waved to her former in-laws, who’d remained pleasant after the divorce but had been quick to pledge allegiance to the new wife. Though it still stung, Mia was determined to maintain her path on the high road. Outwardly, anyway. It

didn't guarantee she wouldn't sit here and *think* less than friendly thoughts toward the man who'd abandoned their family. Like how that new hairstyle of his wasn't intended for anyone over the age of seventeen...

"Yes, looks like Brooklyn's going to have quite a cheering section tonight," Greg said. His gaze shifted past Mia. "Where's the rest of your family?"

"They actually have a life," Margaret murmured, her gaze fixed on the door.

"Sorry?" Greg asked, leaning closer.

Gah, that was the last thing Mia wanted.

"Working," she said. *Lucky ducks*. "But I promised to record the concert and replay it for them afterward."

Greg nodded. "That's cool. Bummer they couldn't be here, though. Tell them all I wish them well."

"Will do," Mia said.

She could only guess what their responses would be to that. Aunt Faye would probably say it was nice of Greg to think of them. Her father would grunt but otherwise bite his tongue. And Del? Well, her response would depend on whether or not Brooklyn was in hearing distance.

What would Alex would say? "Thanks for being a complete idiot and making Mia single again?"

Mia ducked to hide a grin. Yes, it was a petty thought. But sometimes petty was the difference between being able to sit elbow-to-elbow with your ex for an hour and a half at the local high school or having to hide in the ladies' room while you bawled your eyes out in the far stall over broken dreams.

She shifted her attention back to Margaret, determined to keep the mood light. They were here for Brooklyn, and here was where she needed to be. What she wasn't required to do, however, was entertain her ex and his family; they could do that on their own. So, rather than sit there stewing on the past, she joined in on her neighbor's people watching hobby.

Which, it turned out, was far more fun than she'd realized. Time passed quickly as Margaret spun tales and opinions on every family that stepped into the room. Seats around them filled with townsfolk, and waves and smiles were exchanged. Soon the band was filing out onto the stage, Brooklyn stepping carefully around music stands with her bassoon. Mia turned to Greg to point out the new dress they'd found on clearance in Warsaw last week and found him leaning close to his new wife, a smitten look on both their faces. But it wasn't their faces that had her at a sudden loss for words—it was Greg's hand, resting lovingly on Becky's belly.

Her swollen belly.

Just like he'd done with Mia a million years ago.

Becky's gaze shifted to Mia and her grin turned sheepish. Mia sat frozen in her seat, trying to keep her cool. Only, it was the last thing in the world she wanted to do.

Mia had wanted another baby so badly. Had begged Greg for years to grow their family by just one more so that Brooklyn could have a little brother or sister to grow up with. But an only child himself, he'd been adamant that their family of three was the perfect size, and that Brooklyn was the only child they would ever need.

That baby bump, however, said otherwise.

Oh God, what did this mean for Brooklyn? Would she become an afterthought as all the attention shifted to her new half-sibling? Forced to babysit every time she was at her dad's?

Or worse, would she want to spend less time with Mia and more time at her dad's with the new baby?

Greg turned to find Mia staring. A blush rose in his cheeks as a proud papa smile tugged his lips wider. The same smile he'd worn when they'd been expecting with Brooklyn.

“Surprise,” he whispered.

As Mia struggled to think of a high-road-type thing to say, Margaret leaned forward and mumbled her own assessment of the situation:

“Guess we know what happened to the skinny jeans now.”

“Sorry?” Greg asked.

“She said, ‘congratulations’,” Mia called over several dozen sets of footsteps, shuffling across the stage.

“Like hell I did.” Margaret leaned around Mia to get another look at the baby bump and raised her voice. “You know, if you and your hot new man aren’t careful, that could be you in a few months.”

OhmyGodMargaret.

Surprise lit Greg’s features. “New man?”

Several heads turned in their direction. If ever Mia had wanted to find a rock to hide under, it was now. Unfortunately, they had an entire concert to sit through, and the music had yet to begin; Mia was stuck here for the foreseeable future. Her ex continued to stare, waiting for an answer.

“Old friend is all,” Mia said. “Definitely won’t be any babies on the way.”

She shot Mrs. Harper a dark look, but it only broadened the smirk on her neighbor’s face. She’d wanted to get her digs in, and that one had caught Greg off guard. Unfortunately, it’d also drawn the attention of several other members of the audience.

If the rumor mill hadn’t been churning before, it would be now.

Mia tried to focus on the concert but struggled, her mind unable to quiet. And though it would have only caused more rumors to arise, she wished Alex really was there. Because right about now, she could use a solid shoulder to cry on.

Chapter Nine

ALEX LEFT THE dinner table and stepped into his father's home office to take a business call Tuesday evening. Frank Schuler was one of their biggest clients in Tennessee, and if he wasn't happy, no one was. Fortunately for Alex, they quickly worked out a temporary solution to a hydraulic cable issue that'd been cropping up in some of their newest dump beds. He promised to contact his design engineers and get Frank an update by noon the next day.

Frank was pleased. Alex's father, upon learning that Alex would be leaving shortly to get the ball rolling on finding a lasting solution, was far less so.

"You've got to stop promising such a quick turnaround, son. One of these times, you're going to bite off more than you can chew and lose credibility. Solutions take time. Frank knows that."

His father had been short with him tonight, though Alex had given him no reason to be. Yes, he'd been in Bourbon Falls all weekend, but he'd worked from his laptop for the duration. After a productive meeting at the Tippy Barrel with Max Williams, Del had given Alex a ride back to his Rover, so he'd been able to check on a few customers in northern Indiana that day. No Wellington deals had slipped through the cracks, no customers displeased. Not from his actions, anyway; Frank's issue was with the manufacturer.

Was his dad grouchy because he'd mentioned that he was seeing someone? Dating had never gotten in the way of his work before; Alex knew better than to let that happen, especially with the promotion to CEO on the horizon. So why would that bother his old man now?

"He does," Alex said. "He also knows that if I say I'll give him an update tomorrow, it's only that—an update. Keeping

his business is worth it to me to burn a little midnight oil.”

“If we moved the business south like I’d wanted, we could better support people like Frank.”

Now that he’d started dating someone living north of here, his father decided to resurrect his idea of moving Wellington south? Is that what had him so grumpy tonight?

“But you know land is cheaper here. Going north, we could start capturing more of the Chicago-area and southern Michigan markets.”

His father frowned but nodded. “Maybe.”

A maybe was always better than a no. Also, Alex hadn’t come here to talk business—that wasn’t fair to his mother. He looked to her and smiled, trying to steer the conversation back to including her.

“So, Mom, tell me about this charity event you just did with the Lions Club.”

“Lions Club? Oh no, last weekend was with the chamber. But you would have loved it, dear. They had several expensive bottles of bourbon in the silent auction.”

“Did you bid on any for me?”

She looked to his father. “Did we?”

Nathaniel shifted in his seat. “Uh no, not last weekend. So, Alex, did you think any more about vacation?”

Damn, they’d almost made it through an entire meal without anyone bringing it up. And sure, chilling on a sunny beach later this month sounded nice, but he could do that anytime. Right now, he wanted to explore this thing that had blossomed between him and Mia over the weekend.

“We’re going on vacation?” his mother asked.

“Over the holidays. I told you that,” his father said, scowling.

Uh-oh. All was not butterflies and rainbows in the Wellington house. So that's why his father had been a little on edge tonight. As much as he'd love to hear his beloved parents start their usually mild bickering, now was as good a time as any to finish his meal and make an escape. If he hurried, he might even be able to work in a quick call to Mia and see how Brooklyn's band concert had gone tonight.

Alex finished his last bite of dinner and pushed back from the table.

"Sorry, Dad, I kind of forgot about it. Been a little preoccupied, trying to coordinate repairs for the Rover while juggling a few major year-end municipal orders. Can I let you know next week?"

"You can let me know Sunday. We're planning a family dinner with my brother and his wife. We'll expect you here."

Alex arched a brow. It'd been a while since his father had felt the need to guilt him into attending family functions. He hoped Uncle Zeke was doing all right. "I'll do my best."

"But I thought Alex's book signing was this weekend," his mother said.

"No, Mom, that's the following weekend. Wait—were you guys thinking of coming?"

She reached over to place her hand on his. "Of course, sweetheart. We wouldn't miss it for the world."

Pride blossomed in his chest.

"That means a lot to me. Thank you. I'll send you the address and times." He gave his mother's hand a gentle squeeze.

"Okay, dear."

Alex headed for home after that, his villa a comfortable twenty-minute drive. Not too close to his folks, not too far, but just right. He'd bought it new, a spec home that had been the right price in the right place at the right time. Specifically, after his brief marriage to Caroline.

He'd wanted to start fresh, and this villa had been the perfect blank canvas for that. Alex had hired a local interior designer to furnish it, since he was on the road too often to come up with all that on his own. It was masculine but not lumberjack, modern but not cold. To him, it felt comfortable. Functional.

But after spending the weekend in Mia's cozy Craftsman, walking into his modern villa felt about as welcoming as walking into his investor's lobby. Clean, orderly, and with zero personality. In another word, *boring*. Funny how he'd never noticed it before. Also, he now realized, there was not a single Christmas decoration in sight. Mia would be so disappointed if she saw his place.

A smile tugged at his lips at the memory of their kisses. Friday could not come fast enough.

He made the calls he needed to make for work, then checked the time: 9:45 p.m. Too late to call her? Unsure, he texted and asked if she was still up. When she replied, he traded his office for the living room and hit the call button.

"Hey, beautiful. How was your day?"

Mia laughed softly. "Better now, thank you. How about yours?"

He gave her a very brief, very vague rundown of his travels and dinner with his parents—careful to leave out all references to his vehicle—then shifted the topic back to her. "So, why better now?"

"Well, it's always good to hear your voice, of course."

"Of course," he laughed. "But..."

She sighed. "So, the band concert was tonight."

"Yes! How did Brooklyn do?"

Alex clicked on his ventless fireplace and dropped into a nearby recliner.

“She did great. Well, at least from what I could tell. She’s the only bassoon, so most of the time I can pick her out from the rest of the band. When I asked her how it went, she just shrugged.”

“Sounds like something she would do,” Alex said. “So, what has you sounding less than happy then?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “It’s nothing.”

Alex may have been married for a short period of time, but it’d been more than long enough to know that when a woman said “it’s nothing,” it never really was.

“Tell me.”

“It’s just...so, we ended up sitting by my ex and his new wife and parents.”

“We?”

“Mrs. Harper tagged along. She didn’t want me to go alone. I tried telling her I would be fine, but she insisted.”

Concern niggled at him. What could have gone so wrong at a high school band concert? Had her ex made a scene? Had Margaret done something to draw too much attention to them?

“Anyway, we got there before the other side of the family because Mrs. Harper insists on getting everywhere super early. Fine by me. I hate being late. She, on the other hand, just loves people watching.”

Alex chuckled.

“Yes, shocker, I know. But the real shocker was when Greg and his new wife walked in and she...she had a baby bump, Alex. All those years he told me one daughter was enough, and now he’s starting over with his new young wife and—” She sighed. “It just hurts. I know that probably sounds silly, but I guess I’m struggling to process it all.”

“I’m sorry to hear you’re hurting. And it’s perfectly all right for you to need time to process that. It sounds like

something you definitely weren't expecting."

She breathed out a huff. "Yeah, those two have been *great* at surprising me with news I wasn't expecting. Anyway, I congratulated them, of course, but where does that leave Brooklyn? There's going to be a seventeen-year gap between her and her new half-sibling. Will she become an afterthought? Or get guilted into babysitting all the time? And what will I do if she suddenly wants to spend more time over there playing with the new baby than here with me? I've only got a few more years with her before she heads off to college, Alex."

Alex shifted in his chair, unsure how to answer a single one of those questions. All of this was way outside his area of expertise. This was a hazard that came with dating women with children. Usually, he'd be running in the other direction. But for Mia, he'd find a way to help her work through it. Also, he'd taken a shine to Brooklyn after the Christmas tree incident and the way she laughed at him instead of dissolving into a puddle of tears.

"I think the thing to remember is how close you are with Brooklyn—no matter what changes come both your ways, that bond runs deep. But my guess is, she'll turn out to be an amazing older sister because of the example you've set with your own family."

A snuffle sounded from Mia's side of the line. "Thanks, Alex. I needed to hear all of that."

"Anytime." And he meant it.

"One funny thing did happen tonight, though. I think Mrs. Harper knew I was struggling with the baby news. So, when the concert was over and we were waiting for Brooklyn to put away her instrument and join us, Mrs. Harper said just loud enough for Greg's family to hear that it was a good thing my new man had to be away on business, because all the moms would have been watching him instead of the concert." Mia laughed. "I'm not going to lie, I think she has a bit of a crush on you. And also, the look on Greg's face was priceless."

Alex watched the gas flames dancing in the fireplace and grinned. He'd liked Mia's neighbor from the start. "She's a firecracker, that one."

"That she is. Anyway, enough about that. What's the word on your car?"

Alex grimaced, hating that he wasn't out from under his Bambi fib just yet. Hopefully, someday they'd look back on Del's ruse and laugh together about it. For now, he'd just have to craft his answers carefully.

"Parts are in, just waiting on the shop to get them installed. They're dealing with staffing shortages just like everyone else. I'm hoping it'll be done by the end of the week."

His icemaker kicked on, the sound giving Alex a start. It seemed his guilt for all these lies had him strung a little tight tonight. He was going to have to find a way to minimize them going forward.

They talked a while longer, and by the time they said good night, all Alex could think was that Friday couldn't come fast enough. He could use a little distance from his father's badgering, and she sounded like she could definitely use an emotional boost after tonight's band concert surprise.

But then, who said his work week had to end on a Friday?

Alex set his phone down and started on another unplanned project: rearranging his schedule to get him back to Mia sooner. As long as his calls got made and clients kept happy, he could craft his schedule however he wanted. It was time to try out Del's motto on his own family:

What his father didn't know couldn't hurt him.

Chapter Ten

MIA SAT BENEATH the checkout tent at the Oak Barrel Farms Christmas tree lot Thursday night, toasty warm thanks to her faux fur-lined boots, winter coat, thick gloves, and the awesome standup patio heater Del and Chase had invested in. Last weekend's mild weather had been hijacked by a small snowstorm earlier today that dropped four inches of heavy, wet snow on their town. Not that she was complaining—it made Christmas feel that much closer. From the happy squeals of little ones tromping down the sidewalks of Main Street in new winter boots to the snow glistening off the overhead street light decorations, the scene in Bourbon Falls was downright magical.

It was almost enough to take her mind off that darned baby bump.

Mia's smile slipped as the image of Greg lovingly touching his new wife's belly haunted her anew. How had Brooklyn seriously not noticed it these past few weeks? Becky was a twig, her usual wardrobe consisting of items that showed off her ridiculously flat stomach. That baby doll dress over leggings had been a deviation from the norm at the concert Tuesday night, but Mia would never have guessed in a million years it was to hide a baby bump.

For fifteen years, Greg had insisted one child was more than enough. Fifteen years of her hinting, asking, even begging, and him always telling her no. Now the new wife came along, batted her pretty mascara'd lashes, and he caved? Just like that?

“Uh-oh, Chase, she's turning red again.” Del stepped under the tent and came to stand before the patio heater, hands extended toward it. “Sweetheart, we know he's a total douche who did you wrong, but you have to let it go.”

“Not likely,” Mia grumbled, knowing deep down that her sister was right; it did her no good to sit here stewing. But letting bygones be bygones was harder some days than others.

If only Alex was here to sufficiently distract her with some witty banter. Or more kissing—that would definitely help keep her mind off wanting to throat punch Greg. Alex was a million times better kisser than her ex ever was.

Ha! Enjoy those mediocre kisses, Becky!

Del came around Mia’s side and wrapped her sister in a toasty hug. “I know, it sucks, Mi. But no baby will ever be more adorable than Brooklyn was. And I’m calling it right now—their kid is doomed to be a nose-laughers like his mother.”

Mia grinned. No, it wasn’t right to pick on the woman, but since she was married to Mia’s ex, that made everything about her fair game for scrutiny, starting with her laugh. Whether a chuckle or a belly laugh, the woman scrunched her nose and did the laughing through it instead of her mouth. Often, it sounded more like a breathy snort. She looked to Del, and the two of them broke out into simultaneous nose laughter.

That’s when a snowball hit one of the tent’s support poles.

They exchanged a wide-eyed look. Was it Karma or an ornery local?

A second snowball arrived, this time smashing into a tree standing beside the tent’s other side. The look of surprise in her sister’s eyes shifted to one of intended retaliation.

“It’s gotta be Chase,” Del whispered, ducking behind the table to scoop up some snow from the mound created when they’d cleared the checkout area earlier. “Come on, help me make a stockpile.”

“Oh no,” Mia said. “Snowball fights aren’t safe, and I am not getting in the middle of—” A snowball hit her square in the shoulder. “Okay, *now* it’s game on.”

“Atta girl.” Del stood, three hastily made snowballs in hand, and lobbed one in the direction it seemed the others had come from. “Eat snow, Chase!”

“Why would I do that?” He stepped under the tent from the other direction, looked to the snowballs in hand, and arched a brow. “What are you guys doing?”

Another snowball launched from the north side of the lot, and Mia yelled for him to look out. It missed him by an inch, finding its mark on a wreath hanging on the front of the checkout table.

With a shrug, Chase ducked behind the checkout table and started making snowballs of his own.

“Ha! For once I wasn’t the instigator,” Del said. “But if it isn’t any of us, who’s out there?”

“My bet’s on Isaac,” Mia said.

Chase tossed one over the row of trees just north of the tent and an “Ew!” rang out. The trio exchanged a grin.

“Brooklyn,” they said in unison.

Footsteps crunched in the snow, running deeper into the depths of the tree lot.

Del collected an armful of snowballs. “I’ll sneak around the south side and loop north. Chase, you take the middle. Mi, go north and follow a safe distance back. We’ll have her cornered in no time.”

“Okay, but be careful—I don’t want anyone losing an eye or something.”

Del rolled her eyes. “Spoken like a true schoolteacher.”

Before Mia could point out that snowball injuries were truly a thing, Del hurried off. With a wink, Chase started up the middle. On a sigh, Mia gathered the remaining snowballs and headed north. But two steps from the tent, a snowball hit her square in the butt.

“Hey!” She spun and eyed the row of trees in front of the tent. Her daughter must have brought reinforcements.

Not about to be outsmarted by a group of teenagers, Mia crouched down and continued north, then snuck outside the snow fence and made for the sidewalk. These kids would never expect her to go this way. Giddy with confidence, she snuck past the entrance, squeezed through a gap in the fence on the south side, and crept forward once more. Up ahead, a tree jostled, its snowy covering sprinkling to the ground.

Gotcha.

Mia lobbed a snowball underhand over the top of the tree...and heard it hit its target with a wet SMACK.

“Oof. What the—?”

Wait, that voice was too deep to be Brooklyn’s or her friends. It must have been Isaac after all. No doubt when he’d asked, Brooklyn had been game; she was all for avoiding doing her homework lately. Time to get this snowball fight over so they could all get home. Mia squatted to gather snow for another snowball, then crept closer to her target. Was he even still there?

She snuck forward and bent to try peeking through a gap in the tree’s branches when *smack*, a snowball hit her square in the butt. Again.

“What the—?” She spun. “Alex?”

A broad grin stretched across his face as he stepped out from behind a neighboring tree. “Did we surprise you?”

“Yes!” Mia laughed, reaching behind her to brush snow from the seat of her jeans. “I thought you weren’t due back until tomorrow.”

“I wasn’t,” he said, pulling her into his arms. “But after our call the other night, it sounded like you could use some cheering up.”

Her lonely heart melted. Had anyone ever done something so sweet for her before? “Really?”

“Really.” He bent to kiss her softly. “Also, I was missing you terribly. So, I rearranged my schedule and—”

A snowball grazed his shoulder. Two more flew over their heads and hit the tree behind them. Confusion dawned on his face.

“Hold that thought.” Mia tugged him lower to the ground and started sweeping snow toward them. “We need more ammo.”

“Ammo? But I found you.”

“Sweetheart, no one starts a snowball fight in Bourbon Falls that they don’t intend to finish. And I, for one, don’t want to lose to my daughter’s team.”

“Wait—she went rogue on me?”

Two more snowballs landed on either side of them. “Seems that way, yes. Knowing Brooklyn, she’s talked Del and Chase into joining forces with her as well.”

Determination settled on Alex’s features. “Then it’s time we teach them all that they picked the wrong team.”

A small thrill ran through Mia as they hurried to stockpile snowballs. Maybe it had to do with the fact that he’d arrived early or that it felt kinda fun being a little more reckless than usual. But mostly, it was because that look of determination on his face was sexy as hell.

“Hey, old-timers,” Del called. “You give up yet or what?”

“You wish!” Mia cried.

Alex offered her a fist bump, then ducked to avoid a snowball heading straight for his face. Several more fell around them, the opposing team having homed in on their location. Too bad for them, Mia had a pretty good idea of where they now stood, too.

As she led Alex up a narrow path on the lot’s east side, half the lot’s lights went out. Mia snorted. Did they really think a little darkness was going to keep them safe?

“Just over that next row, right?” Alex asked, holding an armful of snow ammo.

“Yep.” She shifted her own snowballs, freeing her throwing arm. “Let’s do this. On the count of three. One. Two. Three!”

The pair launched an air assault her retired Air Force bomber grandfather would have been proud of. Shouts erupted a few rows over, but no return shots were fired.

“Game over!” Del cried.

With a victory whoop, Alex high-fived Mia. Maybe Del was right, maybe being a little reckless now and then wasn’t so bad. Laughing, they hurried down the shoveled path and turned two rows up, Mia ready to talk smack.

That’s when she saw Deputy Earl Brice standing with his back to them, hands on his hips and remnants of their snowballs coating the back of his brown, standard-issue coat. Worse yet, one of their snowballs had also found his short, cropped hair. Past him stood Del, Chase, and Brooklyn, sheepish expressions on their faces.

Oh no. Of all the people to get caught in their crossfire! Earl turned slowly to face them, eyes narrowed and jaw clenched. But when his gaze settled on her, surprise replaced the fury brewing there.

“Mrs. French? Please tell me you weren’t behind all of this.”

Mia grimaced. So, yes, she had been his son’s teacher a number of years ago. And now her reputation as an upstanding citizen was tarnished.

This was why she preferred to live a life along the straight and narrow. Not causing trouble resulted in less gossip and far fewer chances of going to jail.

“What’s going on over here?”

A new voice of authority joined the mix, adding increased tension. Across from them, Mia watched Del give Chase a

small fist bump. Oh, sure, *they* were happy about the new arrival. Because unlike Mia, they wouldn't land on the hot seat once Earl was gone. She turned and faced the fire. Chief, that was.

“Hi, Dad.”



DAD?

Alex shifted his gaze to the stocky, bear of a man who had happened upon their standoff, taking in the fire department logo stitched onto his black jacket. *Damn*. He'd tried to surprise Mia and lift her spirits, not get her in trouble. He held his breath, hoping her family connections would help the situation and not hurt it.

Mia's father's gaze swiveled between them all, eventually settling on Del.

“You get yourself in trouble again, sweet pea?”

“Hey! It's not always me who—” Del stopped, looked to the wide-eyed Brooklyn beside her, and shook her head. “Fine, it was me, okay? We decided to have a late-night snowball fight since there weren't any customers.”

“Except they *did* have a customer wander in,” Earl said, brushing the snow from his buzzcut. “Maybe the next time you sisters decide to have a snowball fight in the middle of town, try waiting until *after* the deputy stops by to purchase a wreath for his mother.”

Chase hung his head. Del, however, didn't miss a beat.

“Or maybe next time we'll invite you to join us. That way, my team is sure to win.” She gave him a wink.

“*Delaney...*”

At her father's tone, Del's shoulders briefly fell. “But to make it up to you for being such a good sport tonight, Earl, go ahead and choose whatever you want for your mama. It's on the house.”

She led the snow-battered deputy toward the wreath display, and her father's scrutinizing gaze fell on Alex and Mia.

"So, who's really responsible for this disturbance?"

Mia started to speak, but Alex refused to let her take the fall for him.

"I am, sir."

"Sir?" Amusement lit his features.

"Alex, this is my father, Fire Chief Stephen Brooks. Dad, this is Alex Wellington, an old acquaintance of mine from college. We've recently reconnected, so *be nice*."

The chief's brows rose. "Is that so? Well, Del must approve of you if she just took the blame for all of this. Hmm, not sure if that's a good sign or not."

"Oh, Dad."

The chief broke into a hearty chuckle. "I'm just busting his chops, MiMi. Besides, you know I love seeing Earl flustered. There's been a friendly rivalry between the fire and police departments since long before my time at the station."

"Men," Mia said with a shake of her head.

"Well, we got him pretty good tonight, I'm afraid," Alex said. "For a moment there, I thought I was going to have to call my folks and ask them to wire over bail money."

"Eh, Earl wouldn't have arrested you. That would have led to too much paperwork afterward."

Whatever his reason for turning the other cheek, Alex was relieved.

"Even so, I'm glad you got here when you did," Mia said. "He wouldn't dare cuff us with you present."

"Not if he knows what's good for him, anyway." The chief winked.

“Right? Listen, I need to get Brooklyn home because I’m about ninety-nine percent sure she’s still got homework to do.” She stepped forward to reach up and give her father a tight hug. “Love ya.”

“Love you, too.” He kissed the top of her head and held her a moment longer before meeting Alex’s gaze. “And you, Alex? Where are you headed tonight?”

Nothing like being direct. “My hotel, over in Warsaw. I got into the area late and didn’t relish driving back to Indy tonight. This way, I can spend a little more time with Mia and Brooklyn tomorrow before heading back.”

“Very good. Though, I wouldn’t stay too long tomorrow if I were you,” the chief warned. “There’s a snowstorm brewing out west. Weatherman’s saying if it hits, we could see some significant snowfall.”

Shoot, maybe Alex should have driven his Rover tonight. He’d been worried about bringing it back into town so soon and drove his Camaro instead. It got him here faster but didn’t handle well in the snow. He’d skidded and slipped a little coming into town tonight, not having known the snow had hit up here. Indy was dry as a bone when he left home.

“The channel you watch is all doom and gloom,” Mia said. “They were predicting a foot and a half yesterday, and what’d we get, four inches?”

“You know what I always tell you—proceed with caution on things you can’t predict.” The chief’s gaze shifted to Alex.

Thanks for the vote of confidence, Chief.

“We’ll be fine,” Mia said. She pecked a kiss on his cheek then returned to Alex’s side and wove an arm through his. “Night, Dad.”

“Night, kiddo. And nice meeting you, Alex. Safe travels back to Indy tomorrow.”

Mia motioned for Brooklyn, and the trio made their way to her little white Pontiac Vibe. Despite beaming Deputy Earl in

the head with a snowball and having her father appear unexpectedly on the scene, Mia was all smiles.

“We totally would have won if Deputy Brice hadn’t showed up,” Brooklyn insisted. “But why did you keep throwing snowballs after Aunt Del shut off the lights?”

“How were we supposed to know what that meant?” Mia said. “I thought she was just trying to distract us. You know your aunt doesn’t always play fair.”

“True.” Brooklyn extended a fist to Alex. “Awesome idea, Alex. This was way more fun than my chemistry homework.”

“Which you will be heading straight home to finish, young lady.” Mia waited until Brooklyn climbed into her car with a groan before pulling Alex in close for a fast kiss. “Are you sure you want to waste money on a hotel room? You know I have a spare bedroom at my place.”

Alex glanced back to make sure they were out of the chief’s line of sight, then slid his hands around her waist. “I appreciate the offer—just not so sure that’s such a good idea.”

“Oh.” Mia’s face fell.

Damn, that wasn’t the look he wanted to leave her with tonight.

“It’s not because I don’t want to stay at your place,” he whispered. “I’m just not sure if I can behave myself a third night in less than a week. That’s a lot of temptation to resist, and I’m not as strong as you might think.”

A grin tugged at her lips. Much better.

“Besides, I have a feeling the chief wouldn’t appreciate my car being outside your place tonight after I told him it wouldn’t be.”

“Good point.” She sighed. “Don’t blame him for being protective—he’s had to raise three daughters in this crazy, messed-up world.”

“Oh, I—”

“Hey, Mi!”

They turned to see Del jogging over.

“What’s up?” Mia asked.

“In case Dad mentions seeing something behind my shop, don’t panic.”

Her gaze flashed briefly to Alex, who most definitely began to panic. Del had insisted Mia wouldn’t see his Rover behind her shop but failed to mention there could potentially be other wandering eyes. Now what was he supposed to do?

“One of my plant reps stopped by and got a nail in his tire,” Del continued. “I let him leave his SUV behind the greenhouse while he searched for a new one. Guess the place in town was out of stock or something.”

Alex nodded, pretending to sympathize with the guy while silently admiring Del’s ingenuity. And hating that it was even needed. He’d find a way to smooth over their little fib eventually, though.

“Anyway, Dad saw it and is now hinting that he thinks it was his Christmas present from the two of us.”

“Let me guess—it was red?” At Del’s nod, Mia shook her head. “Silly Dad. Like we have that kind of money to buy him a new vehicle for Christmas.”

“Right?” Del laughed. “Okay, I gotta go help Chase finish closing up. Catch ya later!”

Alex waved, hoping he would, in fact, *not* get caught later. Mia’s hands claimed his, diverting his attention.

“You should come over tomorrow,” she said. “For dinner. Brooklyn will be leaving for her father’s for the weekend, so it would just be the two of us.”

“You don’t say?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She offered him a demure smile.

“But what if it gets to be too late for me to drive back to Indy?”

Because if they had dinner together, he’d offer to cook. Something Italian with a side of wine. And dessert? Well, he’d prefer that to be Mia.

She trailed a finger down the front of his coat, one brow lifted. “Then I guess I’ll just have to make room for you at my place again. On the first floor, this time.”

Yes, her thoughts seemed to be in line with his. He almost hoped the chief was right about this supposed snowstorm—it’d be all the more reason to stay in bed on Saturday. And, if Alex was lucky, Sunday, too.

He met her gaze and said, “How can I say no?”

Chapter Eleven

IF OVERTHINKING HAD been an Olympic sport, Mia would have won gold Friday. From the moment she woke to the minute she got home after school, her mind was going a hundred miles a minute. All her fault, the suggested evening alone with Alex to blame.

The first major dilemma was what to wear for their first official date. Did she own a pair of jeans that squeezed everything nicely into place without giving her a muffin top? And speaking of tops, should she go crew neck or V-neck? Sweater or no? Perfume or no?

Unable to make a decision on any of it, she'd hurried to the kitchen to get things in order out there. Alex had offered to cook, but since it was her place, shouldn't she contribute to the offerings? Maybe a better question was, what could she add to the menu that didn't suck?

An appetizer? Dessert?

Did she even own a decent bourbon Alex wouldn't scrunch his nose at?

"Hey, Mom?"

"*What?*" She spun from the refrigerator to face Brooklyn and belatedly realized her answer had come out entirely too loud. And maybe a touch frantic. "Sorry, sweetheart, I, uh, thought you were still in the other room. What's up?"

Brooklyn gave her a flat look, not buying the lie. "I just wanted to let you know that Alex just pulled up."

Mia froze like a doe in headlights. "Already?"

A knock sounded at the back door. Good lord, why was he here so early? She hadn't had time to change out of her school clothes, let alone whip anything together!

“You get the door, and I’ll go change.”

Brooklyn frowned. “But I’m leaving in, like, fifteen minutes.”

“Perfect, then you can keep Alex company while I’m changing. Thankyouyou’rethebest!”

With that, she sprinted down the hall, pretending not to hear her daughter’s growl and grumbles. Thankfully, she’d sorted through her closet the night before and narrowed down her outfit options to five. Unfortunately, today none of them looked worthy of an evening with Alex. In fact, nothing in her closet did. Not a single thing.

Mia sank to the floor, crippled by indecision. She needed someone else to step in and make these decisions for her. So she called someone who never seemed to have this problem.

“Hey, Sis,” Del answered. “All ready for the big date?”

Yes, she’d already texted Del about tonight’s planned activities. Robyn, too. Both had been extra supportive of the decision.

“I can’t do this,” she whispered into the phone.

“What do you mean, you can’t do this? Oh crap, did you get your period?”

Mia dropped her head to her knees. “No, I mean I can’t go through with this. I-it’s too soon. I’m not ready.”

“Oh, Mi. You are ready, sweetheart. More than ready.”

Fear wrapped its ugly claws around her throat. “I’m not, Del. I’m so not.”

“Okay, first? Take a breath before you hyperventilate.” Del paused. “You’re still breathing too fast. Do I need to run a paper bag over to you?”

“No,” Mia hissed into the phone. Good grief, how would that look to her guest of honor? She forced herself to take louder, slower breaths.

“Better. Now keep that up and listen to me: You absolutely can do this. And you absolutely deserve this, after all those years of being married to Gregosaurus.”

A smile tugged at Mia’s lips. Del had never been a huge fan of Greg, especially when he sniped at her over stupid things—something he did far more often toward the end of their marriage than she’d realized. After he cheated on Mia, Del had lost all respect for him.

God, Mia could not live through getting cheated on again.

Which is why she hadn’t been in a hurry to get back into dating. *See?* She wasn’t ready.

“Breathe, Mi, you’ve got this. In fact, how can you *not* have this? You’re the most confident, bullheaded—uh, I mean, driven—woman I know. Heck, you corral two-dozen hyperactive third graders every day—that takes superhero strength! Just think about all the difficult things you’ve lived through: childbirth, divorce, a decade’s worth of Jack Wagon’s office parties where you felt like a complete outsider. Losing Mom.”

Del’s voice softened on the last item. Twenty years had passed since the car accident on that fateful day, and still the memory pierced Mia’s heart. But Del was right—all those things she’d mentioned were far more difficult than going on a single date with a man she admired. She took in a good long breath, held it, then let it go.

“You’re right.”

This was Alex, after all. Someone she’d looked up to once upon a time, and was starting to again. A man, if she were being honest with herself, that she’d begun to trust more than most.

“Of course I’m right. I’ve had you as a mentor all these years, haven’t I? Now stop overthinking everything, splash some cold water on your face, and go be your amazing, beautiful, confident self.”

Mia ran a hand over her hair. Could she do this? Could she swallow her fears and step back out into the world of dating?

She had to if she wanted to truly give love another shot.

“Thank you, Delaney.”

“You’re welcome. Oh, and maybe put some clothes on if you haven’t already,” Del said. “Of course, they can always come back off later, after Brooklyn heads out.”

Mia groaned. “You just had to go there, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah, unless you wanna eat dinner naked. I’m not knocking it, mind you, because that can actually be kinda—”

“Good-*bye*, Delaney.”

With a shake of her head, Mia disconnected and proceeded to follow her sister’s advice of splashing some cold water on her face. After one last pep talk with her reflection—this time, one that included positive self-talk—she stepped back into her closet and traded today’s teacher attire for her favorite pair of jeans and a soft red cashmere sweater. Then she touched up her makeup, applied a subtle splash of perfume, and headed for the main portion of the house.

Was she still anxious? Definitely.

Still terrified about the prospect of getting naked in front of another man? Absolutely.

Going to let her fears and worries spoil the evening?

Not a chance.

Laughter drifted from the kitchen, along with chatter and...chopping? Mia stepped out from the hallway to find grocery bags strewn across the counter and a bottle of red wine waiting beside the stove. At the island stood Alex, looking handsome as always in dark jeans and a sage-green button-down with its sleeves pushed up, demonstrating to Brooklyn the proper way to chop green onions. Mia leaned against the doorframe, content to watch and curious to gauge Brooklyn’s level of interest.

“Keep your fingers like this, curled back and out of the way,” he said, demonstrating the technique. “Now you try.”

“Me?” Brooklyn looked from him to her mother. “You promise not to freak out?”

Mia grinned. “I only freak out when kids play with knives or run with them, not when they’re trying to learn how to cook.” She moved closer to stand across the island from them. “Besides, the faster you learn, the sooner you can do the cooking and I can go back to cleanup duty.”

At Alex’s encouragement, Brooklyn gave it a try. Mia let this go on for several minutes.

“Sweetheart, your father is expecting you.”

She looked up from her growing pile of green onion slivers. “But this is way more fun.”

Mia hated to spoil the moment, but she didn’t want Brooklyn to endure her father’s petty anger tonight, either. “So will your weekend be if you don’t start it off with him being mad.”

Her shoulders sank. “Yeah, you’re right. Thanks for letting me help, Alex.”

“Anytime.”

Hands were washed, things were collected, hugs were given—surprisingly, even to Alex—and Brooklyn was off. Mia watched her car’s progress from the front window until she couldn’t see it anymore, then she closed all the blinds, locked all the doors—this was Bourbon Falls, after all; one never knew who might turn up unexpected—and returned to settle into a seat at the island.

“All good?” Alex asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Mia said. “It’s just always a little melancholy when your whole world leaves the house for the weekend.”

“I can only imagine.” He sectioned off a small portion of the green onions and put the rest in a sealable container. “Did

that happen a lot? You, trying to keep Greg from getting mad about things?”

Mia was surprised by the question. Was it really that obvious? “Delaney and Robyn seemed to think so. I was just trying to keep the peace, you know? Sweep the little stuff under the rug.”

“Until the little bump under the rug builds into a mountain.” He looked up with a grin. “I did the same thing with Caroline. Eventually, it felt like I was walking on eggshells all the time. She admitted later it was the same way for her. We were both trying to be accommodating and avoid confrontation, when all we’d probably needed was a few candid conversations.”

Mia nodded, watching him measure out other ingredients for whatever meal he had planned for them. Is that what would have prevented the shouting match they’d had in college? Some candid conversations?

It didn’t matter now. What was done was done. The smart thing to do would be to move on and learn from their past mistakes.

“You really love to cook, don’t you?”

He looked up from her mixing bowl, a broad smile on his face. “Yep, always have. I used to spend hours in the kitchen with my nana as a kid. After she passed, the major holiday meals gauntlet was passed on to my mother and me.”

“Oh wow. That was definitely not the case for me. My father’s the amazing cook in our family. He’s had a ton of practice, since they take turns cooking at the firehouse. He and Aunt Faye tried sharing their tricks of the trade with me, but after enough failed meals, they let me bow out. I hate cooking. But then, Del teases me that I hate anything I’m not very good at.”

“Is it true?”

She shrugged.

Alex chuckled. “Some things just take practice, Mia. If at first you don’t succeed...”

She rose to fish for her bottle opener. “But some things you can feel in your bones that practice won’t fix.”

“I suppose it’s also a matter of how badly you want to improve. Of course, some things are more fun to practice than others.”

Hmm, like getting naked in front of your new man? That could be fun, and something she definitely wanted to get comfortable doing. Because the way his cologne was calling to her tonight, she could hardly wait to try.

Mia opened the wine and poured them each a glass. She took a sip of hers, happy that it was sweet with just a hint of dry. Then she took a longer drink, needing a little liquid courage.

“I suppose some things are more fun when you partner up.”

Alex stepped away from his meal prep, washed his hands, and then reached for his glass—which brought him toe to toe with her.

“I’m happy to share my knowledge with you anytime.” He took a sip, then set his glass down, and kissed her slowly. Deeply. “Anywhere.”

She met his gaze, the desire there unmistakable. And suddenly, all those silly fears she’d had in her closet earlier vanished. Mia slid her hands into his back pockets and pulled his hips to hers. Alex let out a throaty exhale. He ran his hands up into her hair and pulled her into a deeper kiss. Mia arched into him, feeling his awakened length beneath the fabric of his jeans. His excitement spurred her bravado.

“Doesn’t the oven need some time to preheat or something?”

Alex drew back, confusion on his brow. “Was there something you needed to do before I put our meal in?”

She nodded and stretched on tiptoe to bring her lips to the shell of his ear. “You.”

“Oh yeah?” His hands drifted to the hem of her sweater and slid underneath, his fingertips featherlight across the small of her back. “You sure about this?”

She closed her eyes, savoring how his touch felt against her skin. Every nerve ending in her body came alive. “Mm-hmm.”

Alex’s lips brushed along her neck as his hands drifted higher. “I suppose every great meal does start with an *appetizer*.”

Mia chewed her lower lip, about to come undone as his hands skimmed over the thin fabric of her bra. It’d been so long since she’d been kissed by a man, touched by a man. As his fingers slipped beneath the lacy fabric, a needy mewl escaped her. If he kept this up, she might well lose it right here. As if reading her mind, Alex’s hands left her breasts and tugged her sweater higher.

“Wait—shouldn’t we find my bed?”

His gaze turned pleading. “I’ve waited almost twenty years for this. Please don’t make me wait another minute.”

Me, too. “But—”

“Besides, beds are overrated.” Alex’s hands found her waist. In a blink he had her seated on the island countertop, then made quick work of removing her sweater. Desire darkened his pupils, and he stepped forward. “Trust me, we have plenty of room right here.”

As his teeth grazed the fabric stretched taut across her peaks, Mia nearly came unglued. *To hell with the bed.* “Okay, I trust you. Just...don’t let me fall.”

He straightened to cup her face. “Never,” he said, then kissed every inch of her worries away.



ALEX STARED UP at the ceiling from what had to be the world's most comfortable bed, his body zapped of energy and a naked Mia snuggled into his side. Okay, so maybe his claim about beds being overrated had been a little premature. But, damn, his sure never felt this good.

Despite the initial—and highly anticipated—“appetizer” delay, dinner did eventually get made. Both he and Mia were famished by then, each devouring their tossed salads and plentiful helpings of homemade Tuscan chicken. “Dessert” had been similar to their appetizer, only this time it was enjoyed in the comforts of Mia’s amazingly soft bed and at a much more leisurely pace.

And had left them spent.

“Are you hungry?”

She lifted her head, her hair adorably mussed. “Again? You’re insatiable.”

Alex laughed. “No, I meant food this time.”

“Oh. Then no. Even if I was, I would pass. I’m far too comfy to move right now.”

He arched a brow. “Too comfy or too tired?”

“Yes.” She snuggled closer. “Sorry, you’re not allowed to leave tonight. I’m enjoying this body pillow far too much.”

Good, because there’s nowhere I’d rather be than right here.

Alex had known from the moment he’d met her that Mia was special. That she was the sunshine his life had been missing. When he couldn’t have her in college, he’d tried to move on. To find another sun to guide him. But it’d been an effort in futility.

No one had called to his heart like Mia.

A soft snore rang out at his side, and Alex fought to hold back a silent laugh. Instead, he let his eyelids slide shut as he replayed his evening with Mia. Their sexy time in the kitchen,

him so incredibly turned on by her boldness that neither had lasted long. Her helping him meal prep afterward, and all the laughter that'd followed. The wine. The slow walk back to her bedroom, where they had succumbed to their desires a second time by the faint glow of a nightlight spilling out from her adjoining bathroom. Seventeen years he'd been dreaming of holding Mia. Of touching her, of being with her. And it'd been well worth the wait.

On the nightstand, his cell phone buzzed. With his free arm, he reached over to make sure it wasn't anything urgent for work or family. But the alert was for a text from Sally, asking him to please reconsider canceling the Books-A-Plenty gig. Their backup author also had a scheduling conflict, and because of supply chain issues, they were having to cancel their ornament-decorating event.

Alex couldn't help but wonder if Mrs. Harper had something to do with that. On a grin, he set his phone back down and settled in for the night. Now was not the time to get into a text argument with his agent. The bookstore in South Bend needed to find someone else to bail them out. He'd promised Del that he would sign at Brooks Books, and it was a promise he intended to keep.

Lying there in a bed as comfy as a cloud with the one that'd gotten away in his arms, Alex soon joined Mia in the land of slumber.

But then the creaking started. Followed by a *bang*.

Wait, a *bang*?

Alex propped himself up on one elbow and tried to get his wits about him. The old house had occasionally creaked when he'd stayed upstairs last weekend, but he didn't recall any banging sounds. About the time he thought he'd imagined it, though, he heard metal rattling. Was someone trying to break into Mia's house?

Alex slid into his boxers and jeans and crept down the main hall.

Ping. Clink. Rattle.

The sounds were coming from the back door. Alex left the lights off and inched closer to the door, a curtain hanging over its window cutout. From the light hanging on the side of the house, Alex could see the outline of a person. Their silhouette straightened, looked over one shoulder, then bent again. The doorknob rattled as the sound of something small scrapped against it.

Someone was trying to pick her lock?

Alex looked around for something to use as a weapon, grabbed a rolling pin hanging from a nearby hook, and whipped the door open to find a stunned Brooklyn on the back stoop.

“Brooklyn?”

“Alex?”

“What are you doing here?” they asked in unison.

“I live here, remember?” Brooklyn said, pushing her way inside past Alex. “Stupid lock was stuck again.”

He glanced to the kitchen clock. Half past midnight. He had no idea what time curfews were these days, but this seemed later than Mia would want Brooklyn out on the road. He opened his mouth to say as much when she dropped into a seat at the island. From the glow of the nightlight above the sink, he could see she’d been crying, her eyes red and cheeks puffy.

“You wanna talk about it?”

Brooklyn shrugged. He took that as a yes, so he grabbed a small glass from the cupboard, filled it with water, and set it down before her. She sniffled, took a sip, and held the glass in her hands.

“Does your dad know you’re here?”

She shook her head. “Not that he’d care.”

Oh boy. Alex had minimal experience with teens and zero with those of divorced parents. He eased into the seat next to her and leaned onto the counter, mirroring her posture. “Why do you think that?”

“Because he just doesn’t, okay? All he ever talks about is how great Becky is and that I should give her a chance and blah, blah, blah. But I don’t like Becky, and I definitely don’t want to sit around all weekend listening to her talk about their stupid baby on the way.”

And there it was. Apparently, Mia wasn’t the only one struggling with the news that Greg was going to be a father again.

“She’s that terrible, huh?” he asked.

“I mean, she’s not *horrible*. But she’s a total try-hard, you know? Always talking about clothes and bands and stuff she sees on TikTok. Like, just go be a parent and leave me alone already.”

“So, she has other kids already?”

Brooklyn frowned. “No.”

“Oh. Well, how is she supposed to go be a parent if she isn’t one already? I mean, it’s not like us adults take a class in college on how to annoy the heck out of every teenager we ever meet.” Alex bumped his elbow into hers.

The ghost of a grin tugged at Brooklyn’s lips. “Yeah, well, you coulda fooled me.”

“Some of us are just naturally more annoying than others. But you know what? I’d rather have a stepparent who’s a try-hard than one who completely ignored me. Or worse, tore me down all the time.”

Brooklyn considered that for a moment, then gave a small shrug. “Are your parents still married?”

“Yeah,” Alex said, thinking back to their family dinner earlier in the week. Despite an occasional spat or two, he had zero doubt they always would be.

“You’re lucky. You don’t have to deal with stepparents or having to fit into a whole other extended family.”

“Maybe, but I bet you get more Christmas presents than I do.”

Amusement ghosted across her features again. “Fair.”

Alex spied movement out of the corner of his eye. Mia must have heard them, but she remained in the hall. For her sake, he sought the answer to a question he knew had been on Mia’s mind.

“Can I ask you something?”

“I guess so,” Brooklyn said.

“How does it feel, knowing you’re going to be a big sister soon?”

She shifted in her seat. “I don’t know. I mean, at first I was pis—uh, mad, because I was like, ‘what, I’m not good enough?’ Plus, there’s going to be this huge age gap between us.”

Brooklyn tapped her fingers on her glass. There was more to the answer. Alex nodded and waited.

“But then...then I thought it’d be kinda cool, having a baby sister around. All my friends love babies, so maybe they’d be more excited about coming to see me in Warsaw when I go to visit my dad on his weekends.”

“You know it’s a little girl?”

Brooklyn shook her head. “No, but that’s what I think it will be.”

“Well, you’ll all find out soon enough. In the meantime, maybe you can work on cutting Becky some slack. After all, she is going to be the mama of your little sister or brother. Plus, if she’s like any of my cousins, those hormones are going to start going haywire any minute now. I’ve seen women go from laughing to crying to screaming at their spouses all in the same breath.”

“Dang.”

“Dang is right. That pregnancy stuff is for real. Trust me, you don’t want to have to deal with any of that for a long, long time.”

“Heck no, I don’t want kids until I’m way older. Besides, all the guys at my school are either too busy playing sports or too annoying.”

“I remember those days. High school was rough. Plus, they’ve got all that new testosterone to figure out what to do with. For some of us, it takes longer than others.” He gave a subtle wink over the top of Brooklyn’s head. “You feeling better?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Alex. I guess I should get back to Dad’s before he figures out that I left.”

“You can talk to me anytime,” he said. And he meant it, too. Even if things between him and Mia didn’t work out, he’d developed a soft spot for Brooklyn. She was a good kid caught in the middle of an evolving, postdivorce family landscape. “And I’m following you back to Warsaw to make sure you get there okay.”

“You sure? It’s not that far.”

Again, he wished he’d brought the Rover instead of his Camaro. But he’d ride a scooter in the snow if that’s what it took.

“I’ll sleep better knowing you made it back safely. Besides, I think your mom would kill me if I didn’t offer.”

Brooklyn grimaced. “Are you going to tell her I was here?”

“You know she’ll find out one way or another. We might as well be up front with her from the start.”

Her shoulders sank. “Great, I’ll probably get grounded at both houses.”

“Nah, I’ll plead your case and ask for leniency. After all, you’ve got a lot on your mind right now.” He gave her a fist bump. “Hang on, I’ll go grab my keys.”

“Okay.”

Huh, maybe this parenting stuff isn’t so bad after all.

He started for the hallway leading to Mia’s room where he’d left his things. Sure enough, Mia was there, dressed in her pajamas and hugging her midsection. In the dim lighting from yet another nightlight—come to think of it, this house had them everywhere—she mouthed, “Thank you.”

“Oh, hey, Alex?”

He paused to look back. “Yeah, Brooklyn?”

“You might want to put your shirt back on.” She smirked. “I don’t need two new baby siblings.”

Mia’s eyes went wide, and Alex shook his head on a chuckle. “Yep, will do.”

Chapter Twelve

MIA WAVED GOOD-BYE to a happy customer at Brooks Books the next morning, then resumed assisting her temporary helper restock books in the kids' used books section. Two sets of twins had been through the picture books, along with a handful of other preschoolers while their parents had looked at new titles nearby.

"I'm still surprised your aunt has a used book section," Alex said, kneeling to put the misplaced books back in alphabetical order. "I mean, don't get me wrong—it's really cool, giving these books a second chance. It just doesn't seem very profitable."

"True, but those aren't the items we hope to profit from."

Mia grabbed a small stack from the basket they kept at the end of the aisle, where they encouraged browsers to place books after perusing instead of reshelving them themselves. Like racks stationed in dressing rooms, it kept the wrong items from getting shoved into incorrect locations. The concept had helped staff and shoppers alike.

"My mother wanted to bring affordable reading options to our town, since we don't have a library here. So, she started a buyback program, where kids could basically buy a used book and once they'd finished, they were able to come back and swap it out with any book they liked, so long as they hadn't destroyed their copy. It's like having our own library but without late fees."

"She sounds like she was an amazing lady."

Mia felt her throat tighten. "She truly was."

The bell over the front door jangled, and a breathless Delaney stepped in with a travel cup from the Coffey Still in each hand. "Who needs caffeine?"

“Me!” Alex and Mia cried.

“That’s what I heard,” Del said, handing a coffee to Alex and a chai latte to Mia. “What was Little B doing driving home so late last night? Did she forget something?”

Mia exchanged a look with Alex. He’d questioned her suggestion to move his car into her garage while they were out running around today, and this was why. Small towns never slept. At least, not small towns with insomniacs named Margaret Harper.

“No, and we’re going to have a talk about her being out so late without telling anyone where she was going.”

“Did she...interrupt anything?” Del wagged her brows.

“Thankfully, no, we were asleep long before that.” Mia took a sip of her chai, hoping her sister would push no further. Ah, heaven in a cup. “Still not sure how she got in. We’ve been having trouble with the lock on that back door for months.”

Del gave her a flat look. “The same doorknob I offered to replace this summer?”

Mia grimaced. “Maybe? Look, I’m sure I can figure it out. I’ve just been busy.”

And okay, maybe she was a little intimidated by the task. Little things like changing light bulbs and putting IKEA furniture together, she could handle. But making household repairs would take it to a whole new level. Mia had thought if Del could do it, so could she. Unfortunately, Del also didn’t have a fear of jumping into projects headfirst, either.

“I’ll pick up a new one and bring it with me the next time I swing into town. You don’t want to have to struggle to get inside when the weather turns frigid this winter.” Alex took a long sip of his coffee. “Man, this is really good. And I love the name of this place.”

“Figured you would. Kinda goes with the town’s Bourbon theme and all.” Del grinned. “So, is she okay?”

“She will be. After some nudging, she confided in Alex that she was having a hard time digesting the whole baby thing.”

“And she doesn’t know you were standing in the hall eavesdropping. So, be careful what you say to her, or she’ll think I ratted her out,” Alex said.

Mia grinned. “Don’t worry. You already told her you were going to tell me, and she knows I tell her aunt Del everything.”

“It takes a village,” Del said with a shrug. “Anyway, hopefully, she makes it back tomorrow before the worst of the snow hits, or she’s gonna be stuck at her dad’s a few extra days.”

Mia frowned. Maybe the snow was going to hit after all. She gave Delaney a quick hug before her sister hurried back to the tree lot, then pulled up the National Weather Service on the store’s computer.

“Winter storm warning in effect until three a.m. Monday morning. Yikes. They’re calling for significant snowfall overnight, with high winds that could cause blowing and drifting.” She looked to Alex. “Maybe you shouldn’t stay for dinner after all.”

“Are you kidding? I’ve waited all week for another chance at Gina’s chicken and dumplings.”

“The Sweet Mash serves that every Saturday, silly. I’d rather you make it home safe this weekend so you can come back and enjoy them as many Saturdays as you’d like.”

“And I would rather have it both today *and* next weekend.” He set his coffee on the checkout counter and came around to read the report over her shoulder. “See? Significant snowfall overnight. If we cut out of the cookie baking early, we’ll have plenty of time to grab a quick dinner before I head out.”

She still couldn’t believe he’d agreed to help bake cookies this afternoon, in preparation for next weekend’s bookstore event. Poor guy had absolutely no idea what he was walking

into. She'd warned him that he'd be the only guy there, but he said he'd gone to similar events with his mother many times.

Yeah, but not in Bourbon Falls, buddy.

"Do you really want to chance it?"

"It'll be fine, trust me. And look—Indy is only in the one-to-two-inch range. As long as I get south of here before it gets nasty, it'll be easy sailing."

Why, oh why, did men have to do this ridiculous bravado act instead of play it safe all the time? Rather than belabor the fact that this snowstorm appeared to be real, she let it go. Alex was a big boy and could make his own decisions.

"It's your hide." Mia gave his butt a small smack. "Though I am rather fond of it."

Alex hooked his fingers through the belt loop of her jeans and pulled her closer. "And I'm rather fond of you being fond of—"

"If you're going to make out," came a deep voice from the hall, "the best place in here to do that is behind the back row, away from the front window. Or so I've heard."

Mia stepped back on a sharp inhale and found Isaac walking in from the back door. "I am not even going to ask how you know—wait, is that what you were doing the day Brooklyn and I stopped by and found you trying to sneak out the front door?"

Isaac's forever-tanned cheeks reddened. "I'll plead the fifth. Anyway, Del told me to get my ass over here and introduce myself to Alex while I was in the area."

"So, you were out for more cobbler, huh?" Mia said.

"Don't know what you're talking about." He winked at her and extended a hand to Alex. "Isaac Manning."

"Alex Wellington." He shook Isaac's hand. "I hear you're the town's new website guru."

"Eh, I've been known to do a little dabbling."

Mia shook her head. “And you all say I’m not good at taking compliments.”

“Well, your *dabbling* with the Topsy Barrel Bourbons site looks killer. If you ever want to take a stab at designing an author website for me, just name your price. My agent has been hounding me to get one for months now.”

Isaac laughed. “Sure, man. Let me get past this next round of proposal deadlines and we’ll talk.”

He stayed a few minutes more before heading out, his deadline—and carryout cobbler—calling for him. Once the store was quiet once more, Alex clicked away the weather page and took Mia by the hand.

“Where are we going?”

“Away from all this doom and gloom. Besides, I hear there’s something we need to see in the back row.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

If Alex wasn’t going to spend the day worrying about the coming snow, neither would she. Turned out, the back row was a lovely place to find lip service. With the pending bad weather, shoppers were sparse during the rest of her shift... which meant not only did Mia and Alex have ample time to restock books but to also peruse the back row’s selections.

Repeatedly.

It was like being a teenager all over again, sneaking around, bending the rules she once lived by. From the moment Alex had come to town, he’d managed to lure her outside her comfort zone. With him, her doldrum days had become full of fun, excitement, and romance.

She never wanted it to end.

This next commitment, however, would definitely put their budding relationship to the test. It would require mental agility, along with physical dexterity and stamina. Few men had ever chanced it. In fact, if Alex didn’t run screaming from town by dinnertime, Mia would call it a win.

“Where did you say we were headed next?” Alex asked as they climbed into her vehicle behind the bookstore.

“Barbara Thompson’s house.” She studied him for a moment, trying to commit her handsome passenger to memory before the town had a chance to scare him off. “It’s time to meet the rest of The Sisters.”



ALEX HAD TOLD himself for years that he would do anything to win Mia back. Walk over hot coals, fight in a bar brawl, maybe even rob a bank. But never in a million years would he have guessed winning her back would involve cursing blue hairs, frosting battles, and sprinkle explosions.

Oh, and Christmas edibles.

“Dammit, Nan, will you put your gummies away already?” Margaret Harper scolded. “I need someone to put green and red sugar sprinkles on these spritz before they go into the oven.”

Her sister Nancy offered Alex a wink as she tucked her Santa-shaped edibles collection back into the pocket of her tie-dyed apron. “If you change your mind, honey, you know where to find me.”

“I sure do.”

Alex’s mind wandered briefly to Tom. He’d bet he would be up for some edibles right about now, after that last text he’d gotten from his friend. The pain was increasing, and Tom had conceded to allowing his pain medication to increase as well. It made his brain foggier, but he hated watching his family see him suffer.

God, cancer sucked.

Nan’s voice broke through his thoughts. “And then Charlene looked to Helen, who was talking with Mabel—”

“She wasn’t!” said Barb.

“She was!”

Alex bit back a groan. So. Many. Stories!

He threw an imploring look to Mia, hoping she'd take pity on him and come up with the perfect excuse to get them out of here. Unfortunately, there wasn't much she could do at the moment, as both her hands were covered in chocolate and powdered sugar. But instead of seeming overwhelmed or put out by all the noise and drama, she was absolutely glowing.

Sure, that could have been from the heat—Lord knew it had to be about eighty-six degrees in here with the double oven going and all these bodies pounding out cookies. What were there, seven people in this tiny kitchen? But the smile on her face and laughter crinkling the corners of her eyes suggested it was more than that.

Mia was happy, and the sight made him happy, too.

“Less staring and more rolling, Tree Mangler,” Margaret said with a wink.

Yes, word had gotten out about the mishap with Mia's artificial tree. And that Alex had stayed over at her place several times now. He'd barely walked in the door before they'd started rapid-fire questions about everything from his intentions with Mia to his preferred condom manufacturer. And they expected answers to each and every one.

Eventually, Mia told them all to cut it out, and to their credit, they did. Still, being the only guy in a room full of chatty Cathys left him feeling a little awkward, especially when topics like lingerie sales and mammograms came up. It seemed no topic was sacred when The Sisters were around.

Alex resumed his current task of rolling out thin logs of red- and white-colored cookie dough. Somehow, these were going to be snipped and twisted into candy cane shapes and then sprinkled with crushed peppermint. It was a far more complicated task than just adding frosting to sugar cookies, one he'd been assigned after Mia had bragged on his cooking skills.

Cooking, he had patience for. Baking? Not so much.

When Mia had said they were coming here to bake cookies, he thought she meant the little store-bought tubes of sugar cookies that they'd ice and then be on their way. But oh no, not the ladies of Bourbon Falls. Instead, they were making at least a dozen different kinds of cookies, and *everything* from scratch.

At this rate, they'd be here until midnight.

"Oh, wow, looks like they gave you the newbie task."

He looked up from cutting and measuring to find Del peering over his shoulder. "The newbie task? You mean I'm not the only one who gets tired of rolling and measuring?"

"Nope." She laughed, the sound warming the room. "But it's my turn now. Mia sent me over to relieve you so you can get your things and head back south before the storm hits."

"Perfect," Alex said. "Has it started snowing yet?"

"No, but there's a line of big, dark clouds off to the southwest. I think they mean business."

Damn, maybe the forecast was right for a change. Though, if the snow hadn't started yet, they should still have time to grab a bite before he hit the road. Or maybe they should just go back to her place for a little predinner "dessert."

As he looked around for Mia, Del leaned closer and lowered her voice. "You are still signing for us instead of B-A-P next weekend, right?"

"Yep, it's all set. Agent promised to ship a few dozen of each book to your store. They should arrive well ahead of Saturday."

"Unless we get snowed in," Del said, casting a nervous glance to Barb's kitchen bay windows. "But I guess if that happens, no one will be coming to the event and it won't matter, right?"

"I suppose not." He rose, his mind having already shifted gears to Mia and all the delicious things he'd love to do to her before he headed out of town. Alex hitched a thumb toward

the hallway still dressed in 1980s ivy-print wallpaper. “Uh, do you know where the bathroom is?”

“Down the hall, last door on the left. And make sure you put the seat back down or Barb will tan your hide.” Del laughed, but Alex was already on the move. Yes, he had to pee, but he lingered afterward, planning to be in there a little longer. A quick text to Mia, and the countdown began.

“Alex? Everything okay?”

He spied her through the cracked door, opened it, and quickly pulled her inside.

“Oof! What are you—?”

He silenced her question with a hungry kiss, backing her into the wall and pressing his body against hers. Her arms wrapped around him, pulling him closer still.

“I had no idea you found baking cookies so erotic,” she whispered.

“You have no idea,” he whispered back, nipping his way to her ear. “I want you one more time before I go.”

“How can I say no to that?” She released her grip on him. “But not here.”

“No?”

“Are you kidding? Margaret will notice us both missing in about eight seconds. Go start telling everyone good-bye. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Need time to compose yourself?” he teased.

Mia laughed quietly. “Well, I can’t really walk out looking like this, now can I?”

Okay, so maybe his hands had found her hair again. And her cheeks and chin were a little pinker than normal. But he wanted his girl looking happy and well kissed.

His girl.

Damn, he liked the sound of that.

“Fine, but don’t make me wait long.”

“I won’t.”

Thankfully, she was good to her word. He’d just thanked everyone for their patience and explained he needed to go when Mia reemerged.

“Okay, ladies, I need to get our cookie helper back to his car. I’ll be back soon.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Margaret asked, planting one hand on her hip. “You have a kid-free house and a man that looks good enough to eat. Don’t you dare hurry back.”

The others laughed as Alex winked and dragged Mia out of the house.

“Drive fast,” he said as they scrambled into her car, those damned dark clouds Del had mentioned looming in the distance. They were going to have to make this quick.

“On it.”

And she was. Four steps inside her house, her lips were on his, their kisses crazed and needy. They left a string of discarded clothes from the living room all down the hall. A few steps more and they were in her bed, Mia’s nails clawing a trail down his back. And what she needed, he was more than happy to provide. Their climaxes came one after another, their predinner festivities over nearly as quickly as they’d started. Alex dropped onto the pillow beside her, grinning and spent.

“I need to accost you in strangers’ bathrooms more often.”

Mia laughed. “How about we just bake cookies more often?”

“Deal.” He laid beside her, letting his pulse slow to nearly normal before leaning over to give her cheek a peck. Any more than that, and he’d be hungry for more. “Come on. If we hurry, we might be able to get in a quick bite at the Sweet Mash before the storm arrives.”

“You really think you’ll be able to outrun it?” She followed him down the hall, each scooping up articles of clothing and putting them back on along the way.

“Oh yeah. You guys are on the edge of lake effect snow from Lake Michigan, right? It won’t extend down to Indy.” He tugged on his socks and shoes. “Down there, we’ll be lucky to get a light dusting. Usually, it just turns to rain.”

Or ice, which he refrained from admitting aloud. Ice storms were the worst. But in all the doom and gloom forecasts he’d peeked at today, thankfully no one had said anything about ice.

“Okay,” she said as they pulled their coats on. “But we’re going to ask for a seat by the window. And if it starts to snow, I’m sending you on your way.”

Alex pulled her into a hug. “You’re kinda cute when you’re bossy. I like it.”

“I’m not bossy.” Her mock scowl faltered. “Much.”

“Come on, Miss Bossy Pants,” he teased. Alex tugged the back door open and stopped. For a moment, he thought her vehicle had been stolen, because it was nowhere in sight. A few hard blinks later, and he realized the Equinox was exactly where they’d left it—it was just now covered in snow. “What on earth?”

“But...but it wasn’t even snowing when we got here!” Mia cried. “How long were we inside, maybe ten minutes? Fifteen at the most?”

“Wow, I guess the forecast about this storm was really accurate for once. But then, even a blind squirrel occasionally finds a nut.”

He blew out a sigh, mentally rearranging his evening. Work and edits could be done on his laptop, and year-end calls to the last few of his customers weren’t needed until Monday. It seemed like there was something else he needed to do this weekend, but he was drawing a blank. He didn’t sweat it—he’d remember eventually.

Mia tugged him back inside. “Oh, Alex, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have kept you at Barb’s so long.”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t have traded cookie time with you and your friends for the world.” At her incredulous look, he amended with a wink, “Okay, so I wouldn’t have traded what happened *after* for the world.”

“Maybe we won’t get as much as they predicted and they’ll have the roads between here and Indy cleared by morning.”

“Hopefully so. In the meantime, that early snow means we have plenty of time now.”

Mia paused, one sleeve out of her coat. “For dinner?”

“No,” he said, helping remove her coat with a wink. “To crawl back into bed and rest up for round two.”

Chapter Thirteen

MIA WOKE TO eight inches of snow on the ground the next morning, with a predicted three more on the way. Though not the craziest accumulation they'd ever had, a cold front coming down from Canada had brought with it high winds, making conditions blizzard-like and roads treacherous. Alex wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, and neither was she.

Which was perfectly fine with her.

"I know we can't stay like this forever," she said. "But I have to admit—I'm loving today's change of pace."

They were sitting on her couch after breakfast, snuggled together with preferred mugs of caffeine in hand, watching the snow globe effect going on outside her picture window. Between the crackling fire in the fireplace and the glimmering lights of her beautiful, fresh Christmas tree, Mia was in holiday heaven. Having Alex here to share the perfectly lazy Sunday with her made it that much more special.

"Agreed. I don't do much sitting still, but right now, there's literally no place I'd rather be."

"Really? Not even lounging on a sandy beach in the Caribbean somewhere? You just told us last weekend about some amazing vacations your family went on when you were a kid."

"Nope." He nuzzled her neck. "Don't get me wrong, I do love getting away from it all now and then. Finding a secluded beach to lounge on, my toes dug into the sand and a bucket of ice-cold brews nearby. But you can go to the beach anytime; Christmas happens only once a year. And to be honest? The past couple have felt kinda meh."

Mia rested her head on his shoulder. She could relate. Even with her large and lively family, flying solo was still taking

some getting used to.

“Well, if you’re feeling that way this year, there’s always plenty of room around the Brooks’ family dinner tables for one more. Or do you already have plans with your folks?”

She could tell by the deep exhale, it wasn’t an easy answer.

“Do I have plans? No. Did my father already start making plans, and is he pressuring me into joining them? Yes.” Alex shook his head. “I mean, we stopped exchanging gifts at Christmas about the time I was finishing elementary school. After that, a vacation to somewhere warm or exotic was the family gift. Not that I minded—we made a lot of great memories on those trips. But now...”

She shifted to face him. “But now?”

“Now, I’d rather make great memories in Indiana, regardless the temperature outside.”

Mia’s heart swelled at his confession, but guilt pricked her at the same moment. The more time he spent with her over the holidays, the less he would be with his parents. And they were getting older. As someone who would give just about anything to have even one more minute with her mother, she knew the importance of staying close and connected.

“Or maybe Brooklyn and I will sneak into your suitcases so we can enjoy some of this amazing beach time, too.”

Surprise lit his features. “Would you two like to join us? My parents would be thrilled to have you ladies accompany us.”

Travel? With his parents, whom she’d never met? Warning alarms went off in the back of her mind.

“Oh, gosh, I didn’t mean to self-invite, Alex. I was just being silly.”

“Oh.” His smile dimmed. “Well, if you change your mind, I can always bring along an extra-tall suitcase.”

It may not have been the right time, but there was something about the expression on his face that reminded her of something. Another place and time. Yes, she'd seen that look before.

“Hey, Alex, can I ask you something?”

He took a drink from his mug. “Sure, what's that?”

“Why did you get so upset with me back in college?”

A small grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I wondered how long it would take for that to come up. You held out longer than I'd expected.”

“Well, I almost asked you at the bookstore, but that darned smile of yours has a tendency to sufficiently scatter my thoughts.”

“Really. Will it work if I do it now?”

She closed her eyes. “Nope.”

Alex chuckled, the sound one of her favorites lately. He pulled her in closer, and she almost asked if he was trying to keep her from running. Which was silly—she wasn't going anywhere. The Alex of the past had matured a lot since the one she'd known back then.

“Well, what I told you back at the bookstore was true—I had been wrestling with something and hadn't handled it the best around you. What I left out was that the issues I'd been wrestling with had to do with you.”

“With me? But hadn't your grandmother just passed or something?”

He nodded. “You've got a good memory. She did, right before spring break. And that entire week full of family gatherings and viewings and then the funeral and burial, all I could think about was how I wished you were there. ‘Mia would know how to cheer me up.’ ‘Mia would know how to make the hurting stop.’ ‘Mia would understand what I'm going through.’”

She squeezed the hand he had wrapped around her. Had she known about his grandmother's passing, she would have found a way to be there for him. Losing someone you loved was heart-wrenching, but to feel alone in the midst of it? She couldn't even imagine.

"Once the family had gone and it was just only-child me again, I realized I didn't want to be alone anymore. So I got back on campus early, intending to finally work up the nerve to ask you out. Sure, I'd heard you and Greg were going steady, but I decided it didn't matter—I wanted you for myself. Only, when I came by your dorm to see you, it was just Robyn there; you were down the hall catching up with another friend. Before I could tell her my plans, she said, 'You aren't going to believe this—Greg told me he's going to propose to Mia this summer. He's already got the ring and everything. Isn't that crazy?'"

Mia hung her head. Poor Alex. She'd had no idea he'd felt that way.

"I hadn't known what to say," he continued. "So I agreed with her and trudged back to my apartment. And though I wanted a chance to be with you more than anything, I couldn't bring myself to break you and Greg up. I refused to be that selfish. I accepted defeat and told myself that it would be okay eventually—I'd just have to avoid you for a while. Give my heart time to heal and reset."

"But when you tried keeping your distance that next day after class, I followed." She groaned. "You kept trying to tell me you were fine, but I didn't get the hint."

"No, you didn't." He grinned. "In typical Mia-style, you kept pushing for answers, wanting to know that I was truly okay. And I wanted to tell you how I felt, and why I was trying to keep my distance, but I couldn't, not without jeopardizing what you and Greg had. The harder you pushed, the angrier I got. Because you pushing meant you cared, more than anyone else ever had, and *I couldn't have you.*"

"But you didn't know that," she whispered.

Alex met her gaze. Mia swallowed hard.

“Maybe I’d had some feelings for you, too. It started the day we met, but they were so unexpected that I didn’t know what to do with them. I kept tucking them away, telling myself it was just the excitement of my first year at college. I refused to even let my brain go there, because I was so determined to stay committed to Greg.” She snorted softly. “And gee, look where that got me.”

“It got you a beautiful daughter, who was able to grow up in your magical hometown, where you’re both surrounded by your family and friends.” He entwined their fingers, then pressed a soft kiss to her knuckles. “You were right where you needed to be. I think, deep down, that was a big part of me choosing not to pursue you back then. I knew the career ahead of me was going to include a lot of traveling. You would have been left behind, stuck in Indy away from the people you loved. It wouldn’t have worked out.”

Mia laid her head on his shoulder. It seemed the young, dumb jerk hadn’t been either of those things after all. His confession brought some closure to the secret crush she’d had on him all those years ago. Because he was right—it wouldn’t have worked.

“You left school, and eventually the pain subsided,” Alex continued. “I met Caroline in grad school, and she started to bring joy back into my life. But we were too much alike, too driven by work to know how to make a marriage work. Our split was amicable, and for a time, I was content to accept that maybe I was just meant to be on my own. Until a few months ago, when I saw you on TV.”

“That’s all it took?”

“Yep. It’s like those cartoons where a character opens a closet door, not knowing that closet was stuffed to the max by another character, and suddenly they’re buried in all this stuff that tumbles out.” He laughed. “That was me, sitting in my recliner, buried under all these memories and emotions I’d tucked away long ago. Only, once they’d reappeared, they

refused to let me tuck them away again. So, I gambled a little and made a detour to Bourbon Falls.”

Oh, he’d gambled, all right. If it hadn’t been closing time and her daughter in the next room, Mia might have given him the what for after showing up at their store. And she may not have stopped yelling, even if there were people outside on the sidewalk watching.

Funny how a few innocent overnight stays could cool tempers and allow space for healing and romance.

Mia grinned. Romance, something she’d never expected to have in her life again. Maybe Delaney’s mantra had been right all along: Life wasn’t made for worrying—it was made for living. It was time to stop clinging to the safety of solitude and trust fate to do its thing. Hopefully, this time around, things would turn out a whole lot brighter for them both.

She pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Well, I for one am glad you did. But, Alex, next time you’re struggling with something, talk to me, okay? Whether it works out or not, we each deserve to have that conversation.”

“Agreed.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze. “And no more shouting matches, either.”

Mia laughed. “Okay, now that one might be a harder promise to keep.”

“As much as I’m loving sitting here, my bladder is about to burst. Let me ease by you for a moment.”

“Sorry,” she said, shifting to let him up. “I guess I have been pumping you full of coffee for a while.”

“It’s a lazy day.” He shrugged and pecked a kiss to her cheek. “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.”

Mia cradled the mug in her hands and shifted her gaze to the swirling snow outside. It looked cold out there today. Blustery. She counted her blessings for the roof over her head and warm space inside.

A buzz distracted her, and she glanced down to see Alex's cell phone on the cushion beside her. It must have slipped out of his pocket while they were sitting there. She grabbed it for him, and its screen flashed the preview of a text alert from someone named Jennifer.

Wednesday at six. Do not be late.

Mia felt her smile slip. Who was Jennifer?

“Okay, much better,” said Alex from the hall.

Mia bobbed his phone, the guilt of being caught unintentionally snooping making her clumsy.

“Oh, that's where my phone was. Wondered where I'd set it down.” Alex took it from Mia and kissed her cheek, then resumed his place beside her. “So, what'd I miss?”

“Uh, nothing. I heard your phone buzz and found it on the cushion here.”

She was trying to cover the reason she'd been holding it when he came back into the room. Mia wasn't a snooper, not by nature. Though, she'd sure feel a whole lot better if he freely explained who Jennifer was.

“Oh?” He clicked to check its screen, then set it back down. “Eh, nothing I can't take care of later. Right now, I'm going to focus on enjoying my snow day with you.”

Mia studied him for a brief moment and detected zero guilt in his eyes. Probably, this Jennifer was just someone he worked with. She hoped so, anyway.

Stop it. Just because Greg cheated does not mean Alex will, too.

She needed to hold on to that thought, because it was true. Learning to trust again was all part of the healing. Why waste a perfectly good afternoon—heck, a perfectly good relationship—worrying over something that probably doesn't exist?

So instead of asking who this Jennifer person was, Mia pushed her from her mind and snuggled into her new man. “You’ll get no complaints from me.”



ALEX REMEMBERED MIDWAY through lunch that his parents were expecting him for dinner. Damn, his father had been pretty insistent about it. Odd, because usually he’d drop reminders to Alex throughout the week if something important was coming up, but both his mom and dad had been fairly quiet this week. Not that he would blame his forgetfulness on them. This oversight was completely his own, inspired by the beauty sitting across the table from him.

And he was trying to savor every minute of it with her, which included ignoring that last hint from his editor. He still had plenty of time to get his manuscript to her.

“I’m sure they’ll understand,” Mia said after he mentioned it. “No parent would want their child out driving in this weather.”

His gaze shifted to her kitchen window. The swirling had subsided and snowfall lightened, but the skies were still overcast and dark. Alex had a feeling the storm wasn’t quite finished with them yet.

“You haven’t met my father,” he said with a chuckle. “I’m just hoping Aunt Daphne and Uncle Zeke didn’t make the drive in from Chicago. If they made it and I didn’t, I’m gonna catch all sorts of flack from my old man. But what can I do? I mean, damn, they haven’t even plowed your street yet.”

She grinned. “You’re not in Indy anymore. Here, we have two snow plows. They do the main arteries through Bourbon Falls first so emergency vehicles can get in and out of town. Then they’ll start clearing the streets downtown and slowly spiral out from there. Heck, they probably won’t reach my dad’s farm until late tomorrow.”

“But what if someone in the outlying area has an emergency?”

“Oh, we have our ways of getting to them.”

Right on cue, a motor’s high-pitched whine sounded in the distance. And another. Snowblowers maybe? No, the sound wasn’t quite right. A few moments later, a pair of snowmobiles came gliding down the street.

“Okay, now *that* looks like a fun way of getting around.”

Mia rose to clear their empty plates. “Maybe they’ll stop and give you a lift.”

“Pfft, I highly doubt—” The snowmobiles pulled into Mia’s buried driveway and their riders dismounted, the taller one wearing a backpack. “Wait, did you know about this?”

“Maybe.” She winked. “Del gets bored when she has nothing to do. She keeps those at my father’s farm in the summer but thought to grab them before the storm. Good thing someone believed the weatherman, huh?”

Touché. “But I don’t have any of my ski gear here. I’ll be frozen in no time.”

“I told her as much, so she was having Isaac bring over an extra pair of snow pants and boots. No idea if they’ll fit, but thought we could give it a try.” She came to stand behind him, her hands on his shoulders as they watched Del and Isaac wade through small drifts of snow on their way to the side door. “But if you don’t want to go—”

“Are you kidding me? Heck yeah, let’s do this!”

Mia laughed. “Okay. I just didn’t want you getting bored, stuck here all weekend.”

“Bored? Here, with you?” He rose from the table and squeezed her adorable butt. “Not gonna happen. Just let me call my father first and give him the heads up that I won’t be leaving until they get the roads cleared.”

He stepped into the hallway to make his call.

“What do you mean you won’t be home for dinner?” his father demanded. “The roads are fine, and I expect you here as

promised.”

“I didn’t make it back to Indy before the storm hit. There’s a good nine or ten inches of snow on the ground here, and they haven’t plowed Mia’s street yet.”

“Then it’s time to put that expensive Land Rover to good use.”

Alex grimaced. “I didn’t bring the Rover.”

Cursing sounded on the other end of the line. “The next time I ask you to be sure to make it for dinner, check the forecast before you leave town.”

The line went dead, and Alex was left speechless. When was the last time his father had been angry enough to hang up on him? And all over a stupid meal?

Voices drifted down the hall; the others had made it inside. With a frown, he shoved his phone into a back pocket and headed to join them. If his father thought he was going to call back and beg for forgiveness, he was sorely mistaken.

“There he is. Here, Alex,” Del said from the mudroom off Mia’s kitchen, digging snow pants and boots out from the pack he’d seen on Isaac’s back. “Give these a try.”

The pants were a smidge long and the boots a size too large, but he’d rather have too much room than too little. “We’ll make them work,” he told the others.

“Good,” Mia said, also now bundled up. “We don’t want you to turn into a popsicle out there. Have you ever ridden before?”

“Nope. Buddy from college offered to take me once, but he came down with the flu and we never found another time to make it happen.” He finished tugging on his coat. “So, who am I riding with—Del or Isaac?”

“Neither,” Del said with a grin. “Your girl knows how to drive just fine.”

At his surprised look, Mia shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a small-town girl with many talents.”

Yes, she certainly was. They all donned ski masks—which made him grin; now they looked like a band of robbers—and headed outside. One step off the side steps, they were smacked by a snow-filled gust of wind.

“Okay, now I understand the ski masks,” he admitted to Mia as they climbed on the nearest snowmobile.

“Like I said, we don’t want you to become a human popsicle.”

“I appreciate that.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and whispered in her ear, “Although, I know a woman who would warm me up in no time.”

She laughed. “Not this woman. You’ve gotta be warm *before* you get anywhere near my bed.”

“Who said anything about a bed?”

Mia looked over one shoulder. “Careful, now. You distract me too much and I won’t be paying enough attention to where we’re going.”

“Fair enough. I promise to behave. For now.”

It was a good thing he did—the reserved woman he knew went on hiatus as wintertime Mia stepped on the gas and threw caution to the wind. She and Del zipped down the streets in town and angled for the countryside, cranking up the speed as they flew across the empty roads. Apparently, this was their old stomping ground, where both had cut their teeth on snowmobile driving. And though Alex was usually one who preferred to drive, today he was content to hang on to Mia and enjoy the adrenaline rush.

Theirs weren’t the only machines out and about, which meant there were trails to follow and new friends to make. The troop made their way south of town, past an old train depot toward a pair of small waterfalls, partially iced over. The other

riders continued on, but Mia and Del stopped and turned their machines off so Alex and Isaac could stretch their legs.

The scene was beautiful, but it was the quiet that first caught his attention. Gone were the usual sounds of traffic, electronics, and the big-city hustle and bustle he was used to.

“Now this is what I call a good old-fashioned cleanse for the soul,” Del said.

A family of birds chattered from a pine across the stream before them. Alex could get used to small-town living. Heck, he’d visited dozens of them over the years, checking in on customers throughout the eastern portion of the country. The slower pace used to bother him, but then, he hadn’t had a woman at his side worth slowing down for, either.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?” Mia asked, her gaze on the falls.

Alex pulled her closer, his gaze shifting from the majestic view to the woman in his arms. “Sure is.”

“Ugh, time to go,” Del said. “Alex is getting sappy over there.”

Laughing, they all mounted up and continued on. The girls drove over to their father’s farm to check on her aunt Faye and their old dog Rex, since the chief was on duty. Then they looped around Del’s store and greenhouse, which Alex had to remember to pretend he’d never seen before, and a secluded little ranch just past it that Isaac had apparently rented before meeting Del. A few more races through what the girls said were soybean fields and dusk started setting in. A quick poll found that fingers and toes were beginning to go numb, so the group called it a day and headed back into town. They passed a snowplow along the way, slowly making its way along the main road leaving town to the north. Mia’s street, however, had yet to be touched.

“Bummer. I was really hoping they’d get the snow cleared by now for your sake,” she said as they waved good-bye to Del and Isaac. “Looks like you may be stuck here again tonight.”

“You’ll get no complaints from me.” *My father, on the other hand...*

Alex pushed that thought aside as he followed her to the side door that she’d left unlocked. He was not about to let his thoughts go down that path after a fun-filled afternoon. They stepped inside and began shrugging out of their snow-covered gear.

“Me, either. But I’m sure Brooklyn will have a fit, being stuck at her father’s house for an extra night.”

“Maybe school getting canceled will ease the pain a bit?”

Mia snorted. “Nope, they all have computers they bring home with them, so they can have e-learning days when school gets canceled now. I made sure she took everything, just in case.”

“What? No more weather cancellations? No fair!”

She laughed and started for the kitchen. “Well, the idea is to keep them from having to miss out on a bunch of summer vacation if they get too many snow days. Want me to make us some hot chocolate?”

“Oh, I guess that makes sense.” He hung his coat on the last available hook. “And yes, please. Gotta warm up before I get near your bed again, from what I recall.”

She winked. “You listen well.”

A phone buzzed nearby, and they both reached to check theirs for missed messages.

“Oh, yep, I told you so. Five messages from Brooklyn, asking if the roads were clear enough to come home yet. Ope, make that six. In this last one she’s asking me to come and get her.” Mia shook her head as she started texting back. “Sorry, kiddo, that’s not happening tonight.”

“It’s too bad I don’t have my other vehicle,” Alex said, mentally kicking himself yet again for choosing to bring the Camaro. “I probably could have made it out of here to get her.”

“Oh? Is it on stilts?” Mia laughed.

“Not exactly,” he said, opening his message list. “It’s a— Uh-oh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Not sure. Dad texted an hour ago, said to call him ASAP. I’d better see what’s going on.”

Mia set her ingredients aside. “I’ll hit the restroom and give you some privacy.”

“Thanks.” He waited until he heard her bedroom door close, then placed his call.

“What took you so long?” His father’s voice was even more agitated than when they last spoke.

Was this family dinner to announce something was wrong with his dad? Something that would mean he’s fighting against the clock? Alex drew in a deep breath, trying to hold back the panic creeping up his spine.

“I was away from my phone. What’s going on?”

“Your mother fell. We’ve been sitting in the ER for two hours now, and if I don’t hear her X-ray results soon, I’m going to march up to the counter and—”

“Wait, X-rays—is she okay?”

“She says she is, but you know your mother—she never wants the rest of us to worry.” His father sighed. “She put her arm out to break the fall, and I swear I heard a snap. The way she cradled it when we helped her up...I just didn’t want to take any chances.”

Alex’s heart went out to his mother. Now he wanted those X-ray results to hurry up, too. “Poor Mom. Did she trip on something?”

“We don’t know. One minute she was upright, the next she was falling. I just thank the good Lord that she wasn’t carrying anything to the table yet.”

Alex hung his head. If he'd been home, he could have helped his mother in the kitchen. If he'd been there, he might have been able to catch her. Or kept her from falling in the first place. But no, he was up in Bourbon Falls, shirking responsibility and playing house with Mia.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there," he said softly. "How's Mom holding up?"

"She wants to go home. Hell, we all do, but we're not going anywhere until—oh, I think I see the doctor coming."

"Please, keep me posted on what he says."

"I will. Now hurry up and get home. We need you here."

Alex's gaze shifted to the living room, its open curtains providing him a clear view of the unplowed road out front. "I'll do my best."

Chapter Fourteen

ALEX DIDN'T SLEEP well that night, his thoughts with his mother. She'd never fallen before, so what had caused tonight's accident? Had she been dizzy? Blacked out? Slipped on a melted ice cube?

Okay, so maybe small-town life did have a few drawbacks. Specifically, their inability to clear roads faster. The change of pace was something that would definitely take some getting used to. Unless, of course, he could convince her to move south.

Ha! I'd have better luck asking my parents to move north, and that's not gonna happen.

But eventually they would need to come up with a plan so they weren't spending all their time together in just Bourbon Falls. There were places he'd like to show her in Indianapolis as well, people he'd love for her to meet. And his parents would adore her and Brooklyn, once they had a chance to meet.

When he heard the plow come down her street at six the next morning, Alex rose, showered, and kissed a sleepy Mia good-bye. He hated leaving her soft, warm bed, but knew it was the right thing to do. She, of course, completely understood.

"Be careful, and text to let me know you made it okay," she said, propped on one elbow as he gathered his duffel bag.

"Will do. Thanks again for a perfect weekend."

One kiss more, and he headed out.

The drive home was much slower going than usual, which he'd fully expected. The major roads had been cleared, but blowing snow had drifted across the once-clean highway he relied on, melting and then freezing again as temperatures

dipped after sunset. Between the black ice and his sports car's rear-wheel drive, a trip that usually took him no more than an hour and a half this morning took him over two. More than once, he wished he'd stayed snuggled up with Mia rather than venturing out.

By the time he eased into his parents' place, it was going on eight-thirty, the sky just beginning to turn from deep violet to a dusty pink. He sent Mia a quick text letting her know he made it okay, then headed inside. His father was crashed on the couch, his mother asleep in the recliner beside him. A cast peeked out the top of a navy-blue sling.

Fatigued from the slippery drive, he dropped into a seat beside his mother's chair. Should he wake her? Let her sleep?

Alex's cell phone vibrated in his pocket. It was a text from Mia, thanking him for letting her know he'd made it and to keep her posted on his mom. He wished she were here; she always seemed to know what to do.

His gaze shifted back to the sling. Too bad there wasn't some magical way to speed up the healing process. Evelyn Wellington had never been one to slow down, and this cast was sure to irritate her.

"Let her sleep."

He turned to find his father shifting to a seated position, stubble on his jawline and hair ruffled. Alex rose and came to sit beside his father on the couch.

"Broken?"

His father nodded. "Thankfully, they were able to set everything without surgery. Doctor said this is a fairly common break. She goes back in two weeks to make sure it's all healing well and get a waterproof cast."

"How's she holding up?"

"Pretty well, all things considered. The Percocet was her best friend once they finally gave it to her. Still lots of

questions about why we had to stay at the ER. I had to bribe her with a trip to DQ on the way home.”

Alex grinned. His mom had always had quite the sweet tooth. “I’m guessing they were all closed by then, huh?”

“Yes. Not that she’ll remember the conversation.”

“Forget ice cream? They must have her on some pretty good pain pills.”

His father was quiet for a moment, then dropped a hand to Alex’s knee. “Son, I’d planned to tell you this after dinner tonight. Your mother, she’s been acting...off lately. Mixing up dates for her events, forgetting to relay messages, misjudging distances. At first, I thought maybe it was her allergies acting up, but after she took a tumble in the living room a few months back, I made an appointment with our family doctor.”

Fear sent ice through his veins. “You didn’t mention her falling before.”

“The couch caught her fall, and she was more embarrassed than anything. She asked me not to mention it to anyone. But I went ahead and made an appointment with our GP. After a physical and long list of questions, he recommended we see a specialist.”

“A specialist? For what, physical therapy?”

His father’s hand tightened on his knee. “Son, your mother’s been diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer’s disease.”

Time ground to a halt. His mother, keeper of the family calendar, organizer of community activities, was losing her memory?

“No way,” he said. “Not Mom. Maybe...maybe she was dehydrated yesterday. Or had a UTI—I’ve heard those can be really dangerous if left undiagnosed in women her age.”

“Alex.”

“No.” He rose from his seat, needing to put space between him and his father. His mother stirred in her sleep; Alex lowered his voice. “Find another doctor. Get a second opinion. Or a third. Mom doesn’t have Alzheimer’s. No one in our family ever has.”

“We did get a second opinion. And when I didn’t like what that doctor had to say, I got two more. They ran more tests, different tests, but the answer always came back the same.”

It was all Alex could do not to scream. This couldn’t be happening to his sweet and determined mother. It just couldn’t.

“But why? Why Mom? Why now?”

His father’s head dropped. “I don’t know, Son. I just don’t know.”

For the first time in a week, Alex looked at his father. *Really* looked. His clothes were wrinkled, his jawline scruffy with more than a single day’s growth, and his shoulders were slumped. Their family patriarch, who had yet to meet a battle he didn’t think he could win, looked tired and defeated.

And the last thing he probably needed to deal with in the midst of his personal hell was a defiant son refusing to listen. Alex resumed his seat beside him.

“We’ll find a way to fight this,” he said, pulling his father into a tight hug. “Whatever it takes, whatever we have to do, we’ll help Mom fight this.”

His father nodded, his grip tightening around Alex’s back. And for the first time in his life, Alex Wellington heard his father cry.



MIA LOOKED UP from the spelling quizzes she was grading at their dining room table, hearing her cell phone buzz with a new text alert. Hopefully, this one was from Alex. She was anxious to hear how his mother was doing.

After digging under several stacks of papers, she located the phone but found the latest text wasn't from Alex. It was from Brooklyn. Again. She'd sent Mia several throughout the morning, all containing varying degrees of the same question: when she would be allowed to drive home. Those didn't bother her. In fact, texts like that warmed her mama's heart. The texts from three of her coworkers, however, had her feeling like the town spotlight was fixed on her.

*Is it true you've had a man staying at your place the past two weekends?
Inquiring minds want to know.*

Who's this out-of-town Romeo we're hearing about and when do we get to meet him?

Rumor has it you've fallen for a guy from Indy. Please tell me you're not leaving us!

She should have known it was only a matter of time before the rumor mill started churning with Alex news. Guess it hadn't done them any good, hiding his car in her garage. But how to respond? If she said nothing, they'd just pounce on her at school tomorrow.

She thought about asking Del for advice, since she and her rebel ways had been regular gossip fodder for years, but then opted against it. Del didn't care what people thought of her and did as she pleased. Mia wasn't wired that way. So, she called the only other person in town who'd known Alex back in the day: Robyn.

"Girl, you have the town all abuzz right now. You got three texts, and I got even more."

"You know I hate being in the spotlight," Mia said. "So, how do I get out of it?"

"That depends—are you staying in Bourbon Falls or moving to Indy?"

Mia snorted. "Can you seriously see me living in Indianapolis? I'd get lost on a daily basis in a city that big."

“True. You struggled enough on campus, and that was a fraction of the size. And I’m glad to hear you’re not planning to go, because I’d be all sorts of unhappy if our favorite two babysitters skipped town.”

“Favorite and cheapest.” Mia laughed, pushing back from the table. “No, Brooklyn and I aren’t going anywhere. Heck, I don’t even know if this thing with Alex will even last.”

She rose to look out her kitchen window, smiling at the pristine snow in her backyard. Not a single footprint to mar the surface, just a blank canvas, waiting to be used. Just like her future with Alex. Well, until she’d seen that text yesterday. Now she wasn’t so sure everything was as picture-perfect as she’d thought.

Robyn’s voice softened. “Are things not going well?”

“Actually, they’re going really well. Almost too well.” She turned from the window and walked down the hall to her bedroom. Everywhere she looked, she saw Alex. Where he’d held her, where he’d pleased her. Where he’d slept, and even where he’d shrieked about the tiniest spider that’d snuck past the hall. “What if it doesn’t last, Robyn? What if something goes wrong and I’m stuck with nothing but a handful of memories again?”

“Girl, I stayed quiet while you put yourself in solitary confinement these past few years. Listened while you tried to justify why getting back out there was a bad idea. That you shouldn’t date because you needed to protect your reputation or spare Brooklyn from awkward introductions. I know, you needed time to heal. Some time to find yourself and rediscover the amazing, beautiful, smart, caring woman we all grew up with. And you know what? I didn’t fully see her again until a week ago, when romance walked back into her life and relit the spark that’d grown dim inside of her.”

Mia’s vision swam at her dear friend’s words. She sank down on the edge of her bed, grappling with the idea that she was truly ready to give relationships—and in time, love—another try. “Really?”

“Really. So, stop your worrying about all the what-ifs. Alex is the fire to your spark, sugar. He always has been.”

Is that why things had always been so easy with him? Because they had some sort of connection that was stronger than the rest? That would certainly explain why their parting in college had hurt her so deeply—and why she was hesitant to put her heart in danger of it happening again.

She’d allowed herself to let loose and enjoy his company the past week, but what would happen when the fun wore off? Or if this Jennifer was actually competition for her down in Indy? She almost brought it up but stopped herself. There was no sense in tarnishing Robyn’s view of Alex if Mia was just being overly paranoid. The town gossip, however, was something they both knew about.

“But what about the rumors?”

“I don’t say this often,” Robyn said, a smile in her voice. “But for once, I’m suggesting you take a page from Delaney’s playbook: You do you, and let the talkers talk. When it all works out in the end, you can say ‘I told you so.’”

Mia grinned. She always did love being right. “Thanks, Robyn.”

“Anytime, girl. You know that. Now, can we circle back to the topic of babysitting? If Drew and I don’t get a date night in before his parents arrive for the holidays, it will *not* be pretty.”

Ah yes, Dr. and Mrs. Owens—two lovely people who unfortunately had a penchant for getting under their daughter-in-law’s skin. Would things be like that between Mia’s and Alex’s parents? She put a hand to her mouth to smother a giggle. It was far too early to be thinking thoughts like that. For now, she’d focus on saving Robyn from her own in-laws.

“I’ll be sure to ask Brooklyn just as soon as she gets home.”

Chapter Fifteen

ALEX AWOKE IN his childhood bedroom late morning, groggy and disoriented. Muffled voices sounded from down the hall, those of his father and uncle, aunt and mother. It took him a moment to remember where he was and why. Laughter rang out, which brought a smile to his face. His mother must be feeling better today.

No sooner had he thought that than his memories from this morning came rushing back. Her cast. Her prognosis. Her scared husband, trying to keep it together and failing.

Alex had struggled to stay composed, too. But somehow he'd managed, for his father's sake if nothing else. They would be leaning a lot on each other as they navigated the uncharted waters ahead.

But where did that leave Mia?

He reached a hand to the empty space in the bed beside him. She'd never been here, yet he missed her all the same. Hopefully in time, she'd come to Indy and meet his folks. Sooner, preferably, than later.

Funny, he figured her curiosity would have prompted her to call by now. Alex checked his phone and was disappointed to see he'd forgotten to hit send on the text message he'd typed to her before laying down for a short nap. In it, he'd told her about the broken arm and the even worse news about his mother's diagnosis. But as his thumb hovered over the send button now, Alex hesitated.

Was it too soon to share about the Alzheimer's? He himself had yet to fully wrap his head around all that he'd learned just hours ago, and it was a disease he admittedly knew very little about. Besides, she was probably busy trying to get Brooklyn home and everything ready for school to

resume tomorrow. At least, he assumed it would—in typical Indiana fashion, their snowstorm was being followed by a small heat wave that would bring temps into the midforties in Indy today—a fact he'd learned as he was lying here a few hours ago, waiting for his mind to stop racing so he could get some sleep. The snow he'd slid on for hours this morning would likely be gone by noon.

Stupid weather.

After staring at his text for another minute, Alex deleted it and opted to call her instead.

“Hey there, miss me yet?” he asked.

Mia laughed. “Of course. How are things in Indy?”

“Well, I hear Mom and the rest of the family chatting amicably in the other room, so she can't be feeling too bad. Dad said her arm was a clean break of only one forearm bone, and they were able to set it without surgery.”

“That's so great to hear!”

“It is.” Unlike the other news. “And I'm sorry, I texted you all of that earlier but apparently forgot to hit send. Guess the fatigue finally caught up with me. Feeling much better after that cat nap, though.”

“No worries at all. I'm just so glad to hear everyone's doing okay. She'll want to wear pants with elastic waists for a while, to make it easier to get in and out of them. Oh, and you'll want a garbage bag to put over the cast when she showers—can't get that plaster wet. Unless they gave her a fiberglass one already.”

“You sound like you've lived through broken bones before.”

“Brooklyn did something similar on the playground a few years back,” Mia said. “It was the end of the world for a few days, but once people started getting to sign and doodle on her cast, the inconvenience of it all quickly subsided. Did your mom hit her head or anything?”

“Thankfully, no.”

“Oh, good. I’d hate to hear that she blacked out or suffered any memory loss.”

“Yeah...”

Alex stared up at the ceiling, still grappling with his mother’s diagnosis. How much would she forget? And how soon? Would there be a day when she eventually forgot who he was? Forgot the name she gave him?

“Oh, shoot, that’s Brooklyn trying to call on the other line,” Mia said. “She’d better not be stuck again. Can I call you right back?”

“Actually, just give me a buzz later this afternoon. I’m going to go and spend some time with my family.”

“Aw, enjoy, Alex. I’ll chat with ya later.”

“Bye, Mia.”

They disconnected, but the warmth in her voice stayed with him. If anyone he knew understood the importance of family, it was her. And he would tell her about his mother’s condition, but not until he’d had a little more time to process it himself. By then, hopefully, he’d have answers to some of the questions that were bound to arise.

Mia had always been the girl of a million questions.

After freshening up, he joined his family in the kitchen, where his aunt Daphne was preparing soup and salad.

“Sorry, Alex,” she said with a wink. “No breakfast for you today.”

“So long as you were the one cooking, you’ll hear no complaints from me.”

He gave her a peck to the cheek, then crossed the room to kneel before his mother, seated at the kitchen table. Her face was without makeup, but the smile he received made her natural beauty shine. She placed her unrestrained hand on his

cheek, and he leaned into her touch like he had so many times as a child. It felt the same as always, soft and gentle.

Maybe this morning had just been a bad dream. Maybe he'd been delusional after the stressful drive and lack of sleep. Hey, a man could hope, right?

"You look tired, sweetheart."

"Nothing a hot meal and some caffeine can't fix." He took her hand in his. "How are you feeling, Mom?"

"Oh, I'm fine so long as I take my pain medicine on time."

His father grimaced. "Apparently, I'm not the best nurse in the world and got behind on giving it to her. I've got it set in my phone now, so it won't happen again."

"Got behind on her meds? Man, you're fired." Alex grinned. He'd always wanted to say that to his oldest and closest boss.

His father chuckled. "Trust me, your aunt gave me all sorts of grief earlier. It won't happen again."

"Apparently, caregiving instincts come more naturally to some than others," said Daphne, bringing plates of food to the table. "Isn't that right, Evelyn?"

His mother looked from Alex to the food being set before her. "Oh, is it time for dinner so soon?"

"Lunch, sweetheart," his father said. "Be careful, now, that soup's hot."

"I know how to eat soup, Nate. I'm fifty years old, for goodness' sake."

Alex's heart sank. His mother wasn't fifty—she was fifty-eight.

The others exchanged awkward glances as his father eased her chair closer to the table, careful not to bump her arm. "Of course you do, dear."

“Actually, I’m not all that hungry. I think I’d rather go and rest for a while.”

“Your medicine kicking in, Mom?” Alex asked.

She nodded as his father helped her to her feet. Gently, he led her into the other room. Alex watched them go, struggling with the view. Moving as slowly as they did, his parents looked...old. Only, they weren’t—neither had reached full retirement age.

“We’re going to stay a few more days,” Zeke said softly. “Daphne will stay with your mom while I help your dad start working on his transition.”

Alex looked to his uncle, the CFO of their company. “Transition to what?”

Zeke dunked a slice of sandwich into his soup. “Retirement.”

“H-he can’t. I’m not ready.”

Daphne patted Alex’s hand. “You’ll do great, sweetheart.”

But that wasn’t what Alex meant. He’d been groomed for years to eventually take the helm at Wellington. What he wasn’t ready for was being tied to a desk job in Indy.

Not when the woman he was falling for lived an hour and a half to the north.



BROOKLYN MADE IT home safe and sound just after lunch, allowing Mia to take her first full breath of the day. This was her daughter’s first winter driving, and she’d already proven this summer that she wasn’t the best at navigating slippery roads. But with every hour behind the wheel came more experience, and Brooklyn would continue to develop more confidence. That didn’t mean Mia wouldn’t have a head full of white hair by the time her daughter graduated high school.

“My suggestion? Find the biggest empty parking lot you have close by and get her to make the car slide. Then she can

practice how to handle her car when it happens on the road,” Alex said when she called him before dinner. “Besides, Del has that giant four-by-four. If Brooklyn slides off the pavement, you’ll have a way to pull her back onto the road.”

Been there, done that. “Now that you mention it, I think our dad did that with each of us girls our first winter on the road. Thanks for the reminder.”

“You bet. If she’d been home this weekend, I could have taken her out in the Camaro and taught her how to make donuts. That’s definitely one of the perks to having rear-wheel drive in the snow. Of course, I spent my whole drive home trying *not* to do that on the highway.”

Mia shook her head. She was up in her craft room, testing out a few new felt snowman projects. So far, the glue wasn’t sticking well on any of them. Time to change mediums, it seemed.

“You know, if you’d waited another four or five hours, the roads probably would have been a lot cleaner for you.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I realized that later. Still, it was a huge relief to get here and know Mom was all right.”

She set down her glue bottle, wishing they’d invent a way to hug someone over the phone. “I can only imagine how difficult a drive that was, both physically and emotionally. How did everything go today with your family?”

“Good. Mom did a lot of resting. I think they have her on some good pain meds. Dad’s going to start weening her off the big stuff tomorrow, doctor said by the end of the week the pain should be much more manageable.”

“Oh, that’s great to hear. Maybe if it is, she and your dad can come up for your first book signing this weekend.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Wow, in all the commotion it had totally slipped my mind. I’m trying to think if there’s anything I need to do ahead of this weekend. The books were supposed to be shipped right to your store, so I won’t have to go digging through my house looking for extra

copies. And I've got business cards, I guess. Is there anything else I should bring?"

"Nope, I think we've got everything else covered," Mia said, glancing at her to-do list. She'd been touching it up all afternoon, to keep herself preoccupied from missing Alex. "We tracked down a Santa suit for Dad, have holiday plates and cups on order for the cookies and cocoa, and Aunt Faye ordered some really cool bookmarks to hand out at the signing table."

"That all sounds great. Honestly, I don't think I'd be much help if I were there right now. Too much going on between this and work and my writing. Hard to stay focused on anything."

"I wish there was more that I could do for your family, Alex. Would you like me to drive down after work tomorrow and stay with your mom so you and your dad can have a break?"

"No! Uh, I mean, I wouldn't chance it if I were you. With our luck, we'd get hit with another snowstorm or something."

He laughed, but the sound was a little off. Mia tried not to think too much about it, but then her mind went back to that text. Was he really looking out for her or trying to keep her away?

"Ha, yeah, maybe so. Okay, well, if you change your mind, I'm happy to come down and help however I can."

"I really appreciate it, Mia. We'll be good for a while, with my aunt and uncle still being here. Once they go back is when things will get interesting."

Oh, that's right. She'd forgotten his relatives were in town. *See?* She was just being paranoid again. Mia shook her head and pushed the mystery girl from her mind. This trust thing was going to take practice. In the meantime, she would make sure that everything was set for his book signing this weekend in Bourbon Falls. Besides, if his parents did end up making the trip, she wanted everything to be as perfect as possible.

After all, she only had one chance to make a great first impression.

School resumed on Tuesday, and Mia had her hands full with a classroom of restless children longing to be outside playing in the snow that was quickly melting away. She opted not to do the snowman craft activity until the next day, hoping they would be a little less unruly by then.

Unfortunately, the delay wasn't much help.

"Well?" her aunt asked as she arrived at Brooks Books to relieve her on Wednesday evening. "Did you have a room full of masterpieces or a floor full of glitter?"

Mia dropped her purse behind the checkout counter with a groan. "Let's just say the janitor will be leaving me a fresh nastygram tonight."

"That bad, huh?"

"Yeah, pretty much. And it was my fault, too. My mind was clearly elsewhere after lunch, and I forgot to tell the kids to put the glue down before applying the glitter and pom poms. So, they do all this work, get their creations looking the way they want, and it all fell off the minute they picked up their papers to hand them in. I can't remember the last time I made so many kids cry."

"Oh, sweetheart." Aunt Faye pulled Mia into a gentle hug. "I'm sure they've already forgiven you."

"Maybe. I did bribe them with a promise that we could try a different craft tomorrow. We never do two big projects in the same week. This time, I'll make sure there's no glitter involved."

"And maybe keep yourself a little more focused this time, too." Her aunt winked.

"I will. At least, I'll try." Mia shook her head. "I hate feeling so scatterbrained. I'm just so worried about Alex—he sounded pretty stressed out when I called him from the teacher's lounge."

“You’ve said he’s juggling a lot right now, but I’m sure he appreciates your kind words and support.” Aunt Faye gathered her things and slid on her coat. “I don’t wish to add to his already full plate, but we still haven’t received his books for the signing. You may want to check with him on that. I’d hate for them not to arrive in time.”

“No kidding. Shoot, I thought his agent said they’d be here by Monday or Tuesday.”

She grabbed her phone to call him but hesitated. With all that he had going on, did she really want to bother him with this right now? But after hugging her aunt good-bye and finding herself in the quiet, empty bookstore, she knew she had to ask for Alex’s help. This event wasn’t just to support him—it was to help continue their support of the kids down at Riley Children’s Hospital. They were already making a gamble, shifting from their previously successful ornament-decorating event. She hated to add more risk to their future.

Rather than call, though, she decided to send a short text instead. He responded a few minutes later, saying he would send her the email from his agent that had the shipment’s tracking number on it.

“Perfect,” she said to Felix, the fat orange tabby her aunt had taken in a number of years back to be the store’s mouser. He hid during the day, coming out only when the crowds had gone and family remained. He’d hopped up on the checkout counter, tail swatting with annoyance that no one was petting him. “See? A quick text and then I’ll go back to giving him space.”

Space she knew Alex needed. Unfortunately, after having him living under the same roof as her the last two weekends, this space was also making her feel a bit lonely. Which was silly, of course. She’d been on her own with Brooklyn for more than three years now. Surely, she wasn’t getting hung up on a man already.

Forwarded you the email, Alex texted. Let me know if there are any problems.

See? Easy peasy. *Will do! Hope you have a great evening.*

You, too, beautiful.

Grinning like a schoolgirl, she got on the store's computer and logged into her personal email. Sure enough, the message Alex had forwarded her was there. She clicked on the listed tracking number and was rerouted to UPS, who indicated they'd delivered the package yesterday.

Okay, that was weird. Wouldn't her aunt have seen the books if they'd arrived?

Mia rose from the stool behind the checkout counter and rummaged around all the boxes she could find of books that had yet to be shelved. None contained Alex's books. Frowning, she returned to the computer and clicked to expand the UPS tracking details. The box had left New York on Friday, made stops at two facilities on Monday, and then was delivered Monday at two thirty in the afternoon to 1234 N Eddy Street, Suite 4D, South Bend, Indiana.

Books-A-Plenty's address.

She looked to Felix on a grimace. "Houston, we have a problem."



ALEX WENT HOME to sleep in his own bed Wednesday night, needing some time alone to process all that was going on. Right now, he felt like a kid trying to drink from a fire hose. His mother's fall. Her early-onset Alzheimer's diagnosis. His father's insistence on retiring in an incredibly short amount of time. Alex's changing role at work. Texts from Tom that sounded less upbeat than usual. Missing books. The edits he had turned in tonight just under the wire. His upcoming book signing. Mia, who he wanted to focus more of his time and energy on but was falling short this week.

He'd waited years, nearly half a lifetime, for a second chance with her. No one had ever filled his emotional cup the way she did or lifted his spirits with a simple smile like she

could. These past two weekends were some of the best he'd had in years, and the last thing he wanted to do was set aside all he'd worked to get back while he dealt with the storm life had sent his way.

He tried going to bed early to put the day behind him but found he couldn't sleep. Once again, his mind was going a million miles an hour. So, he started on the household chores he'd skipped while snowed in up north, hoping the monotony of it all would relieve some stress and free his mind to tackle the challenge ahead, which so far, he'd only been able to summarize into one word: *balance*. If he was going to be what everyone needed him to be, he would have to find a way to strike a balance between Mia, his family, and work. Oh, and his home—someone had to take care of that, too.

Though, if things continued to progress well with Mia, maybe they could consolidate homes eventually. Why keep two places when all they needed was one? He'd never become attached to his villa—it was a fresh start after a failed marriage and a soft place to land after a long week on the road. Not as soft as Mia's amazing bed, though. Man, he wished he was in it now, with her curled up beside him. Her touch always seemed to ease his worries.

He heard his cell phone ring in the other room. Afraid something else had happened to his mother, he tossed the sponge in his hands aside and hurried to answer it. At seeing the caller ID on its screen, though, Alex's worries fell away.

“Hey, there, beautiful.”

“You really should stop answering like that, you know,” Mia said. “I'm going to get spoiled hearing it.”

He smiled at the blush he could hear in her voice. “Then I'm definitely saying it more, because you deserve to be spoiled and often.”

She laughed. “If you say so. Um, how are things down there?”

“Well, I decided to come home tonight, if that gives you any indication.”

“That bad, huh?”

He started to answer, then caught himself. So far, all he'd admitted to Mia was that his mother had a broken arm and his dad was needing time off work to care for her. After reading through a bunch of pamphlets this morning the doctor had given his father, Alex was even more hesitant to tell Mia about his mother's diagnosis. Depending on the type of dementia his mother had, the chances of it being passed down to him were nearly fifty percent—yet another thing he had to worry about. Hopefully, they would have that answer by the end of the week. If he was lucky, hers wouldn't be that type.

Either way, he knew he couldn't hold off telling Mia all this for long. He needed her wisdom and strength. But he really wanted to have that conversation in person, with her holding his hand.

“Eh, just a little more hectic than normal. We'll get through it, though. How are things up there?”

“That's actually why I'm calling. I clicked on the link you sent me earlier, to track the book package. And it does appear that they were delivered yesterday.”

“Great!”

“Just not to here.”

Of course not. Why would something actually go right for him this week?

“Oh shoot. Can you see where they're at?”

“Yeah, are you ready for this?” Mia said. “They're in South Bend, at Books-A-Plenty.”

Alex groaned. “You have got to be kidding. I swear I told her to change the delivery location. Do I need to run up there Saturday and grab them myself?”

“No, sweetheart, you’ve already got way too much on your plate. Besides, it’s not nearly as far for one of us to run and get it for you. But you might want to have your agent give them the heads-up that it’d been shipped there by mistake. I’d rather not get kicked out for walking in and demanding they hand over a bunch of books.”

“That probably wouldn’t go over too well, huh?” He sighed. “Okay, let me reach out to Sally. I know she’d already sent books there, but she’d promised to send a few dozen to Brooks Books as well.”

“Thank you, Alex. I’m so sorry to have to bother you with all of this.”

He insisted she stop apologizing, then asked her about her day. Listening to Mia tell the horrors of her classroom art project gone wrong soon had him laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes. This—this was why he needed her in his life. She was his sunshine, the warmth he’d been so long without. By the time they wished each other sweet dreams and disconnected, he felt a hundred times better than he had when he’d walked in the door that evening.

Wanting to end the day on a high note, he sent an email to Sally, asking what could be done about the book delivery mix-up, and then headed for bed. His thoughts still on Mia, he soon drifted off to a sound sleep.

Alex woke the next morning at five and went on a run before breakfast. It’d been days since he’d last stretched his legs, and the exercise helped to clear the morning fog from his mind. Fresh from the shower, he grabbed a cup of coffee and sat down at his laptop to check for a response from Sally. Sure enough, she’d written him back shortly after he’d fallen asleep.

Alex,

Please call me as soon as you’re able. Yes, my assistant misunderstood and sent more books to South Bend. When we called to alert them of the mix-up, though, the manager thanked me for sending more since you

had apparently changed your mind and decided to do the signing after all. Are you telling me that is not the case? If so, I need to alert Books-A-Plenty ASAP. They seemed to think you were indeed coming, and that your family was providing cupcakes and punch to their event.

Best,

Sally

His family? Why had B-A-P brought them into the conversation? Sure, he'd mentioned the event to his parents during dinner a number of weeks back, but he'd told them since then that he'd moved the event to Bourbon Falls instead.

No, wait—it wasn't his parents he'd told about the change. It was only his mother.

Oh no.

Alex lowered his coffee mug, empty stomach now filled with dread. His gaze shifted to the pile of mail he'd brought in last night but hadn't had the energy to look through at the time. Poking out from the stack was a rectangular navy envelope, the corner of his parents' unique return address sticker just visible. He fished it from the pile and tore it open to find it contained two items. The first was a short, handwritten note from his mother saying how proud they were of Alex, and that she couldn't wait to stand in line at his first book signing. She had also gotten help from his niece to make invitations for all their friends and family to attend. The second paper was one such invitation, announcing his signing at Books-A-Plenty this coming Saturday from three to six p.m.

“Oh, Mom,” he whispered. “What have you done?”

Chapter Sixteen

“**A**RE YOU SURE you don’t need a ladder?” Mia asked her sister, who was straddling a recliner in the readers’ section of Brooks Books.

It was Friday evening just after closing, and the Brooks family was working to get their store ready for tomorrow’s big event. She and Delaney were hanging holiday streamers along the tops of all their bookshelves, while Aunt Faye and Brooklyn rearranged furniture to make room for Alex’s book-signing table. Gina would deliver their cocoa in the morning, and The Sisters promised to have thawed cookies on site by eight a.m. Despite their early setbacks, everything was finally starting to fall into place.

“Pfft, ladders are for losers,” Del said, stretching to add tape to her section of streamers.

“Or for aunts trying to set good examples,” Mia answered in a singsong tone.

“Oh relax, will you? Besides, if we stop so you can run home to get a ladder, it’s going to slow us down. I thought you wanted to be done before Alex gets up here.”

Mia couldn’t help but smile.

“That’s what I thought,” Del said, grinning. “Now hand me another piece of tape.”

There was no use hiding her excitement over Alex’s expected arrival—everyone knew she was smitten, even Brooklyn. Mia had been trying to play it cool in front of her daughter, but by midweek Brooklyn confessed she’d already figured it out. Which was probably a good thing, since half the town was talking about it. Mia still hated being in the spotlight, but Del had reminded her that theirs was a small

town—something else would come along soon enough to divert everyone’s attention.

“You’re sure Alex is bringing the books with him?” Aunt Faye asked.

“Yep, he said he got it all worked out with his agent, who overnighted another few boxes to him. So long as he makes it here in one piece, the books will be with him.” She laughed. “He even texted a picture of them beside his travel bag inside the car to assure me they hadn’t been forgotten.”

He’d been such a good sport about it all, insisting he take care of everything so no one from the Brooks family had to take time out of their busy schedules and drive up to South Bend. Really, she was just glad to avoid any awkward encounters with the B-A-P staff. No one here felt intense ill will toward them, but feelings were still a little hurt from them duplicating the Bourbon Falls ornament-decorating event.

“And is he getting in tonight or tomorrow?” Aunt Faye asked.

“Tonight,” Del said. “Can’t you tell? She’s practically glowing.”

Brooklyn made a face. “Ugh, maybe it’s a good thing I’m staying over at Emily’s house tonight. I’m not sure I can stomach watching you two acting all lovey dovey all evening.”

The back door squeaked open and shut, and all eyes went to the hall.

“Speak of the devil,” Del said as they waited for the newcomer to appear. But it wasn’t Alex—it was their father.

“Ho, ho, ho! I thought I’d stop in and see how the decorating was coming along.” He gave each of his daughters a peck on the cheek, and a wink to Faye and Brooklyn. “Looking good in here, ladies. So, where will I be sitting tomorrow for my big performance?”

“Over here, Grandpa.” Brooklyn ushered him to the kids’ section, where the blue rocker he’d bought his wife all those

years ago sat before their large, braided rug. Beside the rocker was a small table, and on that stood a well-loved copy of *The Night Before Christmas*. “What do you think?”

“I think it looks perfect.” He turned to offer his girls a watery smile. “Your mother would have been so proud.”

Del stepped forward to give him a hug. “Thanks. We love ya, Pops.”

“Love you, too, sweet pea.” He tucked her under one arm. “And I’m not just saying that because of the gift Santa had stored behind your shop.”

Del frowned. “Gift behind my shop?”

“The big shiny red one. You know I’ve always been partial to red. Not that I was looking, of course.” Their father offered an innocent shrug. “Wouldn’t want Santa to send that one back because I’d been naughty and peeked.”

Wow, he was still stuck on that idea? Del and Mia exchanged a look.

“Dad, I already told you,” Del said, easing out from his embrace. “That was my sales rep’s vehicle, not a Christmas present. A good thing, too, or you would be in trouble for peeking. Speaking of being naughty, aren’t you supposed to be on duty tomorrow? How are you going to play chief and Santa at the same time?”

“Chase volunteered to come in and cover for me while I was at your event. Good practice for our future chief.”

“Ha, like you’re going to retire any time soon,” Del said with a laugh.

“Not until I buy myself a new vehicle. Unless, of course, Santa is being sneaky and just moved my gift.”

Mia shook her head. Sometimes, her father could be incorrigible. “I wouldn’t get your hopes up, Dad. Now, less talking, more working or we’ll be here until midnight getting ready. Here, I’ll walk you out.”

She exchanged a smirk with her sister. Surely, their father didn't think that vehicle parked behind Del's shop was really for him. But what stuck in her mind even more than his silliness was that comment about retirement. If he retired, and Chase became the next chief, what would that mean for Oak Barrel Farms? Could Del really run it on her own?

Mia meant to ask him if retirement was truly in his plans when the back door opened again.

“Alex!”

His face split into a wide smile. “Hey there, beautiful. Chief.”

“Good evening, Alex.” Her father looked between the two of them, standing a respectable distance apart with silly grins on their faces, then sighed. “I guess that's my cue to go.”

“Love ya, Dad.”

“Yeah, yeah, love you, too.” He backed out the door, gaze shifting to Alex. “Take care of my girl.”

“Will do, sir.”

The door closed, and Mia pulled him to her. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” He brushed a hair back from her face. “Talk about a sight for sore eyes.”

She kissed him softly. “Sorry I couldn't be there with you.”

“Nah, it's probably better that you weren't.” He cupped her cheeks and kissed her sweetly. “Besides, what's the saying? Absence makes the heart grow fonder?”

Mia grinned. “Well, mine's pretty fond of you, too.”

His lips found hers again, the kiss slow but deeper this time.

“Ugh, no, it's just Alex,” she heard Del say down the hall. “Hey, when you two are done sucking face, can you bring the books up here? I'd like to get home before the sun comes up.”

Mia pulled back from Alex with a grin. “We’ve been found out. Wait—where are your books?”

“Shoot, I left them in the Rover. Guess I had my priorities backward.”

“Nope, I’d say they were right on the money.” She stretched to kiss him once more. “Here, I’ll help you bring them in.”

“You’d better grab your coat then,” Alex said. “I had to park around the corner. The spots back here were all full.”

“Oh, sorry about that.” She grabbed her coat and followed him out into the cool night air. It was overcast again, the temperatures expected to dip. Selfishly, she hoped for a fresh dusting of snow to make their holiday event that much more magical tomorrow. After the warm-up they’d had this week, most of the snow from last weekend’s freak snowstorm was long gone.

“You are staying at our place tonight, aren’t you?” Mia asked as they stepped back outside.

“Hmm. I mean, if the offer is there...” He winked, leading her toward the road. “I wasn’t sure what your plans were, since this is your weekend with Brooklyn. But I did remember to pick up a new doorknob for your back door.”

“Seriously? You’re my hero.” She wove her fingers through his. “And wouldn’t you know, Brooklyn’s made plans to spend the night at a friend’s tonight. That means if you stay over, we’d have the whole house to ourselves again.”

“Well,” he said, raising her hand to his lips. “How can I possibly say no to that?”

“Besides, after the week you’ve had, you deserve some pampering.”

Alex nodded. “It’s been a doozie, all right.”

His phone buzzed, then buzzed again. On a sigh, he released her hand to check his newest text messages. Mia couldn’t help it—she peeked at the sender’s name.

Her heart sank. It was Jennifer again.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

He frowned and tucked the phone away. “Yep, fine.”

They continued on, no longer holding hands and Alex’s mind still somewhere else. As excited as Mia had been to have him back, his behavior worried her. And the texts. Was it stress or something more?

And who the heck was Jennifer?

She wanted to ask him that but hated to get into a serious conversation after he’d just spent an hour and a half on the road. Besides, he really had had a heck of a week. The guy was probably just tired and stressed.

Too bad her gut was telling her there was something more. A feeling she pushed aside, determined to stay positive and give Alex the benefit of the doubt. So instead of talking about the elephant she sensed in the room, Mia shoved her hands into her coat pockets and followed him around the corner.

The truth would come out eventually.

It always did.



ALEX HAD WANTED to tell Mia about the double-booking debacle. In fact, he’d spent most of his drive to Bourbon Falls rehearsing what he would say. But then they got back to her place and Mia led him straight to her bedroom. Before he knew it, clothes were coming off, her body was on his, and the last thing he wanted to do was rehash the struggles he’d lived through all week.

In fact, she pampered him so thoroughly that for a time, he was able to forget about everything but her.

As he lay in her bed, body spent from lovemaking and his mind taking its first vacation from reality in days, he refused to ruin their perfect night together. Instead, he promised himself that their heart-to-heart would have to happen after the

fact. There was just too much to cover in the short time they had together before the event tomorrow.

The double book signings. His mother's diagnosis. His father's early retirement and how that was affecting his own career. Operation: Imaginary Bambi.

Alex anticipated sympathy and forgiveness for all but the last one, but he knew he needed to come clean about that, too. They had agreed to have the tough conversations as needed, and this would definitely be one of them. They just hadn't set a time limit to when those conversations needed to take place.

Tonight, he was choosing to postpone for her sake as much as his.

He thought briefly about getting up and responding to the emails his editor had texted about earlier, but decided against it. If she couldn't cut him a little slack for not responding as promptly as usual after all he had going on, maybe she wasn't the right editor for him going forward. Sure, she was probably getting pressure from higher-ups at the publisher, but she didn't have to get snippy with him over it. Besides, he'd have time to work on it all tomorrow evening, after the signings were done.

Alex woke the next morning to the sound of Mia's shower running. Tempting as it was, he didn't join her. Instead, he rose and made his way to the other bathroom, giving her the space she needed to get ready while he mentally prepared for the day. By the time she stepped into the kitchen, hair up in some fancy braid and Mia dressed in a colorful holiday sweater, he had a simple breakfast of toast and omelets waiting, along with her beloved chai.

"Have I mentioned how much I love you spoiling me with these amazing breakfasts?"

Alex grinned as she joined him at the kitchen's island. It still felt like a dream sometimes, being here with her.

"Maybe once or twice. And I enjoy doing it, so it's like we both get a little spoiled." He leaned over to kiss her softly.

“You look perfectly festive.”

“Thanks. I know it’s not the sexiest outfit in the world, but it seemed appropriate for our family-friendly event.”

“Very. But I’m not gonna lie, if you added some glasses to the outfit, you’d have that sexy librarian vibe going.”

“Oh?” Mia reached for a pair of readers and slid them on. “You mean like this?”

Alex’s mouth went dry. “Um, Mia? If you don’t want your breakfast to go cold, I suggest you take those off.”

She laughed, seemingly unaware of how serious that statement had been. As she set the glasses aside, Alex shifted in his seat and forced his thoughts to truck specifications and highway weight ratings. Their conversation shifted to the event, which helped to further keep his thoughts under control. He’d never seen her so excited or so antsy. While he showered and readied for his signing, she paced the floors, texting what sounded like half the town.

“Okay, Faye has the doors open. Del is there with a beautiful fresh wreath strung with lights to hang behind the checkout counter. Gina is leaving with the hot chocolate in five, and The Sisters are en route with cookies.” She paused, her gaze scanning the bedroom. “I feel like there’s something I’m forgetting. Decorations, cookies, cocoa, wreaths—”

“Santa?”

“Yes! Santa! I’d better text Dad, make sure he didn’t leave his costume at home...nope, he’s got it. Good.” She resumed her pacing. “Okay, so what else could I be forgetting?”

Alex abandoned buttoning his oxford and stepped from the master bath to catch her as she made her next pass. “Mia, honey, you’ve got this.”

“But—”

“No buts. You’ve planned for weeks, gotten help from all your amazing friends and family, and finished all the prep work. Now it’s time to go and enjoy yourself.”

Worry crinkled her brows. “You think?”

“I know.” He pressed his lips to hers, the kiss soft and lingering.

On a sigh, she stepped back and helped finish buttoning his shirt. “Unfortunately, we probably won’t be able to come back and have any post-event celebration sex. Brooklyn should be home by then.”

Alex grimaced. “Actually, I’ll need to get on the road as soon as it’s over. I promised my parents I would meet them and my aunt and uncle for dinner before they head back to Chicago.”

“Oh.” The happiness on Mia’s features dimmed. “Does that mean they’re not coming to the signing?”

Crap. How was he supposed to answer that without adding another lie?

“To be honest, I’m not sure. Mom said she wanted to be there, but it’ll just depend on how she’s feeling.” *And if she remembers there are two signings, not one.*

“Well, let’s hope she’s feeling the best she has all week so they can come out and support you, too. There you are,” she said, smoothing his shirt, its buttons all neatly in their places.

God, she was beautiful. And caring and passionate and all-around amazing. Once this weekend was over, no matter how crazy his life was about to get, Alex was going give his all to their relationship. That meant no more lies, starting tomorrow. He just prayed she would understand and offer him some grace for the delays.

“Thank you. You’re much faster at that than I am.”

She shrugged, her gaze avoiding his. “Maybe it’s a mom thing.”

“Maybe so. Listen, I’m sorry I got roped into dinner with my family tonight, but if you’re not busy tomorrow, maybe I could swing back by and visit for a while. I should have time to replace the doorknob, too.”

Mia offered him a small smile. “Never apologize for spending time with your family, Alex. Especially with all you have going on right now.”

If you only knew.

“But so far, tomorrow afternoon is wide open. Come to think of it, Brooklyn might be going to catch a movie with her friends in Warsaw.” Mia stretched on her tiptoes to kiss him. “Maybe we can get in that celebration of your accomplishment this weekend after all.”

“How can I say no to that?”

Alex laughed, looked away, and swallowed hard. There was a lot he planned to tell her before their clothes came off again, and some of it might not be well received. But that was tomorrow—no sense in stressing about it today. Right now, he had a role to play in the Brooks Books holiday event, one that would hopefully bring both customers and revenue to their little store. The rest they could sort out later.

He finished dressing and gathered his things, then paused before the mirror over her dresser to check his reflection one last time. Mia came to stand beside him, looking radiant as ever. Her fingers interlaced with his, and he gave them a gentle squeeze.

“Ready?” she asked.

With her by his side, Alex was ready for anything. He prayed this time around, he wouldn’t be so stupid as to drive her away. “Let’s do this.”

Chapter Seventeen

BROOKS BOOKS HAD been putting on holiday events for years, and despite not having their traditional ornament-decorating activity, this year still managed to top them all. Customers from all across the region, new and old, turned out by the dozens, eager to have Alex sign their books and Santa read to their kids. One family drove all the way down from New Buffalo, Michigan.

Even better? Large, beautiful snowflakes began to fall outside just as her father sat down to read. It was just a quick dusting, but Mother Nature really came through for them today.

Though Mia had planned and planned some more, there were two things that caught her by surprise. The first was how amazing a job her father did as Santa. His costume, found at a rental shop in neighboring Warsaw, was perfect and high quality, not like some of the cheaper knockoffs they'd seen at the malls when Brooklyn was a little girl. Then his crew at the fire house had helped dress him, donating reading glasses and just the right amount of stuffing for his midsection. The entire makeover looked so realistic that she hardly recognized him.

And, oh, did he have a ball, taking on the role of Santa.

From the ho ho hos to the bowl-full-of-jelly laughs, one would have thought he'd been playing Santa for years. The kids, of course, ate it up. They listened to his story with rapt attention, then begged for their turn to sit on his lap and tell him what they wanted for Christmas. Though that hadn't been a part of the plan, her father hadn't batted an eye at the requests. He simply set his book aside and asked the kids to form a line. And, because Santa was the one giving directions, they listened. That meant Mia, who had been designated as Santa's assistant, had very little to do besides laugh and hand

out cookies to children who had had their time with the jolly old elf.

She made sure to sneak looks at the rest of the family as she could, checking to make sure everyone had what they needed. It seemed that while the little ones were focused on Santa, their parents browsed, many buying books that they asked to be double-wrapped so their kids wouldn't see the titles they were getting for Christmas. They definitely kept Del and Isaac busy at the cash register. And guests young and old made frequent stops to the cookie and hot chocolate station, manned by Brooklyn and Aunt Faye.

Unfortunately, that left Alex to fend for himself at the signing table. But frequent glances in his direction found him smiling and looking relatively relaxed as he chatted with customers about his books. Though he'd insisted on their way over that he'd be surprised to sign more than a book or two, by the time Santa left, he was down to his last three copies.

"Wow, look at you Mr. Big-Time Author—you're nearly out of books!"

He looked to Mia as she approached, beaming. "I know! Can you believe it?"

"Well, when you write a book about bourbon and do a signing in a town named Bourbon Falls..."

He chuckled. "So, it's kind of like real estate? Location, location, location?"

"Exactly. Did your parents make it yet?"

His smile dimmed. "Uh, no."

And there was surprise number two. Sure, he'd said that it would depend on how his mom was feeling, but what parents wouldn't want to come out and support their son? Mia tried not to judge, since her family was a little more tight-knit than most. But still, this was his first signing. How could they *not* come?

"Aw, Alex, I'm so sorry to hear that."

He shrugged. “It’s all right. I knew it was a longshot, with Mom in the shape she’s in.”

“Well, I hope there’s nothing keeping them from attending your second signing.”

His gaze shifted from hers. “You and me both.”

A couple she knew from town approached his table then, and Mia stepped away so his attention wouldn’t be divided. After seeing that Del and Isaac had a good handle on customers checking out, she decided to offer her assistance at the snacks table.

“He’s doing really well,” Aunt Faye said, tipping her head toward Alex. “Great idea you girls had, to have a book signing.”

“And Grandpa did awesome as you-know-who,” Brooklyn said, who had been all smiles today.

That was another thing Mia loved about the Christmas season—it brought the kid out in everyone, even the moody teens.

“He really did,” she said. “The kids couldn’t get close enough to him when he was reading. In fact, a little girl climbed up in his lap after just a few pages. I stepped forward to help relocate her, but Dad gave me a wink and just kept on reading.”

“Who would have thought?” Aunt Faye laughed. “Something tells me he’s going to become a featured act at this event going forward.”

“Agreed.”

“And did you see the donation jar?” Brooklyn asked.

Mia glanced to the checkout counter and was amazed to see their fish bowl—decorated to look like an ornament, for old time’s sake—nearly full of bills and coins. “Oh my heavens, this really is turning out to be a success. Just think of all the yarn and books we’ll be able to buy for next year!”

“Our town knitters will certainly have their hands full,” Aunt Faye said.

Two o’clock was here before they knew it, and Alex, fresh out of books, was up and on the go. He thanked everyone in her family for putting on such a wonderful event, kissed Mia good-bye, and was gone, hurrying to catch up with his family for dinner. She still felt bad for him that his parents hadn’t been able to come, but at least her family was here supporting him. The others stayed until closing, all breathing a sigh of relief once the OPEN sign was turned to CLOSED.

“We did it!” Del high-fived Isaac and Brooklyn. “Best Brooks Books holiday event ever!”

“I’ll take your word for it, since this is my first one.” Isaac laughed. “But I think I saw the Channel Ten news van outside, so hopefully you guys will get even more exposure now.”

“Quick, pull up their website so we can watch to see if they mention us on the five o’clock news.”

“Did they come inside, though?” Mia asked, helping her aunt break down the snack station. They’d had leftovers after the holiday event and so had left the table set up for their afternoon customers to graze from. “I mean, heck, they could have been grabbing lunch at the Sweet Mash.”

“True,” Isaac said. “I’m not sure if they came in or not. It got pretty crazy there for a while.”

“And crazy is good, honey,” Del said. “Crazy is always good.”

Mia laughed. Leave it to the family rebel to say something like that.

“It’s too bad Alex couldn’t have stayed longer,” Aunt Faye said. “We had plenty of cookies he could have helped eat.”

“Yeah, I was bummed he had to leave, too. But the last time he missed a family dinner, his mother fell and broke her arm. I think he still feels guilty about it, so I didn’t give him any grief about leaving.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll be back soon enough.”

Mia nodded. “Tomorrow, if we’re lucky.”

“Seems you’re rather smitten with him. I’m so happy for you, sweetheart.”

“Thanks, Aunt Faye. And yeah, he’s definitely growing on me.”

“Pfft, growing nothing,” Del said. “You’ve been walking around starry-eyed ever since he showed up here a few weeks ago.”

“Oh, look! There’s Alex!”

Everyone scrambled to crowd around Isaac at the computer monitor. Sure enough, there was Alex on the screen, a large stack of books beside him and a small line of people before him. Had he had that many books with him today? And strange, Mia didn’t remember him having those little clusters of balloons on the table.

“Why does the bottom of the screen say ‘LIVE’?” Brooklyn asked. “Alex left a few hours ago.”

Del shrugged. “Turn up the volume, Isaac. I can’t hear what they’re saying.”

After some clicking, the sound from the news story grew louder.

“...according to store manager Jenn Flora, their event will run until six tonight. But don’t delay, signed copies of best-selling Hoosier author Alex Wellington are going fast. Reporting live from Books-A-Plenty in South Bend, Indiana, this is Carla Sampson with News Channel Ten.”

A round of gasps rang out.

“He didn’t,” Del cried.

And now we know who Jennifer is.

Mia’s vision went red. “Oh, it seems he certainly did.”



ALEX COLLAPSED ONTO his hotel bed Saturday night, opting not to make the drive back to Indy. What a whirlwind day, both physically and emotionally. But the one person he wanted to share it with wasn't here with him. Even worse, she didn't know about the second half of it.

I'll fix that all tomorrow, he told himself, and sent a quick text letting her know he was thinking about her. Hell, when wasn't he? Alex was falling hard and fast for her, just like back in college.

When fifteen minutes went by without a response, it finally dawned on him to check the time. Shoot, it was going on eleven—she'd probably crashed an hour ago. After all, she'd had a whirlwind kind of day, too.

Man, he wished she had been able to go with him to the second event. The store was bigger, his signing table had been fancier and decorated with fancy balloons, and a tripod had been set up with a large poster announcing who he was. In addition to cocoa, there was also a coffee bar and designer cupcakes, compliments of his parents. It was great having them there, his father finally looking proud rather than dismissive at his newfound "hobby," and his mother having the most lucid day she'd had in weeks, per his aunt. And the line of people at one time had snaked nearly back to the entry door—had that extra box of books not accidentally been shipped to B-A-P, they would have run out before the event was over.

Even so, the entire time he felt something was missing. *Someone* was missing.

Mia.

He couldn't wait to tell her that, and the sense of urgency boosted his courage to face the tough conversation ahead.

When no response from Mia came, he texted Tom, checking in to see how his friend was feeling and giving a quick update on the Mia front. He also finally fessed up that he hadn't been entirely truthful with Mia on a few things but was

going to take his advice about being honest and make things right. That was a text he didn't expect a response from this late, but he knew Tom would get it eventually. With his conscience clear for the first time in weeks, Alex drifted quickly off to sleep.

He woke to find Mia had read his text but not responded. That was odd. Though maybe she was at church and didn't want to be texting during the sermon? He waited until eleven fifteen to try again. She should be out by then.

Good morning, beautiful! Headed your way soon. Is your afternoon still open for me to visit?

Sure, was her response.

Sure? Okay, something was wrong. Was she mad that he'd left so quickly after the event yesterday? She'd seemed okay with it at the time, so what had changed?

Maybe she knows.

He brushed that thought aside. There was no way she could have known about the second signing unless someone had driven up, seen him, and reported back. Oh no—he hadn't even thought of that possibility. Though, what were the chances?

Rather than spend the next few hours worrying—he needed to time his arrival in Bourbon Falls as though he'd driven up from Indy—he found a cute little coffee shop near the Notre Dame campus to review and respond to the most recent round of comments from his editor. It was something he should have done days ago, but with all he had going on at home, there simply hadn't been time. And despite her hounding him to respond, Alex was relieved to find he had very little to review. Apparently, she loved his addition of Tippy Barrel Bourbons to the manuscript, and once he responded to her handful of remaining comments, she would send it on for the next round of edits. If all went well, its publication date was set for late June. Perfect.

Alex knocked out a few work emails, started a to-do list for the continuation of his hurried transition to CEO, and then called it a day. Work could wait. Right now, he had some confessions to make and his girl to hold.

The drive to Bourbon Falls was quick and painless, the light snow they'd received yesterday long since cleared by salt and plow. Alex spent the forty-minute drive rehearsing his confession speech, trying to mentally prepare for how Mia might react. Hopefully, her sympathetic heart would see past his mistakes and make room for some grace. Because after this, he never wanted to lie to her again. It was a promise he intended to keep.

Brooklyn's car wasn't in the driveway when he pulled in, and anticipation grew in his chest. If they had their talks fast enough, maybe there would be time for makeup sex. Hell, maybe Mia wouldn't be mad at him at all and it would just be long-time-no-see sex. Or "hey, it's Sunday" sex. So long as it had sex in it, he would be game.

Confession first. Then the fun stuff.

Alex trotted up the front steps, rapped on the door, and waited. Waited some more. Okay, maybe he should have grabbed his coat from the car. He knocked again, a little louder this time, and rubbed his hands together to keep warm. When the door finally opened, the gleeful face he was used to being greeted by was gone, replaced by a cool, distant Mia.

Dread filled his chest. What could have possibly happened?

"Hey there, beautiful." Her right brow ticked higher. "Uh, can I come in?"

"Sure." She waved him in but remained by the door. "Wasn't sure if you would show or not."

He frowned, remaining in the entryway as well. "Did you not get my message that I was heading out soon?"

"I did. I just wasn't sure if I should believe it or not."

“Why wouldn’t you—?”

Mia held up her phone. On its screen was a picture of him signing books. But the scene wasn’t one from Brooks Books. Rather, it appeared to be captured from a live news report...at Books-A-Plenty.

Alex felt his cheeks catch fire.

“You saw that, huh?”

Mia tucked her phone in a back pocket, then crossed her arms. “Really, Alex? That’s how you’re going to respond? ‘You saw that, huh?’”

He’d seen that look before, the silent fury burning just below the surface. It’d been many years, but damn, he’d hoped to never be the source of it again. Or on the receiving end.

“Let’s just say, I was hoping to tell you about it myself.”

She gave him a flat look. “I guess you should have thought about that before posing with *Jennifer* for Channel Ten’s reporter.”

Who the heck was Jennifer? Did she mean Jenn, their happily married to another woman store manager? Also, he didn’t even recall seeing the reporter or any cameras. But then, the crowd was much larger at Books-A-Plenty than in Bourbon Falls—a fact he chose to keep silent on for now.

“Yes, you’re right, of course. I didn’t think that far ahead. And it was completely stupid on my part not to tell you. But there was this big miscommunication with my parents, and by the time I found out about it, it was too late to back out.”

“Alex, you told us you canceled the Books-A-Plenty signing two weeks ago. Or was that just lip service?”

Oh no. The jabs were starting to come out. He prayed for strength and clarity of his words.

“I did, and I made sure to tell my mom about it. But, well, there’s something else that I haven’t told you yet. It’s

something I've been struggling with all week. I didn't want to even bring it up until I'd had time to process."

Her eyes narrowed. "Which is?"

"Can we?" He motioned for the couch, and at her nod he took a seat at one end and watched her reluctantly take a seat at the other. Fair enough, him being in the doghouse and all. Hopefully, it would be short-lived.

"When I finally made it to my parents' on Monday, my mother was sleeping in her recliner and Dad was asleep nearby on the couch. He must have heard me come in, because he woke and asked that I not wake her. Dad filled me in on the fall, then dropped a second bomb on me. Mia, my mother's been diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease."

The angry set to her brows shifted to shock. "Wow, Alex, I'm...so sorry to hear that."

"Thank you. I didn't want to believe it, you know? My mom was always the organized one in our family. The one making plans for everyone else then ensuring we stuck to them. But once Dad told me about her diagnosis, some recent miscommunications started to make more sense. Like the first weekend I was here—I'd told her about my car issues and that I wouldn't make it back for Sunday dinner. She didn't relay that to Dad, who was all sorts of put out because he thought I'd just blown it off. Which, by the way, I don't ever do."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?"

There was an edge of hurt to her voice. "Because I was scared. Scared for my mom but also scared for me. Some types of early dementia have a high risk of being passed down to the next generation. I worried that if you found out about Mom's diagnosis..."

"That I wouldn't want to be with you? Alex." Mia sighed. "I'm sorry that you're going through all of this, and if it had been me, I'm sure I would have been scared, too. But I can't help you through these tough times if I don't even know about them."

He nodded, fighting to clear the lump in his throat. “It’s just...I just got you back and didn’t want to lose you again.”

“Well, lying is about the only way to guarantee this won’t work,” she said with a humorless laugh. “Which leads us back to yesterday.”

“Oh, right. Well, that wasn’t exactly a lie, more like a truth I’d planned to tell you after the fact.” Her look darkened again. “I swear, I didn’t even know about it until Thursday.”

“Thursday! You kept it from me since Thursday?”

“Are you kidding? After all the work you’d put into your event and how excited you were when I got into town on Friday, there was no way that I was going to rain on your parade.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “If you’d told me as soon as you knew, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.”

“But the whole reason it happened was because my mother forgot I’d changed locations, and I hadn’t told you about her condition yet. Apparently, in a lucid moment a few weeks back, she asked my niece to help make invitations for the book signing. They mailed them out to family and friends, then ordered balloons and designer cupcakes. That’s why my agent shipped your box of books to B-A-P—because the store told her I’d changed my mind. But I hadn’t—my mother had just gotten the information mixed up.”

“What a mess.” She ran a hand over her hair. “Again, if you’d just been honest with me from the start, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. And I get it, you were processing, but none of this explains another item you’ve been keeping from me.”

Alex froze. How? How had she found out about the Rover?

“I was going to tell you that next.”

“Well, I’m all ears. Because the other lies don’t even matter if you don’t have a good explanation for this one.”

Alex felt sweat form at his hairline. One misstep and he was done for. Suddenly, his perfectly rehearsed speech evaporated.

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

“I see,” said Mia. “Here, why don’t I help you get started? Who is Jennifer?”

Alex frowned. “Why do you keep bringing up Jennifer?”

Mia threw her hands up. “And why do you keep acting like she doesn’t exist? You get texts from her all the time!”

“Have you been looking at my text messages?”

Her cheeks fanned red. “Maybe. It was an accident at first. You were in the restroom and your phone was by me on the couch. It buzzed, I looked.”

“Now who’s been keeping secrets?” Alex barked a laugh. Oh, the irony. “Well, if you’d *asked*, Jennifer is my book editor, and she’s been on me for a week now to finalize our edits so my latest book can go onto the next round of editing.”

Mia hugged her midsection. “Oh.”

“Geez, Mia, did you really think I was seeing someone else? After all the time we’ve spent together lately?”

“I didn’t know what to think, okay? I’m not as trusting as I used to be. That’s what happens when your husband cheats on you.”

“Well, I’m not Greg. And for the record? I wasn’t eyeballing your phone every time you walked away from it.”

Mia turned from him, and Alex instantly regretted what he’d said. They’d both promised not to have any more shouting matches, and now both had raised their voices. He dragged a hand down his cheek and reined in his temper.

“I’m sorry I was out of line on that one.”

She shook her head. “No, I deserved that, I suppose.”

Dammit, he wanted her to look at him. To slide closer so he could hold her hand and tell her everything was going to be okay. But he still had one confession to make. Would this one set her over the edge?

“Listen, Mia, I’m not seeing anyone else, okay? There is no one else out there that I would even want to see more than you. No one on the entire planet. There’s only one person I want to spend my days with, and it’s you. It’s always been you.”

She turned her face toward him. “Really?”

“Yes, really. I swear it.”

Her features softened. “Oh, Alex—”

The front door burst open, and Chief Brooks strode inside. “Stop! You’re making a terrible mistake!”

Mia jumped to her feet. “Dad? What’s going on? What are you talking about?”

He looked from her to Alex, and confusion twisted his expression. “Alex?”

“Sir.”

Chief Brooks shook his head. “I-I’m sorry. It’s just—” He shook his head again. “The red Land Rover in the drive—it’s yours?”

Uh-oh. Mia’s expression had cooled once more. “Yes, sir, it is.”

“Oh, I see.” The chief nodded. “I, uh, never mind. There seems to have been a misunderstanding.”

“Yes, those seem to be going around today,” his daughter said, her arms now crossed over her chest.

The chief apologized for interrupting and left, pulling the door shut behind him. The silence was deafening.

“There was no deer, was there, Alex?” Her voice was soft and eerily calm.

“Now, Mia—”

“*Was there?*”

It was no use lying, the truth had already come out. Alex hung his head. Things were about to get even messier.

“No.”

“So you didn’t need to stay here all weekend, waiting for the rental place to open. In fact, you didn’t rent a car at all, did you? Did you?”

God, he felt like such a schmuck. “No, but Del—”

“Don’t bring my sister into this. She’s not the one sitting in my living room, revealing all the lies they’ve told me.” She shook her head. “I sure hope you enjoyed yourself these last few weeks, buddy, because the fun is over.”

Over? Oh no. God, no. “Mia, wait. I can explain.”

“Yes, you’ve done a lot of that today.” She tipped her head to one side. “Question is, how can I possibly believe anything you say anymore?”

Panic wove like ice through his veins. Tom had been right all along. But surely he could still find a way to make this right.

“Mia, please. Just hear me out. This whole thing started because—”

“Stop, Alex. Just stop.” Her voice broke and lower lip quivered. She turned from him, her voice barely above a whisper. “I need you to go.”

“I was going to tell you,” he said, the confession sounding weak even to his own ears.

“Now you don’t have to.” She hugged herself tighter. “In fact, you don’t ever have to tell me anything again.”

“What? Mia, please.”

She shook her head, still refusing to meet his gaze. He'd thought their shouting match in college had been difficult, but this? This was so much worse.

“Just go.” Her voice wavered.

It would kill him to see her cry, so Alex turned to go. He felt like everything was happening in slow motion, the idea that he'd blown it—again—almost surreal. This couldn't be happening. They'd grown so close to one another; surely she didn't want to throw it all away. He kept waiting for Mia to have a change of heart and call out for him to stop, for him to come back inside so they could work things out.

But she didn't.

And the sob he heard as he closed the door behind him haunted Alex the entire way home.

Chapter Eighteen

MIA DID WHAT she always did when her life imploded—she went to her closet and cried. Why? Why had she let herself get caught up in such a fairy-tale-like romance? She should have known better. Should have never given love another chance.

When would she finally get through her thick head that there wasn't a real Prince Charming in her future?

What hurt the most was, after learning of Alex's multiple careful omissions, she wasn't sure if anything he'd ever told her was even true. The thought nauseated her, and threw Mia right back into the fire she'd crawled out of three years ago. At least there was no other woman this time—a fact she'd learned only after coming clean about her peeking at his phone.

Alex had been right on that one item: She'd jumped unfairly to conclusions about who Jennifer might be to him. Clearly, her scars from the divorce weren't fully healed. Now she had a whole new set to add to the collection. Who knew how long it might take for this batch to heal?

Because losing Alex, again, sure hurt like hell.

The bright side to their breakup—and calling it a bright side was a serious stretch—was that she'd had three years of practice under her belt for hiding her hurt. Which meant by the time Brooklyn arrived home from the movies, Mia's eyes were no longer red and her sniffles were long gone. She made up an excuse as to why Alex wasn't joining them for dinner, and then spent the rest of the evening up in her craft room, doing her best to forget he was even alive.

Which, of course, was impossible to do, sitting in the room where it had all begun.

Still, she persisted, knowing the pain would eventually pass. Work the next day was filled with questions in the

teacher's lounge about her new man and the book signing, which she answered as vaguely as possible. There was no sense in telling everyone of their breakup—the town would figure it out in another weekend or two, when his car was no longer making its appearance in her driveway.

Her family, however, was harder to deceive. She managed to bluff her way through a shift at the bookstore Monday evening, and she stayed mum on the whole thing with Brooklyn, too. But within half an hour at the farm with her father and sister Tuesday night, Delaney had put the pieces together.

“Wait, did you two break up?” Del demanded as the three of them worked to herd the newest batch of ducklings into separate pens. “What happened? You guys were perfect for each other!”

Mia's father stopped what he was doing in the next pen and looked in their direction. Great, the proverbial cat was out of the bag.

“Thanks for broadcasting the news, Delaney.”

Her sister planted a fist on one hip. “It's just me and Pops. Besides, it would have gotten out eventually.”

“Well, maybe I'm not ready for it to be out. Did you ever stop to consider that?”

“Girls.”

Both sisters quieted.

“Did my interruption have anything to do with it?” their Dad asked, his voice softer now.

“It added fuel to a fire already burning,” Mia said. “But it was by no means your fault. Alex admitted to keeping some things from me these past few weeks. Some I could forgive, but when I found out he lied about hitting a deer so he would need a place to stay for the weekend, I was done. Though, I have no idea how he knew to hide his car behind Del's shop.”

Del released another duckling into the pen before her. “I told him to park it there.”

“*What?* You mean you knew about it all along?”

Crap. Alex had tried to bring Del into the conversation, but Mia had cut him off.

“Of course I did. I knew you’d never see it back there. But you”—Del pointed to their father—“you, I didn’t see coming. We love ya, Pops, but you know we couldn’t really afford to buy you a Land Rover for Christmas.”

He grinned. “Hey, one of these days either of you could hit the Powerball.”

Del laughed. Mia found the conversation anything but amusing.

“But why, Delaney? Why would you help him concoct a lie like that?”

“Actually, I did all the concocting. A chance with you if he swapped signing locations from South Bend to our store. Alex wasn’t game at first, knowing you were already still grouchy with him for something that happened, like, seventeen years ago. I mean, sheesh, Mi, let it go already.”

Okay, there was some truth to the absurdity of her longtime anger, but still...

“So, you thought *lying* would make it all better?”

“If that’s what it took to get you to start living again!” Del’s voice echoed through the rafters, sending ducks and ducklings scurrying. She looked to the floor, cleared her throat, then met her sister’s gaze. But it wasn’t anger on her brow anymore. It was concern. “You’d given up, Mi. I could see it in your eyes when Isaac and I were around. The forced smiles, the longing gazes out the windows. It was like, you were happy for us but had condemned yourself to never finding love again.”

Mia swallowed hard. As much as she wanted to say otherwise, her sister’s words rang true. How could they not,

when Del knew her better than anyone?

“When I walked up to find you and Alex in a standoff at the bookstore that first night, your chin raised high and cheeks all red, I knew he was the one who could bring you back to life. To make you remember that you’re not just a single mom with a douche of an ex, but a beautiful, grown woman who deserves to be happy as much as anyone else. Hell, maybe more.”

Mia turned away, hiding a fresh round of tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks. “But you knew how much a lie could hurt me.”

“No, I know how much *cheating* could hurt you. Little fibs happen all the time; you just don’t always know it.” Del stepped around her and pulled Mia into her chest. “Besides, like I told Alex—this one’s on me. And since we’re blood, well, you’ll forgive me eventually.”

What was she going to do with her rebel middle sister? Probably the only thing she knew how. To love her. On a sigh, she raised her arms to return the embrace.

“So, none of it was his idea?”

“Nope.” Del drew back and offered her a tissue from a coat pocket. “But I didn’t have to twist his arm too hard. After all, I was offering him the chance to win back the thing he wanted most: you.”

Was it true? Had Alex been so desperate to win her back that he would agree to one of Del’s crazy ideas? Yes, Mia could believe that. After living with Del her entire life, she knew just how compelling her sister could be. If that was the case, then maybe he hadn’t lied about everything. Maybe he really had fallen for her all those years ago and had never fully gotten over her.

Just like she’d never fully gotten over him.

“What do I do now?” Mia whispered.

“Ha, well, for that bit of advice you’re going to have to ask Pops. I’m only good at causing trouble, not making it right.”

With that, Del winked and headed for the door. Mia shook her head as she watched her sister go, then turned to their father, who’d been quiet while the sisters said their piece.

“I take it you were the one to coach her through that rough patch with Isaac?” she asked.

He nodded. “Though I’m not sure my advice was all that extraordinary.”

“Well, right now, I could use even the non-extraordinary kind.”

They both took a seat on a bale of straw nearby, and her father pulled her into his side.

“You liked him, huh?”

Mia nodded.

“And not just a fling?”

“Dad, I—”

He held up a hand. “I’m not looking for explanations. I’m checking for sincerity.”

“Oh.” She dropped her head onto his shoulder. “No, he wasn’t just a fling. For Alex and me, it’s always been easy, but never the right time. I had a crush on him in college but refused to acknowledge it because I was already seeing Greg.”

Her father grunted. “If I’d known that, I would have paid this Alex guy to steal you away.”

“Stop,” Mia said, laughing. “Anyway, I had no idea, but he felt the same way about me. So, when he came around again a few weeks ago, we fell back into that easy friendship. But it went further this time. I started falling for him.”

“And that scared you.”

She frowned. “No, he lied. About multiple things.”

“Were they malicious? Adulterous?”

“No, but...a lie’s a lie. No matter the reason, they’re wrong.”

Because lies led to leaving. She’d learned that hard lesson once, and it was one time too many.

He nodded. “I see. So me pretending to be Santa yesterday, that was wrong as well?”

She shifted away from him. “Okay, now you’re just being silly.”

“Am I?” He smiled. “You’ve always been a black-and-white child, Mia. Never a fan of the gray areas. But with love, there needs to be a little room for creative reasoning. From the sounds of it, Alex did some of these things to spare your feelings, yes?”

“Allegedly.”

“Then believe him. You’re a smart cookie, and I have no doubt you would have sniffed out a compulsive liar on the first date.”

“So, you’re telling me I should just turn a blind eye to it all?”

“What I’m saying, daughter, is that love isn’t always black and white, right and wrong. Sometimes poor judgment happens, and when it does, you need to stop and think. Shouting or the silent treatment, they might feel like the right thing to do in that moment, but they don’t help in the long run. Tackling the hard conversations are what strengthens a relationship. But to have them takes courage, patience, and sometimes a healthy dose of grace.”

Mia’s shoulders fell. Grace. She’d offered Alex a smidge when he’d shared about his mom, but once the fake deer accident came out, she’d retracted it as quickly as those magicians who yanked the tablecloth out from under a four-place dinnerware setting.

Maybe her father was right. Maybe she was scared. Not about the lies, but of getting her heart broken again. Too late.

And in the process, she'd ended up breaking someone else's heart for the second time.

Alex would be a fool to take her back after the way she'd behaved.

"But he's gone, Dad. I blew it. I sent him away."

"Maybe so." He rose to his feet and offered her his hand. "Or maybe you two just need a little more practice in learning how to communicate."

Practice communicating?

To make this work, they would definitely need plenty of that. And a little more grace on her part. Okay, maybe a lot more, given all that he had going on right now. But would Alex even give her a second chance?

Only one way to find out.

"Could Brooklyn maybe stay at the farm with you this weekend? I think I've got a road trip in my future."

"Of course. We love having her here, and you know that."

Mia hugged her father. "Thanks, Dad. For everything."

"Anytime, MiMi. Now get on home so you can start planning that trip."



ALEX RETURNED TO Indy, feeling utterly defeated. The lie he agreed to run with about the deer may have helped get his foot in the door with Mia but ultimately had cost him everything. He should have known better.

That, of course, was the worst part of it all. Alex wasn't a liar by nature. Now he had intimate knowledge of the destruction lies could bring. He'd had her, and he'd lost her.

Again.

As if his week hadn't already gotten off to a terrible start, he received a text Tuesday afternoon from Tom's wife letting him know that Tom had been moved to hospice. Hoping to see

his friend and mentor one last time, he told his father he was taking a few days off, packed his bags, and headed for Evansville.

Alex hated this time of year in Indiana. The sun came up late and set early, bringing a shortage of much-needed sunshine to his soul. Now his sunshine was even more depleted because Mia was gone, too. He'd left her alone as she requested, but he'd held out hope that maybe her temper would cool and she might reach out to him. Maybe a text saying she'd reconsidered and forgiven him or a call to admit she missed him. But neither had happened, and he wasn't sure what to do next.

Should he give up? Go back and beg for forgiveness? The debate went round and round inside his head as he made the three-hour drive south, racing against the clock to see his friend.

By the time he reached the hospice center, it was well past eleven. Alex texted Tom's wife, praying it wasn't too late, and was relieved to discover she was still there. Connie met him at the door, dark circles under her eyes. She forced a smile as he exited the Rover, but as soon as he pulled her in for a hug, the waterworks began.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered.

She nodded and drew back, dabbing a tissue around her eyes. "You tell yourself it's coming, but that never makes it any easier."

"How's he doing?"

"Tom is Tom." A tiny smile tugged at her lips. "Go on in, he's waiting for you."

"He's still awake?" Alex asked.

"He's in and out of consciousness. Don't take it personally if he falls asleep on you in midsentence. They've got him on some heavy medication to ease the pain."

Alex nodded, drew in a deep breath, and headed inside. As hard as it had been to face Mia this weekend, he'd take that over this any day. He stood outside the closed door to Tom's room, trying to mentally prepare himself for what would be waiting for him on its other side. Before he reached for its handle, the door swung open and a forty-something nurse stepped out, her smile warm and full of compassion.

"Oh, are you Alex?" she asked.

He nodded, his gaze shifting past her to the tiny frame of a man being swallowed up by the lone bed inside.

"Well, you're in luck. Tom's in rare form tonight." Tom said something Alex couldn't quite make out, and the nurse's smile widened. "Go on in, and if you need anything, just press the buzzer by his nightstand."

"Thank you."

Unlike the hospital rooms he'd been in before, this space was small but welcoming, the furniture a dark cherry and the walls a warm, sunny yellow. A large TV hung in one corner of the room, and a wide window took up the wall next to it. A floral loveseat sat beneath the window, and a leather recliner took up the room's other corner. Beside that was a door leading to an adjoining bathroom.

When he'd run out of things to look at, his gaze slid cautiously to Tom. Even now, he found himself unprepared. Tom had lost even more weight than when last he'd seen him, the man virtually skin and bones. What remained of his hair was thin and wispy, his skin a palish gray. An IV connected him to a drip bag hanging on a stand beside him, as if the rest of the view wasn't already sending out signals of impending doom.

"Wow, Alex, you look like hell."

Alex looked to Tom's trademark ornery grin, and the two busted out laughing. His friend might not look the same as he used to, but the fire was still lit somewhere inside.

“You, on the other hand,” Alex said, “look like a million bucks.”

“Do I? Good, because this spa treatment is gonna cost somewhere around that.” Tom winked, then drew a slow breath in and out. “Thanks for stopping by.”

“You know I had to.”

“Eh, not everyone does so well with this stuff. But I’m glad you did.”

Alex sat on the edge of the recliner beside him and asked, “How you feeling?”

Tom’s thin shoulder raised and fell. “Like I’m ready to be done with the damn cancer.”

“You scared?”

“Maybe a little. But I’m ready. Got all my affairs in order, told everyone I needed to that I love ’em. Love you, too, buddy.”

Alex grinned. Yep, he was on some good meds. “Ditto.”

“Yeah, it sucks, checking out early, but I lived a full life and I’m leaving with no regrets.” His gaze settled on Alex. “So, what happened?”

“With Mia?” At Tom’s nod, Alex sighed. He hadn’t come here to dump his worries on his dying friend. “I screwed up. Let her sister talk me into lying about my car, then I wasn’t forthcoming about Mom’s Alzheimer’s. By the time I tried to make things right, the lies had snowballed. She asked me to leave Sunday, and I haven’t heard from her since.”

Tom shook his head. “I warned you—the ladies don’t like lies.”

“Yeah, I know that now. I just...” He ran a hand through his hair. “I didn’t want to miss my chance with her, and it blew up in my face.”

“Sounds like it.” Tom’s eyelids grew heavy. “So, what’s your next move?”

Alex shrugged. “No idea. She told me to go, but...”

“Like I said, Alex. No regrets.”

His eyelids slid shut, and Tom’s breathing smoothed into a slow, steady rhythm. He seemed to be a man truly at peace, something Alex envied.

No regrets.

After straying from that mantra these past few days, he realized it was time to dust it off and try again. Hopefully, Mia would give him a second chance. But he’d never know if he didn’t get off his pouty ass and give it his all.

This time, his words would align with his actions, and he’d find a way prove to her just how much she meant to him. Yes, how much he loved her.

No. More. Regrets.

He stayed with Tom a while longer, chatting when he was awake and letting him sleep as he needed. When Connie reappeared to find Tom dozing yet again, she suggested they let him sleep. Reluctantly, Alex rose and gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

“Godspeed, my friend.”

Chapter Nineteen

HER FAMILY WAS right. She did deserve a second chance at love, but to really achieve a successful relationship, Mia needed to have those tough conversations; just avoiding a shouting match wasn't enough. Plus, she missed Alex something fierce. Her bed felt too empty, her kitchen too dreary. And her heart, it hurt all the time.

If this is what it would always feel like, letting fear guide her decisions, it was high time to take back the wheel.

She confessed to Brooklyn what had happened on Wednesday, and was surprised at the subsequent tongue-lashing her teen doled out. It seemed even Brooklyn had grown attached to Alex and his charming ways. And, she made sure to add, his amazing cooking skills, too.

“Sounds like I need to find a way to make things right, huh?” Mia said.

“You'd better,” Brooklyn said. “Christmas is nearly here. It would suck for you both to be sad on Christmas.”

That it would.

But what could she do to make things right? A simple call or text just didn't seem to be enough. Anyone could do that.

No, she needed something that would mean more to him. Something to prove that she was putting her selfish fears aside and fighting for him. Fighting for *them*.

Another day passed with zero solid ideas coming to mind.

“What about showing up on his doorstep in nothing but a trench coat?” Del asked Thursday night.

Mia was volunteering at the Christmas tree lot, letting bygones be bygones. Their tree and wreath inventory was dwindling, adding a sense of urgency to Mia's quest. Alex

shouldn't have to be alone on Christmas; Mia didn't want to be, either.

“Tempting, but what if he's not there? It could get chilly standing on his porch waiting. Or, my luck, I'd go to the wrong door.”

“Then your peep show would make someone else happy.”

Del laughed. Mia cringed.

“How about we keep coming up with ideas, okay?”

“Spoilsport,” Del grumbled.

“What about sending an anonymous invite to one of those horse-drawn carriage rides through Indy?” Isaac asked, who was filling in for Chase tonight. “That could be romantic.”

“It could, but I have no idea what his schedule looks like.”

“Trust me—no one can work twenty-four seven. I've tried.”

Mia laughed. “True. If only there was a way for me to know what he had planned.”

She pulled out her phone and cued up Facebook, something she'd done her best to avoid all week. Alex's account wasn't blocked, so it was easy to see he hadn't posted any angry memes decrying modern love. That was a good sign. In fact, he'd only posted one thing all week, it's timestamp an hour earlier.

Tom Garrison's obituary.

Mia said a small prayer for his family, then looked to her own.

“I know what I have to do.”



ALEX SAT IN his Rover outside the Peaceful Haven funeral home in Evansville Sunday afternoon, trying to psyche himself up into going inside. With Tom's prognosis as it was, he and his wife had the services planned months ago. Thankfully, it

hadn't arrived as early as expected. Now that Alex was here, though, reality was threatening to crash down all around him.

Tom was gone.

His mother was losing her mind.

He'd lost Mia.

Alex's gaze shifted to the twinkling lights of holiday decorations on a large evergreen standing in the building's lobby, offering a cheery greeting to the mourners.

Yeah, merry freaking Christmas to us.

He waited in his vehicle, watching the minutes tick by. The service started at one, with a viewing one hour prior. And as much as he would have liked to skip the viewing, he knew deep down that he needed this, needed closure. On a heavy sigh, he stepped out into the drizzly December day and headed inside to pay his respects to his friend and mentor.

His father had offered to accompany him. Alex had thanked him for the offer but suggested he stay in Indy with Mom, make sure she didn't overdo it with her arm still in that sling. Most days, she did well with it, but sometimes her memory would slip and they'd find her trying to remove the sling so she could reach for something she shouldn't. Now, he was wishing he had brought them both with him.

Anything not to be alone.

As Alex stepped into the parlor, the smell of funeral home hit him. It was the same at every location he'd ever been to, some subtle potpourri intending to soothe but only serving to remind all those present that they were here to honor the deceased. For the first time, he found himself wondering how long it would be before he was here paying respects to his own family.

To his mom.

Alex stood before that damned Christmas tree, hands curled into fists, refusing to lose it before he'd even made it

into the room where Tom's family waited. He could do this. He could do this.

Someone walked in behind him, and a rush of cold air swept past Alex. On the breeze was the faintest hint of cinnamon and vanilla, and his mind immediately went to Mia.

Oh, the cruelty of it all.

He closed his eyes, trying to rein in his emotions as he listened for their footsteps to pass him by. But no sound followed. A moment later, a hand lit on his shoulders.

He glanced sideways to find Mia standing beside him, concern on her brow.

He just stared, stunned. She was here? But why? What had changed?

"You okay?"

Alex shook his head, too caught up in emotion to say anything. Slowly, as though she feared she might spook him, Mia's arms circled around him. At her touch, Alex felt a whole host of additional emotions surge through him. Support. Strength. Courage.

Love.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"I'm here," she said softly, stroking his back. "And here is where I'm going to stay, until you tell me to go."

Alex pulled her tighter to him, resting his cheek on her crown. "Fat chance of that happening."

"I'm so sorry I overreacted, Alex."

"And I'm sorry I lied. It won't happen again, Mia. I promise." He drew back to cup her cheeks, drinking the sight in. "I love you."

Her gaze grew watery. "I love you, too."

He kissed her softly, then pulled her to his chest. They stood there a long moment, Alex drawing strength from his ray

of sunshine. A thought dawned on him, then, one he felt he needed to clear up.

“Surprises are still okay, though, right?” He met her wary gaze. “I mean, life would get pretty boring without the excitement of a surprise or two now and then.”

Mia chuckled. “Yes, of course surprises are okay. Just try not to go overboard, all right? My orderly heart might not be able to handle too many at once.”

“Fair enough.” His gaze shifted to the end of the receiving line, slowly receding into the next room. He’d faltered before, but with Mia at his side, this time he was ready. “You know, Tom warned me not to fib to the ladies.”

“Tom sounded like a pretty smart guy. What else did he tell you?”

“To live a life with no regrets. It’s what set me in motion to come back for you.”

“And I’m so glad you did.” She stretched on her tiptoes to kiss him softly.

You and me both.

Alex took Mia by the hand. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to his family. They’re pretty amazing people, too.”

He looked to the star, glimmering at the top of the tree.
And Tom, wherever you are, thank you.

Epilogue

MIA STOOD IN her living room, straightening ornaments while waiting for Alex to finish his shower. So far, her first Christmas without Brooklyn there hadn't been nearly as awful as she'd expected, all thanks to Alex. He'd driven up to Bourbon Falls the afternoon of Christmas Eve and cooked them a gourmet meal before Brooklyn left for her dad's house. Then he and Mia spent the evening sharing wine and stories from Christmases past before the fire. Once the yawns started, he led her to bed where they'd made love and fallen asleep in each other's arms.

Talk about a fairy-tale ending to the eve of her favorite day of the year.

They'd slept in the next morning, no one needing to rise early and play Santa or set gifts out under the tree. It felt... nice. Different, but nice. A precursor to what it would feel like when Brooklyn went to college. Which sent Mia into a brief panic at the further realization that college was less than two years away.

"We can get through it," he'd said. "Together."

Oh, how she loved that word.

"Are we late?" Alex called from the master suite.

Mia looked from Whitey the tree to her mantle clock. "Not yet."

He emerged from the hall a few minutes later, hair still damp but otherwise ready to go.

"Sorry, love. I lost track of time in the shower."

Mia grinned. She loved his new term of endearment, too. "Then it's a good thing I didn't take you up on your offer to

get back in the shower with you. We never would have made it to Christmas dinner.”

“I mean, if you’re not hungry…” He waggled his brows.

She laughed and gave him a playful swat. “Behave. And remember—good things come to those who wait.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her breathless. “Waiting is overrated.”

“You’re as bad as my sister.” She gave him one last peck and eased from his embrace. “Speaking of which, we need to go. If she and Isaac get there with Louie before we do, he might eat both our meals. And that would be a tragedy. I’m no cook, but my dad? He’s amazing.”

“My mom was always the amazing cook in our house,” Alex said, his smile waning. “I’m sure going to miss her holiday meals.”

“Don’t count her out just yet. We’re all hoping her new medication can help slow the disease.”

He met her gaze and nodded. “You’re right. Gotta stay positive. Even so, it might be a good idea to get her to write down some of the secret recipes only she knows how to prepare.”

They climbed into his Rover and made the trek over to the Brooks family farm. Sure enough, Del’s truck was already parked in the drive. So was a red Audi SUV Mia didn’t recognize.

“That’s funny, I don’t remember Dad saying anything about him inviting additional guests.”

“Uh-*huh*.”

She threw him a confused look. “What do you mean, uh-*huh*?”

Alex smirked. “Really, Mia? You want me to believe my parents found their way here all on their own?”

“Your parents are here?”

Mia grimaced at the panic in her voice. Alex, however, just laughed.

“Okay, so I guess it’s as much a surprise to you as it is to me. But don’t worry—they’re going to love you.”

“If you say so.”

“I know so.” He gave her hand a gentle squeeze then lifted it to his lips. “Besides, I promise they don’t bite.”

Lord, she hoped not.

He opened her door and together they started for the farmhouse. It was a perfect winter day, the sky crystal blue, the air with just the hint of a nip to it. Her father’s front porch railing had been decorated with fresh evergreen cuttings, presumably courtesy of neighboring Oak Barrel Farms. And yes, there was even a thin blanket of snow from a few nights ago atop the farm’s broad lawn to make her Christmas complete.

Well, nearly complete. Until her youngest sister, Hannah, came home, there would still be that small hole in her heart longing to be filled. Hopefully, it would be someday.

They’d barely reached the front steps when the storm door flung open and out burst her father’s dog, Rex, and Isaac’s bulldog, Louie, each with a giant rawhide bone in his mouth.

“Stop those dogs!” Del cried, sprinting after them.

Isaac was half a step behind her. “Rex! Louie! Get back here!”

Alex looked from Mia to the dogs, darting around the yard in an attempt to stay just out of reach from Del and Isaac. “Should we help them?”

“Nah,” Mia said. “Rex won’t let Louie go far. Besides, this is good penance for her most recent mischievous ways.”

“Remind me never to cross you again.”

Mia laughed and led Alex inside, where sure enough, his parents were seated in the living room with her father and

Aunt Faye.

“I thought that was your car. What a wonderful surprise,” Alex said, stepping forward to hug his parents.

“Yes, another red SUV,” her father said, placing his hands over his heart. “Salt to the wound.”

Mia just shook her head and laughed.

Alex made introductions, and warm embraces were shared. Once everyone took a seat, Alex looked between their fathers. “So, who was the mastermind behind the surprise?”

“Actually, it was my sister,” her father said.

Beside him, Aunt Faye shrugged. “I just thought that it might be nice, getting to know Alex’s folks since he’s been spending so much time here with us.”

“Well, hopefully you’re not sick of me yet,” Alex said, squeezing Mia’s hand. “Because I plan to keep coming back to Bourbon Falls whenever time allows.”

“And that’s why we were elated to receive the invite,” his father said. “Not only would it allow us to spend Christmas together with you all, but it gave us a chance to come up and peruse the area. We’re thinking of downsizing. Maybe relocating to a smaller locale, somewhere with a great memory care facility nearby.”

Alex went stock-still. “You are?”

“Warsaw has a wonderful memory care facility,” Aunt Faye offered. “And it’s just a few miles down the road.”

“Perfect. And who knows, if we fall in love with a home up here, maybe we’ll also scope out a bigger piece of land in the spring and finally move Wellington Trucking out of Indy like we’ve been talking about.”

Alex’s hand tightened on Mia’s. “You’re serious?”

“We’ve both spent far too many years on the road, son. I think we each deserve to work a little closer to home.” He turned a loving smile to his wife. “And to the ones we love.”

“Wow.” Alex’s voice wavered. “Best Christmas present ever.”

“Wait,” Mia said, afraid to get her hopes up. “Are you saying you might all be relocating to Bourbon Falls?”

“I think it’s a definite possibility.” His father winked.

Best Christmas present ever was right!

The men chatted about possible properties for the new Wellington facility while the women discussed housing prospects. Soon, the kitchen timer went off, and Mia’s father rose from his seat.

“Go and round up your sister and her beau, MiMi. It’s time to eat.”

“Okay, Dad. We aren’t waiting on Chase?”

He shook his head. “He’s working at the station today so Smith can be home with his family.”

“Aw, okay.” It was sweet of Chase to make the offer, but they’d sure miss him here.

“I’ll help you get the others,” Alex said, following her outside.

As Mia looked around for the crazy foursome who’d vanished from the front yard, Alex caught her arm and pulled her in for a long, lingering kiss. He drew back slowly and tucked a piece of stray hair behind her ear.

“Are you okay with all this talk of relocating? I mean, it’s all kind of sudden.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m ecstatic about it! Though, there is one teensy problem. The more you’re over, the more spiders you may see.”

She expected him to cringe. Instead, he smirked.

“Or *not* see. I called the exterminator weeks ago. Haven’t you noticed there were fewer of the leggy devils roaming your floors lately?”

“Now that you mention it... Wait, is this something *else* you didn’t tell me about?”

He offered her a sheepish grin. “Surprise!”

“Wha—Oh, I’ll give you a surprise, all right!” Mia dashed off the porch, scooped up a handful of snow, and lobbed it at him. He dodged the throw and ran inside, laughing. Mia shook her head and brushed the snow from her hands.

“Where’s Alex?”

Mia turned to find her sister approaching. “Inside. Where are Isaac and the boys?”

“Corralled in the back yard. Whew, I’m whooped.” Del laughed. “Good Christmas so far?”

From inside the farmhouse, Alex stuck his tongue out at her. Something told her that man was going to keep her on her toes. And that was more than all right with her.

“Best I’ve had in years.”

“Good,” Del said, walking backward toward the porch. “See? I knew you’d forgive me.”

“*Delaney.*”

Her sister laughed and took the front steps two at a time. Alex held the door for her, then called to Mia.

“You done throwing snowballs at me?”

Mia shrugged as she reached the porch. “That depends. Are you done with the surprises?”

He stepped outside, an ornery grin on his face. “Don’t count on it.”

“Fine, just promise me they’ll all be good ones.”

He cupped her cheeks and kissed her sweetly. “Now that, I can do.”

The End

Acknowledgments

Again, my sincere gratitude to my amazing editor (and fellow Hoosier) Julie Sturgeon. Maybe this will be IU's magical season.

To Tina, whom I would be truly lost without. Thank you for talking me back from the plotting ledge, time and time and time again.

To Danielle, who graciously beta-read another of my sweet tales (when what she really wanted was for me to finally write that third dragon book already).

To my mom, who joined her crazy daughter on a Bourbon, Indiana road trip for pizza and pictures. Love you, Ma.

Many thanks as always to my sons for their understanding and support as my writing journey continues.

Thanks as always to the fantastic team at Tule who worked tirelessly to make this book shine.

And to my wonderful readers, from the bottom of my heart, thank you. It means everything that you have continued to follow along with the characters of Bourbon Falls. Psst—stay tuned for Hannah's long-awaited return...

If you enjoyed *Once Upon a Christmas Beauty*, you'll love the next books in the...

Bourbon Falls series

Book 1: *Once Upon a Beast*

[Buy now!](#)

Book 2: *Once Upon a Christmas Beauty*

[View the series here!](#)

Book 3: *Once Upon a Summer Night*

[Pre-order now!](#)

More Books by Kyra Jacobs

Love at the Beach Shop

The Paradise Key series

[Buy now!](#)

Keep Up with your Favorite Authors and their New Releases

For the latest news from Tule Publishing authors, sign up for our newsletter [here](#) or check out our website at TulePublishing.com

Stay social! For new release updates, behind-the-scenes sneak peeks, and reader giveaways:

[Like us](#) on



[Follow us](#) on



[Follow us](#) on



See you online!



About the Author



Kyra Jacobs is an extroverted introvert who writes of love, humor, and mystery in the Midwest and beyond. Her romance novels range from sweet contemporary to romantic suspense and paranormal/fantasy. No matter the setting, Kyra employs both comedy and chaos to help her characters find inspiration and/or redemption on their way to happily ever after.

When this Hoosier native isn't pounding out scenes for her next book, she's likely outside, elbow-deep in snapdragons or spending quality time with her sports-loving family. Kyra also loves to read, tries to golf, and is an avid college football fan.

For more from Kyra:

Visit her website at kyrajacobsbooks.com

Like Kyra on [Facebook](#)

Follow her on Twitter [@KyraJacobsBooks](#)



For the latest news from Tule Publishing, sign up for our newsletter [here](#) or check out our website at TulePublishing.com



TULE
PUBLISHING