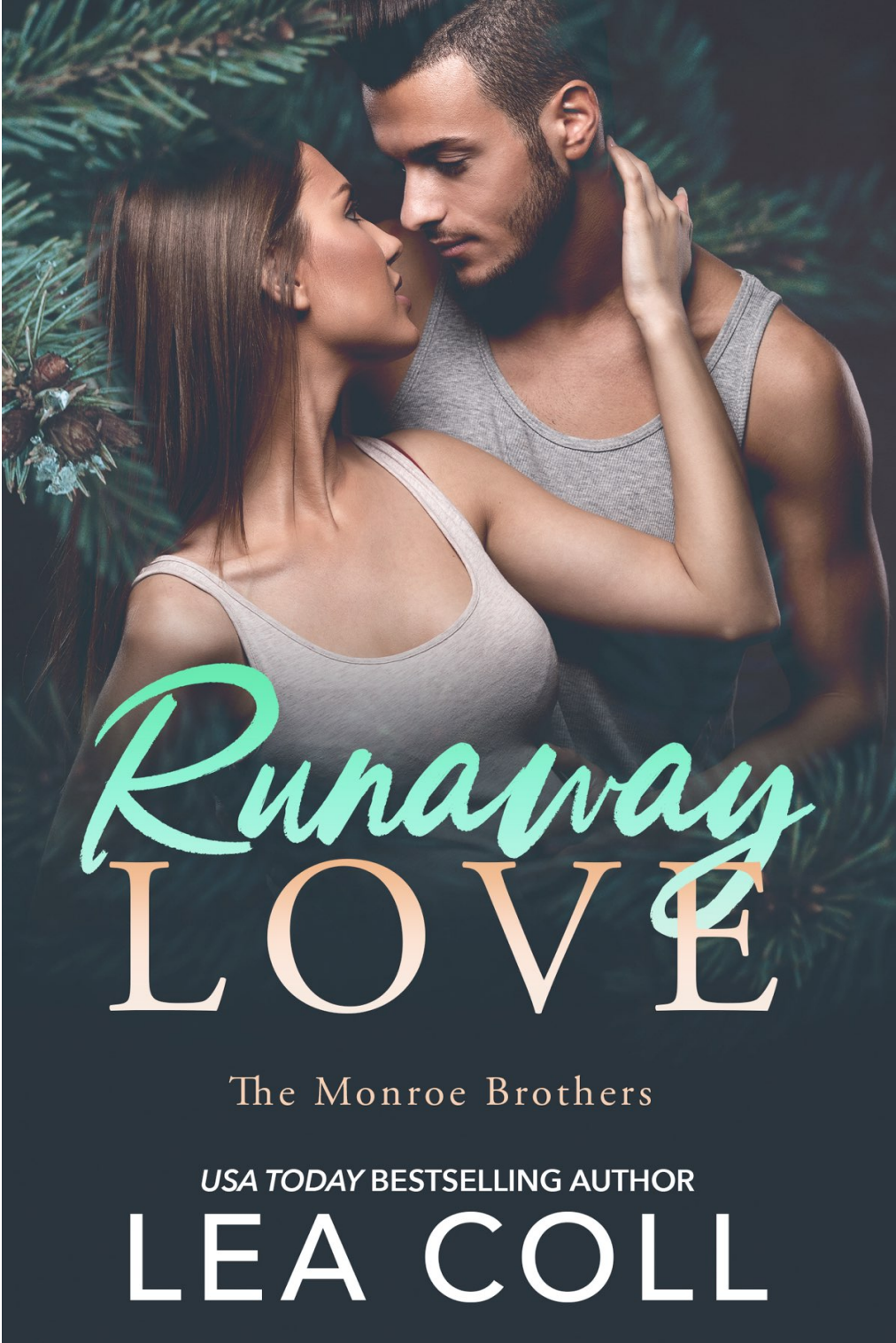


Runaway
LOVE

The Monroe Brothers

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LEA COLL



Runaway
LOVE

The Monroe Brothers

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LEA COLL

Runaway
LOVE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LEA COLL

RUNAWAY LOVE

THE MONROE BROTHERS

Copyright © 2023 by Lea Meyer

All Rights Reserved.

This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information and retrieval system without express written permission from the author.

All characters and storylines are the property of the author and your support and respect is greatly appreciated.

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

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Get the Free Novella](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Books by Lea Coll](#)

[Special Edition Bundles](#)

[About the Author](#)

GET THE FREE NOVELLA

Get the
FREE
book



When you sign up for [Lea's Newsletter](#).

CHAPTER 1



IRELAND

“*I* don’t have time for this.”

“It was your suggestion.” Irritation burned in my gut. My fiancé, James, preferred a flashy wedding venue that flaunted his wealth and status, but I really wanted to get married on a Christmas tree farm. Unfortunately, the one roadblock to that happening was a grumpy mountain of a man.

“Let’s go, then.” Emmett turned and stalked toward the exit of the barn, and I followed at a more leisurely pace. I’d worn knee-high boots, but they were designer and not meant for walking through dirt. With the mood he was in, I was more than a little worried he’d lead me through wetlands.

When he flashed an irritated look over his shoulder, I smiled serenely, hoping to disrupt his dark mood with positivity.

We walked for a few minutes in the direction of one of the many fields sporting trees in various stages of growth. I breathed in the crisp fall air, imagining what it would be like to work here, where your office was fields and not four walls. Maybe that was why Emmett wasn’t keen on me holding my wedding here. “Why are you doing this?”

Emmett stopped abruptly and turned to face me. “You were hell-bent on having a wedding here. You got what you

wanted. I don't think we need to rehash the whys and how we got here."

"Gia was hell-bent on holding the wedding here. Not me." Although that statement wasn't exactly the truth.

"So, you don't want to get married here?" Emmett asked gruffly, his arms spread wide. "In between the rows of Christmas trees with twinkling lights strung between the poles."

Everything inside me softened. "I'd love to. That's not what I meant."

Something passed between us then. It was full of hope and anticipation, and it caused my heart to flutter. *I am engaged to someone else.*

"Let's get this over with." Emmett stalked into a row of trees, and I followed.

"I wanted to know why you'd agree to host my wedding if you don't want me here?"

He glanced over his shoulder at me. "I never said I didn't want you here."

I touched his elbow with the intention of stopping his forward momentum because we'd reached a small clearing between the rows. "Thank you for agreeing to this. I know this is your home, and it wasn't an easy decision for you."

His jaw tightened. "You have no idea."

I wanted to ask if he'd been engaged or married before, but it wouldn't have been appropriate. It was just my intuition working in overdrive. I was a romantic at heart. I wanted to assign feelings to a man who probably didn't experience any range of emotions other than irritation.

His gaze dropped to where my hand held his arm. I felt the warmth of his body through the flannel shirt and the ripple of his muscles as he flexed.

I wanted to step into his body and feel the heat all over.

I am engaged to James.

I let go of his arm and stepped back. I sucked in a breath of fresh air to clear the crazy thoughts in my head.

“Are you sure you’re ready to get married?” Emmett asked.

“We love each other.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Is that the only criteria?”

I frowned, trying to think of the reasons I’d agreed to his proposal. James was solid, and he came from a good family. He worked at his father’s law firm, and he came from money. He represented safety and security. But more than that, he seemed to adore me. I hoped it was me he was interested in and not the idea of me, or the fact that I come from a good family, went to the right schools, and had a trust fund.

“Are you going to quit your job after you get married and pop out some kids?”

A little taken aback by the venom in his tone, I said, “I like my job. I don’t have to work, but I enjoy making others happy.”

Emmett nodded, seemingly respecting my answer.

“I’ve never had to struggle with things like money. I always had my trust fund to fall back on. But my parents were divorced many times. There was a lot of upheaval in my life. Nothing felt safe or secure at home. I’m not telling you this so

that you'll feel sorry for me. Just because someone's life looks good on the outside, doesn't mean that it is."

Emmett sighed. "You're right. I'm sorry for judging you without knowing anything about you or your life."

"I love your farm, and I'm so grateful you're willing to share it with me. I know it's a hardship for you and your family to hold events here."

He held up his hand. "This is just a onetime thing."

"I know what the contract says. But you know Gia's hoping this is just the beginning."

"This wedding will be a disruption, and I'm not looking forward to it."

I watched him closely, the way his eyes were guarded, his muscles bunched tight. "You don't like change."

He looked from the trees to me. "That's probably it. I feel unsettled."

"We'll make this as easy as possible for you. I have a team of people helping me."

"I hope you're right, and this is nothing more than a small interruption."

I didn't push any further because I didn't think Emmett would appreciate it. I needed to prove to him that the wedding wouldn't interrupt his business too much. Looking around, I asked, "Is this one of the options for the ceremony?"

The clearing was in the middle of several fields. I couldn't see the main barn or farmhouse from where we stood.

"None of these trees will be cut this year, so it's the perfect spot for the ceremony. It's private and closed off from the rest

of the farm.”

“I like that.” I wandered the space, noting how many chairs would fit and the best spot for an arbor. “I would think the arbor would go here, the guests there. Would I emerge from the row of trees?” I asked, more to myself than him.

“That’s a little too much like *A Field of Dreams*, don’t you think?” Emmett quipped.

“Wow. I didn’t know you made jokes.” I didn’t wait for his response. “But you’re right, that would be odd. We could move it here, and then I’d enter from this small pathway. We can use a runner for the aisle and rustic chairs for the guests. Maybe purple flowers.” I hadn’t decided on any colors or other details, but now that I was here, surrounded by greenery, I loved the mix of purple, white, and green.

Emmett stood in front of the larger trees. “You could put the arbor here.”

I could see the wedding pictures now, me in a white dress in front of the evergreens. It would be gorgeous. I didn’t want to think too hard about why I couldn’t picture James next to me. “I wonder if Harrison could do something different for the arbor.”

“I can make you one.”

“That’s not necessary. Gia commissions Harrison for those.” I didn’t want to intrude on Emmett’s life any more than necessary.

“I have an idea for something I’ve been thinking about for a while.”

I tipped my head to the side. “*You’ve* been thinking about creating a wedding arbor?”

“It came to me that first time you met with us.” He pulled out his phone, scrolled through some pictures, and showed me a photograph of an image he’d sketched.

The branches were intertwined with evergreens wrapped around them. I wondered if he’d drawn it with me in mind. “This is gorgeous. It’s different than what we’ve done before.”

“I think this matches the vision you’re going for.”

It was perfect, and I couldn’t believe he’d read my mind so easily. “Are you sure you don’t mind making this? This is supposed to be a painless process for you.”

“Nothing about this is painless.” Before I could respond to his comment, he continued. “We have another barn that we built for family picnics and events. That might be your best bet for the reception. It’s a short walk from here.”

“I’d love to see it.” My heart rate picked up. I couldn’t remember him showing us a second barn on our original tour, and I was excited to see it.

We walked in silence, our boots scuffing the debris on the ground. I could imagine what it would be like to live here. I’d take walks between the rows of trees in the early morning or evening.

There were poles with lights strung between them, and I wondered if they were lit year-round or if they were only used when the farm was in season.

This barn was a natural wood plank. There was a large, covered porch on the side, which I assumed they used for outdoor events.

“We could move the picnic tables out. I’m sure you have tables you’d prefer to use. Unless your wedding is a barbecue.”

“Definitely not.” I winced, unable to imagine James’s family attending a wedding at a farm. But this was what I wanted, not what James’s family preferred.

He opened the door to the inside and waited for me to precede him. He flipped on the lights, and I was pleased the interior was spacious and clean. Tables lined the back wall, and chairs were stacked next to them.

I wandered around the space, already imagining the tables, a dance floor, and endless flowers and greenery. Maybe white centerpieces with some kind of ornaments.

“Are you imagining what it would look like in your head?” Emmett asked, and I was surprised he was interested.

I gestured with my hands. “I was thinking centerpieces, maybe a configuration of white and silver ornaments, various sized candles or one tall one in the middle, purple and white flowers, and tons of greenery.” I breathed in deeply, smelling the cedar. “So much that you can smell the needles. It will smell like Christmas.” I looked up. “Maybe twinkling lights on the ceiling. It’s funny because I couldn’t picture it until I was standing here in this space.”

“We don’t usually let anyone outside of family inside the barn.”

“Thank you for inviting me into your space.” I was genuinely surprised he’d done so. He was so guarded and protective when it came to his family.

He nodded toward the room. “Do you think it will work for you?”

“It’s perfect. I’m imagining a winter wonderland. All tasteful, of course.” It would be simple yet elegant. For the first time, my chest filled with hope that maybe my marriage

would be different than my parents'. That I'd be with James forever. But I had this lingering feeling that I was forgetting something important.

As a wedding planner, I could easily see the empty room as it would be decorated on the day of the wedding. It was more difficult to imagine me walking down the aisle to James. Every time I thought about it, there was nothing waiting for me at the end. Now, all I could see was the beautiful arbor that Emmett drew.

"I have one more space I'd like to show you. Maybe you could use it for pictures, or for a private moment with your fiancé."

"I'd love to see it," I said, wondering why his comment about a private moment with my fiancé rubbed me the wrong way. "Do you have a lot of family events here?"

"Picnics and family meals. There's a kitchen, and it's fully heated and air-conditioned."

I shook my head. "Those are the questions I should have been asking, not getting lost in imagining the décor."

"It must be hard to be the wedding planner and the bride."

I chuckled. "Well, it's the first time I've attempted it. My parents haven't set the best example. Both have been married numerous times, so taking this step is huge for me."

"What makes you so sure he's the one?" Emmett asked, his gaze steady on mine as we walked down the dirt path and into the woods.

I thought about it for a few seconds before answering. Our relationship had been a whirlwind. After the first few days, he'd said he knew I was the one for him. "He loves me."

He paused at the top of a hillside. “Do you love him?”

“Of course,” I said. Love was what I’d been searching for my entire life. To me, it meant safety and security. I wanted a home, a place to call my own. I’d never put my kids through what I experienced—the constant upheaval, the stress, and uncertainty.

My brother, Finn, and I were close because we were all each other had when my parents were going through the endless cycles of dating, marrying, and then inevitably divorcing.

“Have you ever been in love?”

“I was. Once.” Then he nodded down the hill. “This is what I wanted to show you.”

Here, the trees were part of the forest and widely spaced. As we walked down the slope, there was a waterfall where flat rocks were placed into the side of the hill, water falling peacefully over them. “This is gorgeous.”

When the ground evened out slightly, there was a spot where someone had made chairs out of logs and placed them in a circle around a fire pit.

“Did you make all of this?” I asked him, genuinely impressed.

“Me and my brother, Knox. He does landscaping work. One of his clients wanted something similar, so he made it here first and then took pictures for them.”

“Do the visitors know about this spot?” I asked him.

Emmett scowled. “This is strictly for friends and family.”

I closed my eyes and breathed in the scent of rotting leaves. “It’s so peaceful. If I lived here, I’d hang out here,

breathing in the fresh air and listening to the water.” When I finally opened my eyes, I was surprised to find Emmett watching me.

He cleared his throat. “If you want to take pictures here, you can.”

I couldn’t see this space appealing to James. He was all about opulence and elegance. This was too rustic for him. But I loved it. “Maybe I could take some shots with me in my dress.”

I ran my fingers over the log benches, imagining little kids sitting here with their parents, cooking s’mores.

“Wouldn’t you mess up your dress sitting on the logs?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I hadn’t even picked one out yet. But seeing this, I imagined something soft and flowing, with purple and white flowers woven into my hair. It wasn’t the wedding that James was imagining, but it was the one I wanted.

My heart ached as I looked at Emmett. Was I making the same mistake my parents had? Was I jumping into this wedding with James too quickly? Was it the right decision? I took a deep breath, my chest constricting.

“Getting married is a big commitment. Just be sure it’s the right thing before you go through with it.”

“Are you speaking from experience?” I asked, my intuition telling me there was a story here.

His face screwed up. “I don’t believe in it.”

I laughed. “My brother didn’t either. Our parents got married and divorced so many times that he didn’t want to put anyone through that himself. When he met Aria, he tried to

keep it casual, but it didn't work. He fell hard for her. Now he's all in. It makes me think I could have something like that too."

Finn and I were different, though. Watching my parents only made me want to find love for myself. I was worried I would look for it in the wrong places or think I had something when I didn't. Was I doomed to be like my parents, always searching for that elusive someone and never finding it? Or were they too quick to walk away?

I just needed to commit to James, and everything would fall into place. I wouldn't be like my parents.

CHAPTER 2



EMMETT

When she showed up with that huge diamond on her finger, my stomach twisted. I'd been attracted to her since the first time she came to visit the farm.

The problem was, I didn't believe in relationships or trust women anymore. The farm was my solace, the place I felt the most comfortable. I'd built the barn for my family to enjoy, so why was I offering it to Ireland?

I couldn't believe she was getting married. Had she been dating him when I first met her? I didn't feel great about lusting after someone else's fiancée. "Where is your fiancé? Shouldn't he be here?"

"This was more of a business meeting. I didn't think it would make sense for him to come, especially if you said no."

"Are you sure this is what he wants?"

When I was engaged, I gave my ex free rein on the planning, and maybe that was a mistake. I wasn't involved, and I'd missed the signs that she wasn't happy.

Ireland went over to the waterfall and sat crisscrossed on the grass and tilted her face up to the sunlight peeking through the leaves. "He said he wants whatever I do."

That was the same mistake I made—thinking a woman wanted to make all the choices when it came to her wedding. In the end, she wanted me to be more involved, or at least act like I was interested.

“Isn’t that what most grooms say?” I figured she’d have some experience with this since she was a wedding planner.

“Most are fairly hands off, but a few enjoy being involved in the planning. I don’t know if it makes a difference when it comes to predicting whether a couple will stay together. Sometimes I wonder if the day matters at all. Maybe eloping would be better. It’s only about the couple, after all.”

“There’s an idea. If I ever get married, maybe that’s what I’d do.” I should have said *get married again*, but I didn’t want to tip her off to my previous engagement. It was bad enough that most people in the area already knew about it. I didn’t need Ireland to know about my greatest humiliation.

“But this place is perfect. It’s so peaceful and calm. I’d love to get married here. Thank you for sharing this with me.” She stood and brushed the leaves and dirt off her jeans.

Ireland surprised me in the best of ways. I figured she was into expensive things, like designer clothes and purses, but she didn’t bat an eye when I said we were going to walk to the possible ceremony locations. Her obvious pleasure with the barn prompted me to show her this spot.

I was intrigued by her, but I should have been repelled. I didn’t mess with other people’s girlfriends, much less fiancées. Ireland wasn’t for me. She was in love with someone else. But then she didn’t act like someone in love.

She acted more like a wedding planner organizing a wedding for someone else. I had a feeling her fiancé wouldn’t

approve of a farm wedding.

It would be interesting to see this play out, and it was partly why I agreed to let her have the wedding here. I wanted to keep Ireland close. It didn't make any sense, not when she was someone else's girl. But I had this crazy need to keep an eye on her and make sure she was okay.

If this guy left her, I'd be here. That was a crazy idea because I wasn't ready to date again. I didn't know if I'd ever be ready. And if so, I wasn't the forever kind of guy. Not anymore, and clearly that was what Ireland was looking for. She wanted the fairy tale, the happily ever after, the man who'd commit to her forever, showing her that she was nothing like her parents. But I wasn't that guy.

"I'll be in touch to let you know when we'll need access to the farm. I'll need to take some measurements, draw up a plan for the décor, and talk to Harrison about how many tables will fit."

It was nuts that I was looking forward to her being in my space. That made no sense at all because I despised anything that interrupted my routine.

"I'm responsible for the growth of the trees, and I run a furniture business on the side. Other than that, I'm free. I can let you in whenever you need it."

"Why the sudden change of heart? You were adamant that you didn't want any weddings here."

"I didn't promise to open the farm to all weddings, just yours." My face heated. Would she assume it was because of her?

Her forehead wrinkled. "What are you saying?"

“You really wanted to get married here, and I wanted to give you that. But I’m not promising anything more.”

Ireland smiled, and it lit up the space around us. “I bet you have a big heart under all that grumpiness.”

Then she placed her hand over my heart, and I worried she could feel how rapidly it was beating.

I wanted to grab her wrist and stop her from touching me, but at the same time, I wanted to pull her closer. Instead, I cleared my throat. “That’s not true.”

“What? That you don’t have a big heart or that you’re not grumpy?” She smiled like I amused her, and I liked it too much.

“Both.”

She laughed, and the sound filled the space in the woods, reminding me that we were very much alone. That her fiancé wouldn’t like it if he showed up to find her palm covering my chest. “We should get back.”

Ireland lowered her hand, and I missed the contact immediately. “Thank you for showing me around and hosting my wedding. I have a feeling it will be beautiful, a truly magical evening with the lights twinkling and all the greenery.”

“Have you always dreamed of a holiday wedding?” I asked as we made our way through the woods and up the hill.

Ireland smiled. “Christmas is a magical time of the year. It was when I hoped for something different, for my parents to find what they were looking for, and for my family to be settled and happy.”

My heart squeezed at her admission. “But you never got what you wanted.”

She gave me a small smile. “I never gave up hope that I would find what I was looking for.”

I wanted to know if she had with her fiancé, but it wouldn't have been appropriate for me to ask. Although I was dying to know. If he was the man for her, then I could stop thinking about her. Maybe this sense of loss would go away. How could I feel like I lost something I never had?

“I am happy,” Ireland said quietly as we reached her car parked in front of the red barn.

“I hope you get everything you've been looking for.” My heart ached for the little girl she'd been, seeking comfort from her brother because her parents were too involved in their lives. I grew up in a tight-knit family. When my father died a few years ago from a heart attack, it only drew us closer together.

“I think I am.” She smiled and then got into her car.

I wanted to be the one to make her smile. My stomach twisted because she was with another man. She was engaged to him, supposedly loved him, and was marrying him on my farm. How had I gotten myself into this mess?

I stepped back and shoved my hands into my pockets as she backed up, waved, and then drove away.

I thought it would be nice to keep her close, to see if her fiancé made her happy. Now I was wondering how smart any of this was. It might be best if I took a step back and let her and her wedding planners take care of everything.

I could make myself scarce while she planned the wedding. As soon as she was married, I'd never have to see

her again. I'd go back to my solitary but predictable life where I tended to the trees year-round and was too busy to sleep and eat during the holiday tree-cutting season.

I wanted to go back to my shop and bury myself in furniture orders for the rest of the day. It wouldn't be long before my time would be taken up with the farm for the holiday season.

Knox fell into step next to me. "Are you sure we made the right decision?"

I laughed and shook my head. "I don't think so."

Knox's brow furrowed. "What did you think of Ireland when you showed her around?"

"She's a nice woman. She appreciated us helping her out."

His face screwed up. "You don't think she's a spoiled princess? We can't compete with the accommodations at Longwood Gardens."

"She didn't seem that way. She might come from money, but she was down-to-earth." She'd sat on the ground by the waterfall and touched the log benches lovingly with her hands. She didn't act like someone who thought she was too good to get married on a farm and celebrate in a barn.

"I hope you're right. I don't want to deal with a lot of drama. You know how weddings can be." Then he flushed. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking before I spoke. I forgot about your situation."

"Don't worry about it. I barely think about it anymore."

"Is that right?" Knox asked, his too-knowing gaze on the side of my face.

“It was a long time ago.” Two years ago, to be exact, and I was over Molly. I’d even gotten to a place where I was thankful she’d broken it off. If she wasn’t feeling me, then it was better to break up before we’d gotten married. It was the way she’d done it that still burned a hole in my gut.

“What changed your mind about hosting the wedding?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but it wasn’t something I could share. I liked Ireland and wanted to make sure she was in love with this guy before she married him. If I said that out loud, I’d sound like a lunatic. “I wanted to see if it was a feasible option for the family. I thought the best way was to limit it to one wedding. It can be a trial period of sorts.”

“You’d seriously consider opening the farm up to year-round weddings?” Knox asked, his tone hopeful.

When we’d talked in the craft room after Gia and Ireland left, Mom had mentioned the possibility of spring and summer weddings, referencing how popular rustic weddings were, not just during the holidays but year-round. “If it makes Mom happy. If we can juggle it all. I don’t know.”

“It would be nice to have year-round income from the farm. And I think it helps to keep Mom busy.”

“I think you’re right. We just don’t know if it’s feasible. If there’s any disruption to our prime earning season, we’d have to pull back.” Generally, all of us had to agree when we added new developments to the farm. Since I was the oldest brother and the one who dealt primarily with the trees, my opinion held a little more weight.

“I agree. Gia already has a farm she uses year-round. It just doesn’t get booked during the holidays.”

“The flower farm?” I asked him, trying to remember our earlier conversations with Gia and Ireland.

“I think Lily owns it. She runs the store Petals in Annapolis. I read about it in the paper when she started hosting weddings, and it mentioned she worked with Gia’s business, Happily Ever Afters.”

“I hope this arrangement will be good for everyone.” We brought in a lot of money from Thanksgiving to New Year’s and then nothing. Mom had been looking for a way to make the farm profitable year-round, and maybe this was it. She also wanted to open the shop in the red barn year-round to celebrate other holidays, like Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day. I loved the idea of pleasing my mother, of making her happy and feeling more secure, but I just wasn’t sure this partnership would be good for me.

I was already regretting it, and we’d only just begun.

Knox clasped my shoulder when we reached my cabin and the shed behind that housed my furniture business. “Don’t bury yourself in work.”

I gave him a wry smile. “That’s what I plan to do.”

“You can’t go ahead with this wedding business and then hide from it.”

I laughed. “I really want to.”

“You’re the one who takes care of the trees and lives on-site year-round. If we decide to do this, you’ll be the one arranging everything.”

Knox worked off-site with his landscaping business for the rest of the year. “I don’t like the sound of that. I’m sure we can come up with something that works for everyone.”

“How would that work? I have a landscaping business. Mom wants to focus on her store, Heath just started working with Morrison Brothers Contracting, Sebastian has his accounting business, and Talon has his metal shop.”

“I don’t want to be the point person for Ireland and her wedding.”

“Yet in the meeting, you said you would be. Did something happen when you showed her around?”

I shifted uncomfortably on my feet. How could I explain that I liked the woman, and I’d changed my mind?

Knox was quiet for a few seconds and then asked, “Do you like her?”

My gaze darted everywhere but to him.

Knox ran a hand through his hair. “You do.”

“I’ll admit, when I first met her, I was attracted to her. But I didn’t know she was dating anyone, much less soon-to-be engaged. Obviously, nothing can happen.”

“But you don’t trust yourself around her.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to spend a lot of time with her.” The more time I spent talking to her, the more I liked her. It wasn’t a good combination for me. Especially when we couldn’t be anything more than business associates.

“I’m proud of you for finally admitting you’re attracted to someone. I was worried about you after the whole thing went down with Molly. I didn’t think you’d ever date again.”

“I didn’t want to. I still don’t want to.”

Knox nodded. “There will be other women. This is just the start of things for you.”

I wasn't so sure about that.

“Just don't lose yourself in work. We need you around here. We're gearing up for the season, and it looks like it will be a busy one. We have more contracts this year to provide trees for hotels and the town.”

“Did we get Annapolis?” I asked eagerly. We'd been wanting that one forever. It was my father's motivation, and we'd all adopted it in his memory.

Knox grinned. “We did.”

I rubbed my jaw. “You're not fucking with me, are you?”

“I wouldn't lie about something this big.”

“Did you tell Mom?”

“Not yet. I thought we could celebrate together.”

“That's amazing. I don't know how you did it, but thank you.”

“When Naomi, the event manager for the town, called, she said she'd visited our farm last year and fell in love with it.”

“Don't tell me she wants to get married here too.”

“I have no idea, but she said she wanted to highlight our farm and show everyone how amazing it was.”

“Whatever the reason, we need this boost. Hopefully, people will be willing to travel a little further to visit our farm.” We were a bit outside of Annapolis, so not everyone may have heard of us yet. There was another farm, closer to Annapolis, smaller and more popular. We suspected they shipped trees in to keep up with production, but we had no way of proving it.

“I have a feeling between the extra publicity with the Annapolis town tree and the possibility of weddings, we might be able to increase revenue. I don’t want Mom to worry.”

“I don’t either. She loves the farm.” I’d do anything to ensure she got to keep it and retire here. We could run it, and she could just relax and enjoy her retirement.

The only problem was I didn’t want visitors year-round. Right now, I only had to endure the influx of people for a few months.

“I have a good feeling about this,” Knox said as he walked toward the red barn.

I went to my shed and pulled out the sheet of orders, prioritizing what I needed to complete before the tree farm opened officially for the season.

I knew others lived for the holiday season. It was full of magic and hope for them. But for me, it meant a ton of people in my safe place, my farm. I’d built my cabin as far away from the red barn as possible.

My chest was tight. I wasn’t sure if it was because of the impending holiday season or the fact that Ireland was marrying someone else on my farm.

CHAPTER 3



IRELAND

The last few weeks were a whirlwind between planning my clients' weddings and mine. I'd been to the farm to measure the barn and sketch my ideas for the reception. Emmett met me at my car and let me into the barn but then mumbled something about needing to finish furniture orders before the season started and then disappeared again.

As much as I was intrigued by him, I needed to focus on planning my wedding to James. I couldn't seem to make the final decision on anything. Lily was waiting for my flower order, Sophie needed my cake order, and Harrison needed to know the approximate number of guests so he could decide on the number of tables, linen, and silverware.

Every time I lifted my phone to dial one of them, my throat got tight, and it was hard to breathe. I felt like I was waiting for a sign that I was making the right decisions.

James was fine with my choice of venue, although I think he would have preferred something more extravagant. He was acting like the perfect fiancé, but something still felt off. Shouldn't I be more excited about planning my wedding and starting our lives together?

I think it boiled down to our living situation. I lived in Annapolis, and he lived in Baltimore, which made it easier to

think, but I suspected it wasn't good for our relationship. We needed to move in together after we got married, and neither one of us had broached the subject of who would move in with whom. My job was in Annapolis, and his was in Baltimore.

Gia was probably worried I'd quit, and I couldn't reassure her I wouldn't because I had no idea what life would look like after our wedding day. I didn't want to quit my job. I loved working for Gia and enjoyed being with my friends on the job. I wasn't sure what my future looked like. I couldn't imagine James at the end of the aisle, much less what our life would be like.

I felt heavy, like something was weighing me down, and it was driving me crazy that I couldn't figure out the source of my trepidation.

"I've been calling your name," Gia said, startling me from my reverie.

I'd been staring at the to-do list. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you."

Gia sat in the leather chair across from my desk. "Is everything okay? It's not like you to space out like that."

I gestured at the list in my notebook. "I need to make these decisions, and it's hard when it's your wedding you're planning."

Gia smiled and leaned forward. "I can understand that. You want me to help?"

I turned the list around so she could see it and pulled out the sketch I'd done of the barn. I'd sat by the waterfall to complete it. Other than my apartment, I felt most at home on Emmett's farm, walking the grounds or sitting by his waterfall.

Everything on the list was what I wanted, and I couldn't figure out why it was so hard for me to place the orders myself.

Gia read through it and then held it up. "This looks great. I love your vision for the interior of the barn. It's going to look like a winter wonderland, yet classy and elegant."

"That's what I was going for." One thing that was certain was that I'd always wanted a winter- or holiday-themed wedding.

Gia tipped her head to the side. "You want me to place the orders?"

I nodded, my throat too tight for me to speak.

"Is James on board with everything?" Gia asked as if she sensed my hesitation.

"He wants what I want." It's exactly what I wanted to hear, so why did his acquiescence bother me so much?

Gia nodded. "I'll take care of it," she said as she took a photo of the sketch and the to-do list. "Now, do you want me to pull a wedding or two from you?"

I shook my head. "I can handle it."

Gia met my gaze. "Do you know what you're going to do after?"

"We haven't discussed it, but I love it here, and I'd like to keep working."

"It will be a long commute from Baltimore, but you could do some work from home," Gia said.

"You'd allow that?" I asked, a little surprised. Gia had always been a stickler for time in the office, but maybe she'd

relaxed slightly since she'd started dating her boyfriend, Silas, whose home was an hour from here.

"I want to keep you, and I want you to be happy. The reality is, we can do some of the work from home. You'll still need to meet with clients at venues, though."

"I'm so appreciative that you've given me some options to think about."

Gia stood and smiled. "Like I said, I don't want to lose you. I've been thinking about the business, especially now that I have this course and my book is out. I'm working with Silas's couples at his resorts, so I'd like to promote someone to the head wedding planner position. Harper manages the schedule and the office, but I need a planner to help her with coordinating planners and scheduling events."

"Are you serious?" My heart rate picked up. I hadn't thought about my future with Gia, other than to continue doing what I'd been doing.

"Aria has expressed interest in getting more responsibility, but you haven't. I don't want to offer it to you if it's not something you want."

It was the only thing I'd heard lately that had me excited. "I'm interested."

"It would mean more responsibility. You'd be meeting with clients during the initial consultations, securing them, and negotiating the contracts."

"I can do that."

"I know you can. That's why I'm considering you and Aria. The question is—do you want it?"

“Yes.” I should have discussed it with James, but it was my career. Why did he get a say in what job I took, especially if it didn’t take me far away?

“I’m glad you’re interested. I’ll decide in a few weeks.”

It wasn’t ideal to be up for a promotion while planning a wedding.

“You and Aria have allowed me to focus on the couples at Silas’s resorts, and even expanding outside of Annapolis.”

Surprised, I asked, “You’d offer weddings off Silas’s resort?”

“I’m thinking about it. I’ve had so much positive feedback from my course and the book that I want to add more content.”

“You’re an inspiration.” I’d never gotten the bug to run my own business, but then I’d always had my trust fund to fall back on.

“I’m playing with the idea of empowering women through starting a business. I feel like I’m really helping people, and it’s bigger than being a good wedding planner.”

“I can see that.” With business ownership came freedom. When I went to college, I felt a different kind of lightness, one that came with controlling my own living space and the friends I surrounded myself with. I was no longer subject to the ever-changing whims of my parents.

“Did you already talk to Aria about it?” I asked, wondering who she would pick.

Gia nodded. “I knew she was interested, though. She told me about her plans from the beginning. It was you I wasn’t sure about.”

“You can count me in.” I just hoped I wasn’t telling her something that wasn’t true. I was getting married, and these decisions were supposed to be made together, as a couple.

As soon as Gia left, I called James. He finally answered on the fifth ring, sounding a little distracted. “Ireland, what’s going on?”

“I have some good news.”

“Oh, yeah?” It might have been my imagination, but he didn’t sound excited.

I shook it off, thinking I was imagining his lack of interest. “Gia is looking to promote either Aria or me to a head wedding planner position.”

“What does that even mean?” James asked, and I heard some background noise, like he was shuffling papers around.

“She needs someone to handle the office in Annapolis while Gia works with the couples at Silas’s resort.”

“Does it mean more pay?”

I opened my mouth and closed it, a little shocked by his callous reaction. “We didn’t discuss salary, but I assume so.”

“How can you take a job without discussing salary?” James asked, with a bite to his tone.

“I don’t really think about money.”

“That must be nice.” His voice was harsh.

“Why are you talking to me like this?” He’d never been so dismissive of me before.

“Some of us think about money.”

“I didn’t realize you’d be upset by this. I thought you’d be happy for me.”

“A promotion is a good thing, but find out how much she’ll be paying you before you sign anything.”

“Of course,” I said tightly, not feeling great about this conversation.

“Listen, I’ve got to go. I need to work late.”

I could imagine him hunched over his desk, running a hand through his hair. “You’ve been working late a lot lately.”

“Even though my father is a partner, I have to prove myself to the other attorneys. They think I’m only here because of my father.”

“That must be tough.”

“Not something you’ve ever had to deal with.”

“I can still sympathize with you.” I couldn’t remember another time he’d blown me off, but maybe I hadn’t been paying close enough attention.

“You want the big wedding. Someone has to pay for it.”

“My parents are.”

“Gia sent me the bill for the wedding.”

I groaned. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why she did that.”

James was quiet.

Between my parents, it would be paid for. I wasn’t worried about it. I wasn’t booking the most expensive venue, and I was conscious about keeping it reasonably priced. Especially since it wasn’t my money I was spending. “Your family’s covering the rehearsal dinner, right?”

“Do we need one?” James asked, his words laced with irritation.

I frowned. “We don’t have to have one if you don’t want one. I just assumed we would since we had an engagement party.”

“I think we should skip it.”

“Whatever you want. I want you to be happy.”

“Great. I have to go.” He hung up without another word, and I sat there feeling more than a little disturbed by the conversation.

Maybe it was the stress of the wedding combined with whatever was going on at work. I should give him some grace. I’m sure things would turn around after we were married. But I couldn’t shake the feeling of unease for the rest of the day.

When I went home to the two-bedroom apartment I used to share with Aria before she moved in with my brother, I drew a bath. I pressed play on a relaxing playlist when my phone buzzed.

I got the plans from Gia.

I felt a little weird texting Emmett while I was naked, but he couldn’t see me.

She said she’d take care of some of the details for me. It’s a little more stressful than I thought to plan your own wedding.

Anything I can help with?

I stepped into the bathtub, letting the warm water soothe my tired muscles. The lavender scent drifted to my nostrils, relaxing me even further.

Now that Gia’s on it, I think I’m good.

Any reason why she's handling it and not you?

I wondered if it bothered him that he wouldn't be working with me. Then I thought that didn't make sense. Emmett didn't even want me to hold my wedding on the farm.

I must have waited too long to respond because the next thing I knew, my phone was ringing with an incoming video call from Emmett. I fumbled with it, unsure whether to answer.

I finally hit answer and made sure the camera only showed my face. My hair was tied in a messy bun, and my cheeks were flushed from the heat of the water.

"Emmett?" I hoped he wouldn't notice that I was naked.

"I wanted to see your face. You don't want to work with me?"

My face flushed hotter. "That's not it at all. It was a lot to keep track of."

"I wanted to make sure it wasn't me."

I frowned. "You've been perfectly accommodating."

Emmett's face filled the screen, as if he noticed something on my face. "Why are you all flushed? Were you working out?"

If anything, my cheeks flamed hotter. "No."

He arched a brow. "What were you doing when I called?"

"Taking a bath," I finally said, to see if that would get a reaction out of him.

His eyes flashed with heat. "You're taking a bath right now? You're saying you're naked?"

“That’s right,” I said with a confidence I didn’t feel. My skin was tingling, my nerves drawn tight, and it had nothing to do with the warm water. It was the desire I saw in Emmett’s gaze.

He swallowed hard and then looked away. “I’ll let you get back to it, then.”

“You can’t see anything,” I said, by way of keeping him on the phone and engaged in the conversation.

“Maybe not with my eyes, but my mind has a very vivid imagination.” His jaw was tight.

Was Emmett Monroe attracted to me? My skin flushed hot, and my nipples pebbled into hard peaks before I remembered I was engaged to someone else. This was beyond inappropriate. No matter how off I felt about that relationship, this wasn’t right.

Yet a part of me questioned why I thought something that felt good could be wrong.

His gaze was hot on mine, as if he was trying to imagine what I looked like naked, which did nothing to cool my overheated body. I wanted to reach down and touch that bundle of nerves that was buzzing with need and slide a finger inside my tight channel. The urge to touch myself was overwhelming.

“I should go,” I said quickly, eager to get off the phone before I embarrassed myself.

“Glad everything is okay. Call me if you need anything.” Without another word, his face disappeared from the screen.

I lowered my phone to the tray I kept next to the tub, making sure the phone call had disconnected before I buried my face in my hands and groaned. What was I thinking to

answer Emmett's call while I was in the tub, naked, and very much wanting his attention?

I was playing with fire. Even though nothing had happened, it made me question what I was doing with James if I could have such a strong reaction to someone else.

Then I took a deep breath and remembered what I was looking for—a man who was steady and secure. Not someone who could scorch my insides with one hot look.

I wanted Emmett, but I knew you couldn't build a relationship based on physical attraction alone. You needed mutual respect, similar desires, and a shared vision of your future.

Emmett wasn't safe. He was a five-alarm fire that needed several districts to respond and put it out. He wasn't the guy for me.

I reminded myself that I liked James. He was steady and dependable. He wanted me, even if he didn't heat me from the inside out. He'd be by my side for years to come. I didn't need something quick burning that would die out in a few weeks.

I'd gotten a crash course in relationship dynamics from my mother and my father dating other people. They tended to burn hot and fast and burned out just as quickly. That kind of life wasn't for me. I wouldn't survive the ups and downs.

James was the right guy for me. I wouldn't walk away from a good relationship. I wouldn't be like my parents.

CHAPTER 4



IRELAND

Gia placed the veil carefully in my hair, which was twisted into an updo, with purple and white flowers woven through it. “There. That should do it.”

Aria clasped her hands together. “You look beautiful. I can’t believe you’re getting married.”

I couldn’t either. It felt surreal, like I was having an out-of-body experience and watching it happen to someone else.

Aria hugged me tightly. “I’m so excited for you.”

Aria was engaged to my brother and believed everyone around her should feel as happy as she was.

Gia hugged me when Aria let me go. “We’re so happy for you.”

“Do you need something to eat or drink?” Lily asked.

I nodded. “I am feeling a little lightheaded.”

Gia ushered me to a nearby settee, and Lily took the bouquet of purple and white flowers from my hands.

James was in charge of the honeymoon and hadn’t given me any details. I’d packed for all weather possibilities and tucked my passport into my purse, just in case. I didn’t particularly enjoy surprises.

I pushed away the irritation about the honeymoon because today was about our wedding. I'd expected to feel butterflies, but instead, I felt numb. I wondered if it was just that I'd attended so many weddings for my parents, and none of them lasted longer than a few years.

Abby shoved a cold glass of ice water into my hand. "Drink. You look pale."

I smiled faintly. "My pictures aren't turning out right?"

Abby's hands cradled her expensive-looking professional camera. "I didn't say that."

But her expression was tinged with concern.

"I'm okay. I just didn't eat breakfast."

"You know better than not to eat," Gia chided me.

What could I do when I woke up with my stomach twisted into knots?

When I thought about the last few weeks, I realized I'd barely spoken with James. When we did, it consisted of me giving him updates on the wedding planning, which was me reciting what Gia had done for the wedding and James murmuring his assent. I didn't want his lack of attention to bother me, but it did.

Now I felt like I was forgetting something. I wasn't sure what it could be because my grandmother's embroidered handkerchief was wrapped carefully around the stems of my bouquet, I wore my mother's sapphire earrings, and my dress was new, so I had my something old, something blue, something borrowed, and something new. What else was there?

The garter was in place, and it was itchy. My makeup and hair were done. There was nothing left for anyone to do except line up the bridal party and walk down the aisle.

Gia handed me a granola bar. I dutifully chewed and swallowed and drank the water. I prayed I'd feel more settled, sure that this was what I wanted.

When I'd finished eating, my stomach felt slightly better. "Can I have a few seconds to myself before we start?"

"Of course," Gia said as she ushered everyone out of the room. She didn't ask any questions before she closed the door behind her.

I let out the breath I'd been holding. The dress was tight. I ended up going with the beaded and embroidered dress my mother liked. Not the lacy, flowing one that would have looked amazing with a crown of flowers on my head.

Mother had insisted that this was the dress a bride of my stature would wear, even if I was getting married on a farm and holding my reception in a barn. I was sure there was an insult in there somewhere, but I didn't care enough to protest.

When I thought about having to walk down the aisle toward James, my heart rate picked up, and my chest tightened.

I drew in a deep breath, wishing I'd eloped. Surely, that would have been easier than facing the wedding guests who'd expect me to be happy and overwhelmed with emotion.

I stood and wandered over to the window. All I could see were Christmas trees lining the hills and twinkly lights that were lit from dusk until dawn this time of the year on the Monroes' farm. It was beautiful, and the sight calmed me more than anything else.

I wondered if Emmett was nearby. Gia had told him he wasn't needed at the event itself. That he could focus on the tree-selling side of the business, but I couldn't help but hope to see him. It was ridiculous because he was a business partner and nothing more. We'd been careful to avoid each other since the bathtub incident.

A knock sounded on the door, and I placed a hand on my stomach to settle it. "Come in."

A small blonde woman entered and closed the door behind her.

Expecting to see Gia, I frowned. "You can't be in here. This is the bridal suite."

The bridal suite was a trailer we'd rented for the bridal party to get ready.

"I promise I'll be quick."

"I can't imagine what you'd have to say to me." I was fairly sure I'd never seen this woman before.

"I'm Maya. I'm James's girlfriend." Her voice shook slightly.

"Excuse me?" I wasn't sure I heard her correctly. James was her boyfriend?

Maya nodded. "I've been seeing James for two years."

"James? *My* James? The one that's waiting for me out there?" I asked, waving a hand in the general direction of the ceremony. I felt like she knew the ending to a book I hadn't read.

"James Whitmore."

I swayed on my feet, feeling lightheaded all over again. “You’re dating my fiancé?”

Her lip curled into a sneer. “I believe you’re fucking my boyfriend.”

I didn’t think it would help to point out we hadn’t been in the same room to have sex in months. I’d been too busy between work and planning my wedding, and we lived far apart. Neither one of us had made the trek to visit the other, and maybe that should have tipped me off that something was wrong. “Why would James date me if he was already with you?”

Maya sneered. “Because you’re the kind of woman he can marry. He wants your trust fund.”

I blinked, even more confused. “Why would James need my trust fund? He comes from money.”

“His father is a drunk and spent most of it. James is desperate to gain yours.” Maya’s words came out faster, as if she’d been holding this information inside for too long.

“No.” That couldn’t be it. James never acted like he was desperate or hurting for money.

“Did you sign a prenup?” Maya folded her arms over her chest.

“That isn’t your business.” I hadn’t mentioned it because I wanted to show James I trusted him. That I didn’t expect our marriage to end in divorce. He hadn’t mentioned it either, and a man who came from his kind of family probably would have. It was another red flag I’d stupidly ignored. “Who are you?”

“I’m nobody. I didn’t come from the right kind of family for him to marry. He said he’d keep me on the side. That his

marriage to you was just to help his family, and he could give me money too. He didn't love you. You were a means to an end. But I couldn't stand by while he married someone else and possibly had kids with you. I didn't want to be his mistress."

Maya kept talking, but I couldn't listen anymore.

I sat on the settee, my hand still covering my rolling stomach. I'd felt like something was wrong, but I hadn't heeded my intuition. Instead, I'd continued forward, thinking I'd found the one. That I was different from my parents. I blinked away the sting of tears. I was wrong.

Maya was screeching at this point, and I'd had enough. "Get out."

Her hand was on her hip. "Don't you want to know the details?"

"I don't care anymore. Get out of my suite." I stood and gathered every one of the refined manners my mother had taught me. When attacked, you must carefully cover your hurt and become a mask of indifference. I was a queen, and I'd fall apart later, when I was alone.

Maya whirled and slammed the door shut behind her.

My mind was racing, my heart thumping wildly. What should I do? There were over a hundred guests waiting for me to walk down the aisle.

Before I could decide, a softer knock sounded, and Gia popped her head inside. "Are you ready to become *Mrs. Whitmore*?"

When she saw my expression, her smile faded, and she closed and locked the door behind her. "What happened?"

“James’s girlfriend was just here. Apparently, he was planning to marry me to get to my trust fund.”

“Did he sign a prenup?” Gia asked.

I shook my head, feeling a little sick to my stomach.

“You’re a romantic, and that’s not a bad thing, but at least you didn’t marry him. What do you want me to do?” Gia asked, ever the professional.

“How do I know if she’s telling the truth?” I asked her, wondering if I was making the right decision.

“I’m happy to bring him in here if that’s what you want.”

“I think I should talk to him.” Maya could be lying, although I didn’t sense she was. There was hurt and pain in her eyes. The sad part was, I suspected she’d take him back despite his crazy plan to marry someone else for money.

Gia hugged me. “You’re going to be fine either way.”

Gia left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

I wasn’t strong and confident like Gia. There was a little girl inside me that wanted the happily ever after. How had I been so wrong about him? I drew in a deep breath and let it out when the door opened again.

James followed Gia inside the room, then she left us alone.

He looked around uneasily. “Isn’t it bad luck to see the bride before the wedding?”

“Maya came to see me a few minutes ago. She said she’s your girlfriend.”

James’s eyes widened, and his nostrils flared.

My fingers curled into fists at my side. “Tell me she was lying.”

He rocked back on his heels. "I can't."

"Is everything she said true? You were dating her first but needed me for my money?"

James held his hand up. "You can't tell anyone about this."

"Fuck you, James." I'd never sworn in front of someone in my entire life. My mother would have had a heart attack, but this situation called for it. "You deserve the same respect you gave me."

I moved to shift past him, but he grabbed my arm. "Tell me you won't tell anyone about my financial situation."

"I'll tell everyone you cheated on me and that you were after my money."

He winced. "Please, don't."

I shook my arm away from him. "I don't care what they say about you because it's true. You're the worst kind of person. You knew how I felt about marriage. I wanted something real, and you deceived me."

James shook his head. "You made it so easy."

I moved my hand to my sternum. "How did I do that?"

"You want to be loved so desperately."

I bit off another curse and grabbed the doorknob to leave. I was beyond done with this conversation.

"Please, Ireland."

"I don't owe you anything. Don't contact me again." I didn't have anything at his place, so this split would be relatively easy. There was just the matter of the hundred or so people waiting for us to get married.

When I opened the door, Gia was there. She took one look at my face and pulled me down the hall and away from James. Aria entered the bridal suite, probably to control the situation with my ex until Gia could handle the guests. She would do everything with grace and ease. I'd never been so appreciative of my friend.

Gia's face softened as she considered me. "I'll tell the guests the wedding is off. Just say the word."

I drew up to my full height, wishing I'd thought to change out of my dress before I left the dressing room. "I'm not marrying James. But I don't know what to do."

"I'll call for a car to come around back. No one will see you." Gia pulled out her phone.

I didn't want to talk to my parents or my brother, Finn, right now. I was so ashamed that I'd misjudged James. I wasn't sure where I would tell the driver to take me. I could go home, but what if James showed up, wanting to talk?

"It's cold outside. Wear your coat." Gia grabbed the coat from a hook by the door to the bridal suite and placed it over my shoulders.

I wrapped the white fur coat over my dress, wanting to disappear inside it. I didn't want to deal with the guests, my family, or the knowing looks. No one expected my marriage to last any longer than my parents'. But I hadn't expected not to make it to the altar.

"The driver will be here in a few minutes." She put her arm around me and guided me toward the door. "You're doing the right thing."

"He was cheating on me our entire relationship." It hurt to say that out loud. How stupid could I be?

“That’s on him. Not you. None of this is your fault.”

I was too trusting, too vulnerable, too needy. James said it was easy to take advantage of me. Had my upbringing brought me to this point? Was I so desperate for love that I’d date any man?

“I promise, you are going to come out of this situation stronger, and you can use what you learned for good.”

I couldn’t see that, and I wasn’t sure I ever would.

Gia opened the back door. “I’ll make sure no one comes this way.”

“Thank you.”

She hugged me quickly. “That’s what friends are for. Now go.”

The urgency in her tone moved my feet. I opened the door, and the rush of cold air felt good on my face. But I was alone at the back of the building. There was nothing but rows and rows of trees.

I wanted to see the waterfall Emmett had shown me the day we’d picked the spot for the ceremony.

Not waiting for the car, I lifted my skirts and ran as fast I could in my heeled boots. Nothing about my outfit was practical. I hadn’t planned on running anywhere. But I wasn’t thinking clearly. I wanted to get to the place that made everything inside me calm.

When I was out of sight of the tents and the building we’d used to get ready for the ceremony, I slowed to a walk, trying to remember where the private spot was. Remembering it was near the woods, I headed in that direction, enjoying the smell of pine and the air that hinted at snow.

For the first time in forever, I hoped flakes would start to fall earlier than the forecasters predicted. I wanted to feel the sting on my cheeks.

I didn't want to think about the wedding guests, my family, what Gia told them, or anything else.

I couldn't believe I'd been duped so easily. Yet at the same time, I was grateful Maya had told me before I married him. I couldn't imagine going through with the wedding and finding out later after our lives were intertwined.

I let my lungs fill with air, feeling grateful for Maya's conscience.

I felt nothing but relief when I heard the trickling waterfall. I sank down in front of it without a care about my dress.

I had no plans to return it or sell it. At this point, it was bad luck. Who would want it?

I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the sky, breathing in the cool air, being present in the moment. Feeling the sting of the wind on my hands, the bite of it on my nose, and the tears that threatened to spill over.

I wouldn't cry for James. Not when our entire relationship was a lie. I had no plans for what to do or where to go. I just wanted to be present in the moment, in this space that made me feel grounded.

CHAPTER 5



EMMETT

I stepped onto my porch to drink my coffee. I'd worked the tree farm all day, and I'd taken the evening off. I didn't want to chance seeing Ireland in a wedding dress getting married to someone else.

The temperature was dipping. I wondered if the weather forecaster was right for a change, and we'd get an early snowfall. Winters in Maryland were unpredictable. Sometimes we'd get large snowfalls, and other times we might not see snow for an entire season. I loved the occasional storm. It meant a day or two without crowds.

I'd avoided Ireland since that phone call. It was poor judgment on my part. I'd had to bite my tongue hard to avoid asking her to lower the camera.

Thankfully, Gia and Aria had taken over the planning. Being around Ireland wasn't good for me, especially not when she was with someone else.

I heard a snuffle, placed my mug on the railing, and went in the direction of the noise to investigate. Maybe it was a wedding guest who'd walked too far from the ceremony or had gotten lost on the way to the barn.

When I glanced at my phone, it was early enough that the ceremony should still be going on. Down the hill, I saw a

woman in a white dress. She was sitting in front of the waterfall, the gown floating around her.

She looked like an angel who'd fallen from the sky and was resting in my garden. When I saw the dark hair under the veil, my first thought was that it was Ireland.

There weren't any other brides scheduled to be on Monroe Christmas Tree Farm today.

I moved closer, but not so fast as to startle her. Her eyes were closed. "Ireland?"

Blinking, she scrambled to her feet. "Emmett."

I reached out to steady her with a hand on her elbow. She wore a thick white coat lined with fur that only highlighted her pink cheeks. Underneath, her dress was covered by an intricate pattern of beads. Her shoulders drooped, as if the weight was too much for her to bear.

She brushed the leaves and grass off the dress of her skirt, her face averted from mine. "I'm sorry to invade your space. I just needed to be somewhere I could think. This was the first place I could think of."

My heart twisted at the possibilities as to why she'd be here and not at her wedding. "I don't mind, but aren't you supposed to be getting married?"

She laughed, but there was no humor in it. "Not anymore."

"What happened?" My first thought was that he'd left her at the altar, and the blood pounded in my ears.

Ireland's eyes were pained as she reached for the pins that tied her veil to her hair. "If I was being honest with myself, I would have acknowledged earlier that something was off between us."

I moved closer to help her, my heart skipping a beat at her admission. “You waited until your wedding day to break it off?”

“I didn’t have all of the facts until I was already dressed like this.” She floated her hands out to her sides to indicate her dress.

I carefully pulled the pins out one by one. When I finally got to the last one, I lifted the veil from her hair.

“I hadn’t realized how painful that was. You know, with all those pins,” Ireland said as she continued searching for and releasing the ones that contained her complicated updo.

“I’ll get them,” I said because her movements were jerky. I didn’t want her to cry. Normally, I’d want to get away from a woman who was near tears, especially when I hadn’t caused them. But there was something about her vulnerability that made me want to help her. “What made you change your mind?”

“James’s girlfriend, Maya, confronted me in the bridal suite before the ceremony.”

I paused, wondering if I’d heard her right. “Did you say, *his girlfriend?*”

Ireland nodded her head. “They were dating before he met me. Apparently, he just wanted my money.”

“What a piece of—” I broke off, not quite believing that someone would use Ireland for her money. “I never thought he was good enough for you.”

“I wanted the forever kind of love, what my parents searched for and couldn’t find. But it doesn’t exist. I’m such an idiot.” Her shoulders slumped.

“You’re not an idiot.” I hated that she thought of herself that way.

“James said it was easy to deceive me. He searched for someone gullible, and I was the perfect fit.”

“He deceived and used you.”

Ireland flinched at my words. I wasn’t good at making anyone feel better, much less a woman who’d been scorned on her wedding day.

“None of what happened was your fault.” I pulled the final pin from her hair, and Ireland’s eyes closed as she breathed a sigh of relief.

I ran my fingers through her hair, sifting through the knots as it tumbled around her shoulders.

“That feels amazing.”

To distract myself from the feel of her hair in my fingers, I stepped back and said, “It’s going to snow. I can feel it in the air.”

Ireland turned to face me and smiled. “I hope it’s a big storm. I could really use one.”

“Why is that?” I asked softly, not wanting to ruin the moment. Even though she was devastated, and her wedding day ruined, my chest swelled with emotion. This moment felt huge.

“I want to disappear from the world. I want to hide out until no one remembers what happened.”

“I can understand that.” It wasn’t that long ago that I faced similar feelings.

Her eyes opened slowly, adjusting to the light. “But it’s not like that in real life. I’m going to have to face everyone eventually.”

My jaw tightened. I’d keep everyone away from her. “Not today.”

“Where should I go? Gia ordered a car, but I ran before it arrived.” Ireland looked around frantically, and I felt bad that I’d interrupted her solitude.

“You can hide at my place. At least until your guests leave.” I couldn’t believe I’d offered up the one place I didn’t share with anyone outside of my family.

Her eyes widened. “You would do that for me?”

The wind picked up, lifting the leaves. “I want to help. Can you walk to my house?”

Ireland lifted her skirt to make her way up the hill. “I ran here.”

I chuckled. “You ran from your own wedding. Isn’t that called something?”

Ireland smiled wistfully. “A runaway bride.”

I snapped my fingers. “That’s it.”

Ireland laughed softly, then sobered. “I never thought this would happen. I’ve always been worried I’ll choose the wrong guy, and it won’t work out. But I never imagined it happening on my wedding day.”

“James set out to use someone, and, for whatever reason, he chose you. You’re not an idiot because you believed his lies. You’re a good person.” I didn’t know her well, but everything I’d heard only made me like her more. Plus, she loved the farm.

My ex, Molly, resented the time the farm took away from her. She never recognized that this place was in my blood.

I held my hand under her elbow as we crested the hill and headed in the direction of my cabin.

“I can’t believe you get to live here. The trees and the rolling hills. Then you have these woods and the hidden treasures you built.”

“I discover more every time I go for a walk. We even have a pond.”

Ireland raised her brow. “I’d love to see it.”

“Maybe I can show it to you later.”

“If you don’t mind hanging out with a woman in a wedding dress all day.”

I raised a brow. “I think I can find something for you to wear... unless you’re partial to the dress?”

Ireland frowned. “Definitely not.”

We walked along the path on the ridge that was lined with lights strung between poles. It was dusk, and the light illuminated our walk. No one came out this far on the farm unless it was to see me.

I hadn’t brought a woman home since Molly. This place had become my sanctuary from everything, and I never wanted to permeate that space with someone else. Until now.

My desire to soothe Ireland, to show her what made this place special to me, overrode my usual concerns.

“Let’s get you out of that dress, and we can explore before the snow starts.”

Ireland lifted her face to the gray clouds. “When do you think that will be?”

“Feel how it’s getting colder, and the wind is picking up?”

Ireland nodded.

“The snow clouds are already here. It’s just a matter of time.”

“Are you better at predicting the weather than the meteorologist on TV?” Ireland asked.

“They talk about probabilities for a large geographical area. I’m only observing what happens in my corner of the world.”

“It’s a beautiful corner of the world. Thank you for sharing it with me.”

“Any time,” I said gruffly as I led her onto the wraparound porch and opened the front door. I hadn’t bothered to lock it when I came out.

“Is that your coffee?” Ireland asked, pointing to the now-cold mug.

“It was. I’ll get us some more.”

“I’d like that,” Ireland said as I opened the door and waited for her to lift her skirts and step inside.

She stood in the foyer, taking in the large space. There was an open-plan kitchen and a vaulted great room with a huge sectional, fireplace, and picture of the farm over the natural wood mantle. It was a chunk of wood I found on the property and sanded.

A blanket hung over the back of the sectional, and a thick rug covered the wood floors. My bedroom was a loft above the

great room. There were two more guest rooms on the first floor and one in the basement, but I never had a need to use those. When I built the place, my brothers pressured me to add the extra rooms for resale value. But I never had a need to fill them, and who would we sell to? The house was part of the overall farm. We'd never section it off to sell to anyone else.

This place was a part of our family's history. None of us would sell any part of it. That's why it was so important for us to find a way to make it viable to generate year-round income. It had to support my mother in her retirement, me, and my brothers. I'd taken over the managing of the farm and trees after my father died.

“This place is gorgeous.”

My chest tightened because Molly hadn't liked it. When she broke up with me, she said she didn't want to be stuck living on a farm. She felt trapped by it.

After that, I was resigned to never finding anyone who'd appreciate the farm life and want what I did. It was selfish to assume anyone else could fall in love with this farm and the lifestyle. It was a year-round responsibility. If I didn't maintain the trees, we wouldn't have a business.

“I'm glad you like it,” I said as I emptied the cold coffee into the sink and poured a new one for Ireland. I set it on the counter. “Would you like to change?”

She nodded gratefully. “Please.”

“I'll get something from my room, and you can change in the guest bathroom.” The guest rooms shared a full bath, and there was a separate powder room for guests. I'd never been so grateful my brothers insisted I add all these amenities. I had a feeling Ireland would appreciate them. Even though she acted

down-to-earth, I'd bet anything she was accustomed to a certain level of luxury.

I'd splurged when I built this place because, like the farm, it was my safe place, my sanctuary. I hoped I'd share it with someone one day, but after Molly, I knew that wouldn't happen.

I jogged up the steps to my loft and quickly rifled through my drawers to find a pair of sweatpants, a T-shirt, and a sweatshirt. I folded them carefully and joined Ireland, where she was looking at pictures on the bookshelves that spanned the entire length of the wall in the great room. The bottom was cupboards, and the top was bookshelves.

Ireland saw me and smiled. "I bet this was an amazing place to grow up."

"We hid in the fields of trees for hide-and-seek, played graveyard tag after dark, and roasted marshmallows over the fire. I swear we always had leaves and twigs in our hair and clothes. I think we drove our parents crazy."

"It looks like you were loved."

"We were." That was never in question. Our home and the farm were filled with love. My brothers and I were accepted for the rough-and-tumble kids we were. My parents didn't try to change us. "I'll take you to the guest bathroom. Follow me."

I led the way through the guest room that doubled as an office and into the Jack and Jill bath. It was spacious, with a shower and stand-alone tub.

"Can I take a bath?" Ireland asked when she spied the modern white tub in front of the large expanse of windows.

"Would you like to do that now or explore the pond first?"

Her lips quirked. “The pond first. Then the bath. I can’t get over this place. I love it so much. If I were you, I’d never leave.”

“I mean, I don’t. Not really. I work in the shed out back and on the farm. I order groceries to be delivered for me and my mom. I don’t need to go into town for anything.”

“You never leave?”

“Not often. Everything I need is here.” My heart might be yearning for something more, but she was fresh off a breakup. Her fiancé cheated on her, and she needed time to heal. I didn’t want to be anyone’s guy, much less the rebound. “I’ll let you change.”

Ireland touched my arm, the heat of her palm searing my skin. “Thank you, Emmett. I really appreciate you letting me impose like this.”

“You’re not an imposition,” I said gruffly as I raced to escape the small space. I wanted to kiss her, and she was just looking for a safe place to lick her wounds.

I was the worst kind of guy to be attracted to someone who was set to walk down the aisle to someone else just a few short hours ago.

To get my mind off Ireland, I texted Gia that she was safe at my place and would most likely stay the night, or I’d drive her home. I was in no rush for Ireland to leave. I was worried about her, and I had a feeling she’d fall apart if left alone. I wanted to hold her together.

It was ridiculous because we weren’t close. We weren’t even friends. We were business partners, coworkers at best. I had no right to be having all these feelings.

I sipped my coffee, giving myself a stern talking-to. Ireland wasn't for me. She was getting over a breakup. I wouldn't take advantage of her, no matter how attracted I was to her.

I did a quick search on my phone for her fiancé. He looked like an asshole on paper. He went to the best schools and worked for his daddy's law firm. He wanted a trophy wife, one he could steal from. He wasn't a man who deserved Ireland. She needed someone who appreciated every part of her.

The door to the guest room opened, and Ireland stepped out. Her hair fell loosely over her shoulders, the sweatshirt and pants swallowing her.

"I have some boots that my mom keeps here when she visits. You can wear those."

"I don't want to put you out," Ireland said, looking uncertain.

"You're not," I said as I handed the shoes to her. "They should fit."

Ireland stepped into the boots and crossed the distance between us to wrap her arms around my waist. I sucked in a breath as she rested her cheek against my chest. Christ. What was this woman doing to me?

"Is this okay?" she murmured against my pec.

It was more than okay, but I wrapped my arms around her and lowered my head until my chin brushed the hair on her head. "Of course."

"I needed that," Ireland said as she stepped back.

I cleared my throat to cover the way my body had reacted to her soft body pressed against mine. It would be a good idea

to send her on her way, but I was a selfish bastard. “You ready to see the pond?”

“Yes,” Ireland said with a smile.

When I first saw her at the waterfall, she’d seemed serene, but when she opened her eyes, I’d seen the anguish in them. This was a tough day for her, and I wanted to help her forget about everything. She could worry about the guests, her family, and what her life would look like going forward tomorrow. Today, I wanted to be a place where she could hide.

I grabbed a coat for myself and a spare for Ireland, and we headed into the night.

“It’s even more beautiful when it’s dark,” Ireland said as we walked the lit path through the woods. “I can’t believe you hung all these lights.”

“After my dad died, we all chipped in and strung them on the paths throughout the property. Mom was going for late-night walks to clear her mind when she couldn’t sleep.”

“I love that you did that for her.”

There was something about walking these paths with Ireland that felt different than when I did it by myself or with one of my brothers or even my mother. I had this crazy vision of us doing this every day. Maybe even with kids running ahead of us, laughing and chasing each other. It was such a vivid picture that the hair on my neck stood on end.

CHAPTER 6



IRELAND

When Emmett fell silent, I nudged his arm with my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

He glanced up at me as if surprised to find that he wasn’t alone. “I was just thinking about how nice this is.”

Pleasure unfurled in my chest that he was having a good time with me. Especially when I’d just run away from my wedding. “You walk the property a lot?”

Emmett nodded. “I have to check on the trees to monitor their growth. I predict which fields will be cut each year, and I like to make sure we don’t have any vandals or trespassers.”

“You get a lot of those?” I asked, surprised.

“Not really. It’s just an excuse to walk. I love it out here. The solitude. The sound of the wind rustling the branches.”

“You’re a solitary guy.”

My lips twitched. “Usually.”

“I guess that’s hard when there’s a runaway bride on your property,” I teased, needing to make light of the situation.

He touched my arm ever so lightly, and his hand moved down until his palm was nestled against mine. “I don’t mind.”

“I was supposed to be showing you how great weddings could be on your farm, but mine was a disaster. I ruined everything.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“So, you wouldn’t mind hosting more?” I asked, hopefully.

He chuckled. “I wouldn’t say that either.”

I groaned. “Gia’s going to kill me.”

“It’s not your fault your fiancé is an asshole.”

“This was supposed to be a business thing, but I’ve ruined it for Gia. She said she was looking to hire a manager. I guess I didn’t impress her with this one. She’ll probably give it to Aria now.” I shrugged.

“You can’t marry a guy who has a girlfriend just to close a business deal.”

I snort-laughed. “When I confronted James, he asked me not to tell everyone he was after my money. He didn’t care that he’d be labeled a cheater.”

“He wasn’t the right guy for you,” Emmett said gruffly.

“Do you believe in soulmates? That there’s someone out there meant for you?” I asked.

“No,” he said with confidence.

I tipped my head to the side. “Have you been hurt before too?”

He sighed. “My fiancée left me at the altar. She didn’t tell me why, other than to say she couldn’t go through with it. I was shocked and scrambling for an answer. I thought everything was fine, but it wasn’t. I questioned my judgment after that.”

“She never told you why?” At least I had closure.

“We talked a few months after the wedding. She was already dating someone else and saying he was the one.”

“You think she jumps from one man to another?”

“We dated for two years. She said I didn’t see her. That I was so focused on the farm and the business, I didn’t care about her. I wasn’t involved enough with the wedding planning.”

“Did she ask you to be?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“She seemed happy to make the decisions with her mother, and I didn’t particularly enjoy spending time with her mother.”

“You can’t fix what she doesn’t tell you. If she led you to believe everything was fine, how are you to know she was having doubts?”

“I guess.”

I wondered if he blamed himself.

“It was humiliating to be left at the altar. People assumed I cheated on her. But I’d never do that to anyone.” His tone was genuine, his hurt palpable.

“I believe you.”

Emmett shrugged as the trees thinned out. “I just wished she’d figured it out sooner.”

The moon shone over the water, and the lights circled the perimeter.

“This is set up so beautifully. How do you manage the electricity for all these lights?”

“We use solar power. So, they won’t last all night.”

“That’s smart.”

We sat on a bench in the gazebo by the water. “Did you make this?”

Emmett stretched his arm over the back of the bench. “I wanted to see if I could do it and practiced until I got better. Then people asked if I’d consider selling them, and that’s how my woodworking business got started. Now I make indoor furniture, tables, dressers, and side hutches too.”

“That’s amazing. I love things made by hand. I support a few clothing designers who still make their own clothing. I appreciate the time and effort that goes into creating it.”

There was a dock that jutted out over the water. “Do you swim here?”

“More when we were kids. We’d make a day of it and bring a picnic lunch. There used to be a swing that went over the water, but the tree died a few years ago.”

“I bet your mom looks forward to the day there are grandkids here.”

“My brother has a little girl, but the rest of us aren’t too keen on settling down. At least not anymore.”

“I’d say men don’t commit, but my mom found a fair number of them to marry,” I said wryly.

“You can’t judge everyone by your experiences.”

“That’s true. But today I want to wallow.”

He played with the strands of my hair. “I’ll give you that. But tomorrow—”

“I’ll deal with the fallout.” Secretly, I hoped to hide out in my apartment for at least a week. Maybe I could work from

home. “How humiliating will it be to tell my clients I didn’t get married? That my fiancé was cheating on me.”

“Just tell them the truth. What do you care what they think?” His voice rumbled along the back of the bench, and I felt it in my chest.

“It’s not good for business. No one wants the bad luck, especially not with their wedding coming up so soon.”

“Not your fault.”

I sighed. “You’re being so nice to me. And we don’t even know each other.”

He shifted on the bench. “I don’t know about that. We’ve shared our ex stories, so we must be close.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Friends, then.”

He didn’t answer, and when I turned to face him, he said, “I don’t know if I can be friends with you.”

“Why not?” I asked, a little surprised.

“I’ve liked you since the first time we met.”

I opened and then closed my mouth before finally gathering my thoughts enough to respond. “You were attracted to me?”

“Until you said you were engaged and wanted your wedding on my farm.”

“Why didn’t you refuse?” I couldn’t get over the shock of his admission.

“Because you wanted to get married here, and I wanted you to be happy.”

“I don’t even know what to say. That’s incredibly kind of you.”

“But that’s also the reason why being around you is dangerous for me.”

We’d originally met before I’d met James. He’d been so grumpy. I never would have guessed his feelings. “You can’t control yourself around me?” I teased.

“Not exactly. But you’re coming off a breakup. You need time to come to terms with that.”

I looked out over the water. “That’s the interesting thing. We weren’t close. Once we were engaged, James stayed in Baltimore. That’s where he lived and worked, and I didn’t think anything of it. I didn’t want to make the commute when I lived and worked in Annapolis. Looking back, I’m not even sure I was in love with him. That’s not how a couple in love acts, right?” I wasn’t even sure I had a good example of what a couple in love looked like. My parents fell hard and fast, got married, and it fell apart even faster.

“I’m not sure I’m the guy to ask.”

“I think I liked the idea of him and who he represented.” I wanted someone to love me so badly.

“That makes it sound like you were looking for a man with a certain social status.”

I shook my head. “That’s not what I was saying. I just wanted someone to love me. A good man. One who was responsible.”

“Sounds like he wasn’t.”

“I knew he was having trouble at work because he was one of the partner’s sons. But I had no idea his family lost all their money. I can’t even imagine.”

“James didn’t have a trust fund?”

“He never said, and I didn’t ask. My mother always said it was impolite to talk about money.”

“Maybe. But if you’re marrying someone, it’s probably a good idea to know what you’re getting into.”

“I thought I could trust him. How will I ever trust my judgment again?”

“That one takes a while. I’m not sure I’m there yet. I haven’t dated anyone seriously since Molly. I haven’t even been interested in anyone in the same way.” I’d attempted to go on a few dates, but I couldn’t help but think that no woman would want to be tied to the farm like I was.

“How long has it been?” I asked, needing to know how he dealt with his heartbreak.

Emmett dipped his chin. “Two years.”

My heart sank. “That’s a long time.”

Emmett nodded. “I focused on myself, the farm, and my family. The things that matter.”

“And you gave up on the idea of meeting someone and falling in love.” That felt sad to me.

“I guess I did. That doesn’t mean you have to close yourself off to love.”

I shrugged. “Look at my track record. Look at my parents.”

“What about your brother? Didn’t you say he just found someone when he wasn’t looking? When he didn’t believe in relationships?”

I smiled. “Yeah, he was playing his guitar at our weddings, and my then-roommate, Aria, is another wedding planner. I

think it started out as physical because they didn't agree on relationships and love. She was a romantic, and he was jaded. But they both fell hard." It made for a fairy tale, one I wanted for myself.

"That's your example of what a good relationship is."

"I guess you're right. It's just that they're so new. I'm sure most people have parents who've been together for decades."

"Not necessarily. Growing up, a lot of my friends' parents were divorced. But even if you can't find a good example of what you want, if you want it badly enough, you can still create whatever experiences in life you desire."

"That's the thing—I don't think I want it anymore. I thought I could be different than my parents, but I was wrong."

Emmett lowered his arm so that his hand squeezed my shoulder. "Don't let one bad relationship define you."

"Isn't that what you've done?"

Emmett was quiet for so long that I wasn't sure he was going to answer. "I guess you're right. I have closed myself off to the possibility of meeting someone."

With Emmett's arm resting over my shoulders, I allowed myself to indulge, and I snuggled against his chest. His arm tightened around me, providing warmth from the wind picking up.

"We should head back. I have a feeling the snow is coming in quicker than expected."

"Am I going to get snowed in?" I asked as we stood and left the gazebo.

“You might. But we have snowmobiles, four-wheel drive vehicles, and a plow we can hitch to our trucks. So you won’t be stuck for long. The main roads are another matter.”

We got snow sporadically in Maryland, and when a big one hit, the road crews usually weren’t prepared. “It’s November. I bet it will be too warm to stick around.”

“You’re probably right. We don’t usually get much snow during the tree-cutting season.”

“Will it affect sales?” I asked him.

“It will just delay it for a few days, and then we’ll be even busier. If you want a tree, a snowstorm won’t stop you from getting it before Christmas.”

“Do you have any family traditions?”

Emmett smiled wide, and it was the biggest, most genuine smile I’d ever seen on his face. It stole the breath from my lungs. “We were allowed to decorate one of the trees that were still in the ground. Each year, we’d pick one. Some years, we’d go for the biggest; other years, my brothers would think it was funny to do a baby tree. But we’d trek all over the farm looking for the perfect candidate. We had more fun looking for the tree than decorating it. Then we’d take a family photo and use it for our holiday cards that year.”

“Did you cut a tree for your house?” I asked him.

“Yeah, but for some reason, decorating one still in the ground was more fun for a bunch of kids with a lot of energy.”

“If it was far away, you wouldn’t see it from the house.”

“We didn’t care about that. We’d race to the tree each day to make sure the decorations hadn’t blown away during the night. Then we’d redecorate.”

“That’s a sweet tradition.” I could see the boys racing through the cold morning to find their chosen tree.

“It’s different.”

“Well, most people don’t grow up on a real Christmas tree farm. You were lucky.”

“I always thought this place was magical.”

With the never-ending paths lit with twinkly lights, the pond, the hidden waterfall, and the various spots they’d created over the years to gather, it was. “I really wanted to get married here. The decorations, the trees, everything was perfect.”

“Except for the groom.”

I laughed. “Right? He was awful.”

“Everyone should be gone. Do you want to see your reception hall?”

I stopped in the path, my heart beating fast. “Are you serious?”

“I don’t think Gia took anything down. She was too busy clearing out the tent for the ceremony. Harrison only removed the chairs. She said she’d deal with the barn later.”

“I’d love to see it.” But on the other hand, I worried how I’d react. I reminded myself that I created the décor. James wasn’t involved in anything, and that should have been my signal things weren’t right.

Emmett grabbed my hand and led the way to the barn where, a few hours ago, I thought I’d be having a party to celebrate my marriage. Now I just felt weird about the whole thing. The lights still hung on the porch, flowers twining around the poles.

Emmett paused by the door, still holding my hand. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“Let’s do it.” I had a feeling it would heal something inside me to see the reception. It didn’t represent my marriage to James. The entire thing was based on a lie.

He opened the door and let me walk in ahead of him. I took my time walking around the room, touching the flower petals. “I love the flowers, the greenery, the white and silver bulbs, and the glittery snowflakes.”

Emmett dropped my hand and scrolled through his phone. Music came over the speaker. Then he set it aside and asked, “Would you dance with me?”

“I’d love to.” I stepped into his arms, loving the feeling of being so close to him. His hand engulfed mine, the other spanning my back. It felt better than it should for someone who was so recently engaged.

“The barn looks the best it ever has.”

The tables were still set with plates and silverware. The centerpieces were exactly how I envisioned. “Gia did a great job of fulfilling my wishes.”

“I thought you were going to plan everything.”

“You know, it got to be too much, and I thought it was because it was my wedding, and not someone else’s. But now that I think about it, I wonder if I sensed that James wasn’t sincere.”

“Subconsciously, you knew he wasn’t true. That this wasn’t right.”

“That’s why I couldn’t seem to make any decisions or implement any of my ideas. I was stuck.”

“Sometimes you know what your conscious mind won’t acknowledge.”

“It was almost like my mind was protecting me.”

“I think you’ll look back on this day and be grateful you didn’t get married.”

I laughed. “I already am.”

“You won’t always feel like this. You’ll realize it was for the best. That you learned something from it, and you’ll take that into your next relationship.”

“I can’t see myself with anyone for a long time.” But it was a lie because I felt way too good in Emmett’s arms. I liked it when he held my hand on our walk. I enjoyed the tour of his property. I could see us dating. It was crazy because I wasn’t in any position to be having those thoughts.

“Look, it’s snowing,” Emmett murmured against my temple as we looked out the windows.

“It’s beautiful.” It made the evening even more magical.

His breath warmed my skin, and he held me tighter, as if this was the only moment we’d be this close, and he didn’t want to let me go. My heart squeezed at the thought.

My imagination was working overtime. I was still in a romantic mode after I woke up thinking it was my wedding day. I was just wrapped up in the magic that was the Monroe farm. In the morning, the sun would be bright, the snow already melting, and I’d remember that this wasn’t my life. The farm wasn’t in my future, and I’d be back to reality.

“Don’t worry about what people think. Just be here in this moment.”

I held him tighter. “Here is better.”

“Block everyone else out. It’s just you and me.”

I let out a sigh and relaxed into his arms. They tightened around me, his body hard and unyielding. I could easily fall for a man like Emmett. He was real and genuine. He wore his feelings on his sleeve, and he’d never use someone to get their money.

He’d built his own business so that it was sustainable. He was a real man. If only I was better at choosing good men for myself.

CHAPTER 7



EMMETT

I'd never felt anything better than holding her in my arms. It felt good. Too good. I was having thoughts I shouldn't be having. Like how it would be nice to kiss her, to see what she'd taste like. I had no business having any of these thoughts because she wasn't mine.

If things had gone differently, she'd be married to another man. But James had never been honest about their relationship.

If he were here in front of me, I'd knock him out. He was the worst kind of guy to use a woman for money. Especially someone like Ireland, who just wanted to love and be loved. Her desires were so pure. James should have spent his time building his own wealth, not inheriting his parents' or taking someone else's.

I held her tighter. I wanted to make her feel better, but it wasn't my place. She needed to get there on her own.

I thought a walk to the pond would help. A walk on the lit paths always lifted my spirits. I wanted her to see the barn she'd spent so much time designing. I'd never seen the barn look so good. It reminded me of her, classy and sweet. "The barn should always look this good."

Ireland looked up at me. “You think you’ll allow more weddings here?”

“Maybe one of my brothers’,” I said as she smacked me lightly.

“You know I meant weddings for other couples.”

“I knew what you meant. I’m not ready to make that decision yet. This one didn’t go according to plan. I’m not saying that would influence my decision. We got a feel for the number of people who’d be invited, the parking, and the planning involved. So that was good. But I need to talk to my brothers about it more because I think we need to add a separate lane for wedding traffic.”

“Gia will compensate you for any interruption to your holiday business.”

“I know she will. She has a good reputation.” I’d asked around after the first time she called my mother with her idea. Mom had been so excited, and I wanted to make her happy, but the idea of more strangers traipsing over the property year-round wasn’t attractive to me.

Ireland tipped her head to the side. “Then what’s your hesitation?”

My jaw tightened. “I don’t like inviting other people here. It’s my quiet place.”

“I get that now that I’ve seen it. I wouldn’t want to share it either.”

I spotted a row of bottles on a serving table by the kitchen. “You want some champagne?”

Ireland smiled. “I’d love some.”

I grabbed a few bottles of champagne and two glasses, knowing I didn't have any fancy glassware at home. "We can take these to my place and make a fire."

She took the glasses from me. "Let's go."

I wasn't sure if she was eager to escape the reception room or if she wanted to spend time at my place. I couldn't imagine it was the latter, but Ireland continued to surprise me.

I locked the door, and we took the path to my house. The snow was coming down harder.

"This place is like living on a campground. Everything you need is here."

"This was my dream when I went to school. I just wanted to live and work here, and never have to leave."

Ireland frowned as she tugged her coat around her tighter. "Were you teased as a kid?"

My lips twisted. "I grew up on a Christmas tree farm. It may seem like an ideal childhood, but other kids thought it was weird."

"Kids can pick on anything, but they were probably jealous. The way you described your childhood was idyllic to me. Nighttime tag, hide-and-seek in these woods. My childhood was more about piano and voice lessons, tutors, and being involved in the right activities and volunteer work. My parents were all about appearances."

"You grew up in a mansion?" I asked her, with no derision in my voice. I genuinely wanted to get to know her better.

"Pretty much. We moved quite often with my mom. She moved into her new husband's house, and we had to go along with her. My dad's house was the same one he'd grown up in.

It was filled with family history but cold and empty at the same time. There was no warmth. We didn't have family dinners. There were always charity dinners and golf tournaments. As kids, we weren't invited to those."

I imagined her childhood was lonely and riddled with periods of unease and upheaval. I felt for the little girl she was, and I knew why she wanted to find love so badly. "I always had the unconditional love of my family. We supported each other in life and in business. We had each other's backs. No matter what. Even if my family wanted to sign the deal with Gia, they were sensitive to my need for solitude."

She nudged my arm with her shoulder. "So you're the holdout."

"I'll admit it's all my fault. But in the end, I'll do what's best for everyone."

"Even if that means denying what you need the most?" Ireland asked, her tone laced with concern.

"Even then." I opened the door to my place, setting the bottles on the counter before moving to the fireplace to get one started. "If the power goes out, it will be nice to have the fire started."

"You'll lose power?" Ireland asked as she kicked off the boots and set them by the door.

"We have in the past. But don't worry. I have a generator. I'm prepared to be snowed in."

Ireland's eyes widened comically. "Do you think we will be?"

I nodded toward my phone. "They're calling for a Nor'easter. Haven't you been watching the weather?"

Ireland sighed heavily. “I was hoping James booked a flight out tonight so we wouldn’t need to worry about it.”

For a few seconds, I’d forgotten about her almost-wedding. “Where were you supposed to be going on your honeymoon? Maybe you can still take the trip.”

“I have no idea. James was in charge of it. He never discussed the details with me, and now I’m wondering if he planned anything at all.” This time, there was no pain in her voice as she talked about her ex.

I hoped that meant progress. The way she talked about him didn’t sound like they shared a great love for each other. It almost seemed like she wanted a relationship so badly that she ignored the signs that it wasn’t a healthy relationship. And James had his own agenda. Every time I thought about what he did to Ireland, the angrier I got.

I turned on the weather on my phone. *“Folks, it’s coming sooner than we thought. The clouds you see here will hover over our area longer, which means even more snow than we previously predicted. The temperatures will dip quickly through the night, the winds will pick up, and the snow will be heavy at times. Plows won’t be able to clear the roads before the second storm hits. Wherever you are, stay put. Road crews won’t be able to get out much during the night. If you have an emergency—”*

I turned it off and put the music back on.

Ireland raised a brow. “It sounds like I need to stay here tonight.”

I nodded. “Looks that way.”

“I could stay in your guest room.”

“Unfortunately, I never got around to furnishing them. One is an office, the other a storage room. I have another room in the basement, but there’s no bed, and it’s not ideal in the winter. It gets cold down there. If the power goes out, it will be best to stay here in the living room.”

“It’s a good thing you have a huge sectional.” Ireland sat on it and stretched her legs out in front of her.

“It was my one splurge. That and the king bed. I like to be comfortable, and as you can see, I’m a big guy.” I’d gotten the deep-seated cushions for the couch and extra ottomans so that I could stretch out.

“Oh, I can,” she murmured, and I wondered if she was attracted to me the first time we met.

“Are you ready for champagne?” I asked her.

She nodded eagerly. “Yes.”

“You aren’t nervous about being snowed in with me, are you?” I asked as I went into the kitchen and popped the cork.

“Of course not. You’re a good guy, and it sounds like you’re prepared for the storm. I feel like an idiot for not even looking at the weather reports.”

“If you could get married at any time of the year, when would you?” I asked her, knowing she was limited by the weekend we opened.

“Hmm. Maybe Christmas or New Year’s. I love the idea of getting married on the holiday.”

I popped the cork and poured two glasses. “Most women wouldn’t want to share their big day.”

She smiled as I handed her the glass. “I see it as making the day more magical.”

“Hopefully, you meet someone who comes with his own magic, and you won’t need to create more.”

Ireland’s eyes widened slightly. “I like the way you think.”

I lifted the glass, not recognizing the words coming out of my mouth. “What do you say we toast to more magic in our lives, to endless possibilities and more love.”

She smiled. “I’ll toast to more magic.”

“To magic,” I agreed as we clinked glasses and sipped the wine. “This is good, and I don’t even like champagne.”

“James chose it. Speaking of that, I need to figure out the money aspect. My parents paid for everything. Looking back, I’m sure James was happy about that. He couldn’t contribute anyway. That’s why he didn’t want a rehearsal dinner last night.”

I pointed my finger at her. “But we’re not going to worry about that tonight.”

I wrapped an arm around her and led her back to the couch. “Let’s enjoy the night. Maybe we can even go sledding tomorrow.”

“Are you serious?” she asked as we settled onto the couch, and I drew blankets over us.

“Absolutely. We can build a snowman, go sledding, or even snowmobiling. I don’t know about you, but when it snows, my brothers and I revert to being kids again. When the snow stops, we clear the roads so that people can get their trees as soon as the plows go through. But we should have a few hours of keeping everything to ourselves.”

“That sounds amazing. I want my own cabin in the woods.”

“It’s addictive. You want to watch a movie while we have power?”

“That sounds good.” She curled her feet under her while I flipped through the channels. “I never thought I’d be snuggled up on your couch on my wedding night.”

“I didn’t either.” I’d prefer her in my bed. But I had to keep those thoughts to myself. She wasn’t ready to hear about how I was still attracted to her. How I wanted to haul her into my arms and see if she tasted like the champagne we’d just drunk.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, handing her the remote.

“I am. I don’t think I ate much this morning.”

“I can make pizza or munchies.”

“Homemade pizza?” she asked me.

“I don’t make the dough, but we can pick our toppings.”

“Let’s do it.” She got up and followed me into the kitchen.

I pulled out the dough, the sauce, and the shredded mozzarella. “What do you like on it?”

Ireland sat on a stool at the island. “I can eat anything but anchovies.”

“Let’s do green peppers, olives, and pepperoni. I have those.” I grabbed the peppers and pepperoni from the fridge and the can of sliced olives from the pantry.

“Perfect,” Ireland said.

I pulled out a cutting board and a knife to slice the peppers while Ireland smoothed the sauce over the dough and added the cheese and the pepperoni. I’d never had a woman in my space. It was nice. I usually met women at a bar and went back

to their place in town. It was out of the way to come here, and I liked to keep this space for myself. Ever since Molly said she felt trapped when she stayed here.

Tonight, I had this sensation in my chest, a fullness that made me think that Ireland was different. She seemed to appreciate my cabin and the farm.

I couldn't remember a time when I willingly danced with anyone except my mother. Everyone said I was grumpy, and maybe I was. But I was wondering if it was more about the person that I was with.

As upset as I was for her, I was relieved she hadn't married James. He wasn't good enough for her. She deserved someone who'd cherish her, who'd listen to her wants and desires, and help her make all her dreams come true.

"I think that's enough peppers," Ireland said to me.

I lowered the knife, finally seeing the large pile of chopped peppers. "I wasn't paying attention."

Ireland laughed. "That's a little dangerous when you're wielding a knife."

"Eh," I said as I dumped the peppers onto the pizza.

"What were you thinking about?" Ireland asked.

I paused, taking the can opener out of the drawer. "How happy I am that you didn't marry that guy."

She smiled wide, and the sight of it took my breath away. "Me too."

I pointed the can opener at her. "You should be grateful to his girlfriend."

Ireland nodded seriously. “She did have impeccable timing. It’s always best to tell the bride you’ve been sleeping with her fiancé while she’s in the white dress waiting to walk down the aisle.”

We laughed as I opened the can of olives. I rinsed and drained them, and Ireland spread them around so they weren’t arranged in one big clump.

“At least you can joke about it already.”

Ireland smiled softly. “Yeah, that must mean something.”

I placed the pizza in the oven. “I hope you don’t mind me saying that you don’t seem crushed by what happened.”

Ireland sobered. “I think I saw what I wanted to see. He was so sweet and attentive at first. I assumed things would stay the same. And I suspect it wasn’t love.”

“I would have expected to see more tears.”

Ireland looked away. “Maybe that will come when I’m alone.”

I hated the idea of her crying herself to sleep. At least tonight, I’d be here for her. “Do you want some time alone?”

She shot me a grateful look. “If I need it, I’ll let you know.”

“We have twenty minutes for the pizza. Want to start that movie now?”

“I’d love to.” Ireland hopped down off the stool.

I cued up a comedy, one of my favorites she said she hadn’t seen. We sat in the middle of the sectional. I had my legs spread out in front of me, and hers were curled to the side.

I placed my arm over the back of the couch where she was sitting.

This thing between us was purely friendly. There was nothing wrong with sharing a meal together, watching a movie, and keeping an eye on her tonight. As long as I ignored the hum of awareness under my skin, it would be fine. She'd never suspect that I continued to harbor these feelings for her.

When the snow ended, I'd take her home and probably never see her again. Unless I agreed to host Gia's weddings here.

I pointed out my favorite parts of the movie to Ireland because I'd seen it a thousand times. She laughed at the funny parts and slapped my arm when she was surprised by something. When the timer sounded for the pizza, I was surprised the time had passed so quickly.

I'd never been so comfortable with a woman like this. We shared a lot of our histories with each other, and maybe that was why I felt so close to her. I wondered if she'd had these conversations with James, or if they'd kept it more surface level.

I pulled the pizza out to let it cool. Before I could slice it, the power flickered and then went out.

"Is it out for good?" Ireland asked.

"It might flicker on and off before it's out for the duration of the storm," I said as the lights came back on. I grabbed a small battery-powered lantern from under the sink, placing it on the counter for later. "I keep these lanterns in every room. The bathroom has one under the sink too."

Ireland sat on the stool at the island as I sliced the pizza and handed her a plate. "I kind of like the idea of being cut off

from the rest of the world, even if it's only for a day.”

“I like it too.” I was surprised she did. Most women liked to be near things: shops, internet connections, and life in general.

“It reminds me of snow days when we were kids. Although, we never lost power in the city.”

“Where did you live?”

“Roland Park.”

“The nice part of town.”

“There are nice pockets, and that's one of them. Where the judges and doctors lived.”

“You don't act like a girl born into privilege.”

“I guess I never felt like I was. I had friends who lived in less affluent areas whose parents were together. They felt richer to me. They had love. They weren't being shuttled from one house to another, forced to keep a smile on their face and pretend that everything was fine.”

“I wish I'd known you then.”

Ireland swallowed her piece of pizza and drank the water I'd placed in front of her. “What were you like as a kid?”

I shook my head at the memories of me and my brothers. “Wild. I couldn't sit still in school. I was forever getting in trouble for fidgeting. I didn't like to be cooped up back then.”

“I bet you're the same now. If you're inside too long, you'll need to go outside.”

“That's probably true. But I was happy at home with my family. I had a lot of brothers to play with, and I felt the love

from my parents. They let us run wild and explore. They thought it was important for us to let loose.”

“Your parents sound like amazing people.”

We ate until there were only a couple of slices left. I put it in the fridge for a late-night snack, and we settled on the couch to watch the rest of the movie. As much as I loved this movie, it was even better when you had someone to share the jokes with. I enjoyed experiencing it for the first time with her.

Ireland eventually rested her head on my shoulder. My eyes got heavy, but I was in no hurry to go to bed.

CHAPTER 8



IRELAND

*W*e must have drifted off. When I woke, I was lying on my side, with my cheek cushioned on a large bicep, a heavy weight rested over my stomach, and there was a wall of heat on my back.

Emmett.

The fire was mere embers, and it was cold. I barely suppressed the shiver when the arm tightened around my waist.

“The power’s out,” Emmett said gruffly.

I sat up slowly, trying to get my bearings.

Emmett swung his legs over the edge of the couch and stood to throw more logs on the fire. When it was burning brightly again, he said, “I’m going to head outside to turn on the generator. You stay here.”

“Are you sure you don’t need help?” I asked, not eager to go outside.

“It will only take a few minutes. I’d prefer you stay inside where it’s warm.”

I nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

I watched while he pulled on boots, his jacket, and gloves before opening the door. A gust of wind swirled around the room, making loose papers on the counter flutter before he closed it again.

Holding my arms to block out the cold, I went to look out the window. The entire landscape was covered in a blanket of white.

Clumps of snow and ice hung from the large pine trees. It was beautiful, and I was glad I was here to see it. Snow never looked like this in Baltimore or even where I lived in Annapolis.

The world felt silent. As if everyone was sleeping. I'd expected to hear the slice of a plow on the road, but we were so far away from anything resembling civilization that the only sound was the occasional clump of snow falling to the ground.

I couldn't see where Emmett went, but he'd been gone for a while, and I was worried he wasn't okay. Feeling a little useless, I pushed my feet into the boots I'd borrowed earlier and grabbed the jacket. When I opened the door, I wasn't prepared for the wind gust, and it almost flew out of my hand. It was difficult to get it to shut behind me.

I followed the footsteps Emmett left in the snow to the shed. The imprints were quickly filling with more snow. It was so dark I couldn't see anything, and not knowing anything about Emmett's property, I kept losing my sense of direction. The wind gusted, and the snow whipped across my face, stealing my vision.

I lost sight of the shed a few times and had to look for the house to confirm my location. I took a few more steps and walked into a solid wall. Hands gripped my upper arms.

“I told you to stay in the house.” Emmett’s voice carried over the snow.

“I was worried about you.”

“The generator’s running. Let’s get you back to the house,” Emmett said gruffly as he turned me around, and we walked together back to the house. He kept his arm banded around me so I wouldn’t fall or get lost.

“It’s coming down hard,” Emmett said when we finally made it to the porch, and he opened the door to usher me inside. I shivered as I kicked off the boots. Emmett closed the door with a bang and slid to the floor to help me with my socks.

“We need to get these clothes off you. Go over by the fire to warm up. I’ll bring you dry clothes.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said as my voice shook from the cold.

He shot me an irritated look. “Just listen to me this one time.”

I tried to smile, but my face was frozen. Instead, I nodded.

I went to warm my hands by the fire while he took the stairs to the loft. He returned with another sweatshirt and sweatpants. “Put these on while I get changed.”

I didn’t bother going into the bathroom because I wanted to stay where it was warm. Even being out there for a few minutes, I felt frozen, like I’d never move easily again. I finally pulled on the new clothes and folded the wet ones.

He jogged down the stairs. “I’ll make some hot chocolate. Sit on the couch and put the blankets on you.”

“You shouldn’t have followed me. You can easily lose your way in the snow, especially at night and when you don’t know the terrain.”

“I was worried about you,” I repeated, wondering if he heard me the first time.

Something flashed in his eyes, and I wondered if anyone looked after him. Or maybe as the eldest, he was the one taking care of everyone else. “You could have gotten lost.”

“But I didn’t.” I knew what I’d done was stupid and short-sighted, but I had to know he was okay. I couldn’t leave him out there while I was warm and cozy inside.

“You’re not a good listener, are you?” Emmett said, his voice softer.

“I am, usually. Maybe just not with you.”

He grunted as he heated the milk on the stove.

“You make hot chocolate a lot?”

“It’s nice on nights like this. I don’t usually have anyone to share it with.”

Pleasure curled in my chest. This night was so unexpected. It was one of life’s surprises I never wanted to let go of.

We fell silent as the fire crackled and snapped. He brought a mug of steaming cocoa to me, piled high with whipped cream, marshmallows, and candy cane shavings.

“Wow. Fancy,” I said as I took it from him, warming my fingers with its heat.

He raised a brow as he sat next to me on the edge of the couch. “You don’t like toppings on your hot chocolate?”

My lips twitched. “I do. I just didn’t think you would.”

“I have cookies too.”

“Are these homemade?” I asked as I snagged one from the plate he set on the ottoman.

“My mom makes these for the shop. She always saves us some.”

“Your mom baked for you when you were little?” I asked, my fingers warm from the mug.

Emmett blew on his hot chocolate. “I think it was her way of showing us love.”

“I adore that about her,” I said as I took my first tentative sip.

Emmett raised a brow. “Your mother didn’t do the same?”

“She was too busy impressing her new man to spend much time on us,” I said, softening my tone so I didn’t sound bitter.

“That’s sad.”

I shrugged. “We were taken care of. We always had a housekeeper and a nanny. I had Finn.”

Emmett shook his head. “That’s not the same as your parents’ love and attention.”

“Maybe that’s why I ended up engaged to James.” I was looking for love in the wrong places.

Emmett’s hand covered mine. It was warm from the mug, and the heat seeped through my skin, warming me from the inside out. “You deserve to be loved and to have had a family like I did growing up. But you can create any life you want.”

“I can?” I asked, genuinely curious as he removed his hand from mine.

“If you focus on what you want, it will happen.”

“I’ve never heard that before.”

“My mom said it all the time growing up. She used it to encourage us in sports. If we believed we could hit the ball, we would. That kind of stuff. But it applies to everything. I wanted a home in the woods, away from everything, and that’s what I got.” He gestured around us with his hands.

“You got exactly what you wanted. I hope that same thinking works for me. But I’m not sure I’m ready for it to come true yet.”

“That’s understandable. You need a cooling-off period, some time to yourself. But when you go back out there, you’ll be ready, and you’ll find exactly what you need.”

I wanted to ask *what if I’ve already found it?* I’d never felt so at ease with another man. I always felt like I had to put on a show or be someone I wasn’t when I was dating. I’d never been so effortlessly *me* with someone.

What if Emmett had asked me out after that first visit to the farm? I had no idea if he liked me in that way or if he was just physically attracted to me. He said he wasn’t looking for anything serious. He enjoyed his solitude. On paper, Emmett wasn’t the man for me. I’d always lived near the city or in town, near the hustle and bustle. I’d be bored on the farm.

But a piece of me longed for this, and I wondered if I’d been missing something my entire life. What if this was what my soul needed? Space and property as far as the eye could see. Tree-lined fields and twinkling lights. It was magical but mine only for tonight. Tomorrow I’d go back to being the rich girl with too much money and not enough love.

“Drink the rest of your hot chocolate before it gets cold.”

I tipped the mug, the whipped cream meeting my lips as I slowly drank. “This is so good.”

“It’s homemade. I didn’t use a mix. Here, you left something.” He used his thumb to swipe the whipped cream from my upper lip, and then he hesitated before licking his finger.

I felt a pang of heat shooting from my chest to my core.

“It’s even sweeter when it’s been on you,” he said, and then it was like he realized how seductive he sounded because he lowered his eyes.

My face was warm, my insides churning. It was wrong to feel this way so soon about someone else. I was supposed to get married to another man yesterday. But then, I’d had a similar reaction to him the day we met.

I was drawn to him then, before I knew anything about his family or the way he lived. Those feelings had only intensified as I got to know him. My body didn’t realize I was supposed to be mourning the loss of James in my life, not feeling the anticipation of something with Emmett.

What kind of person did it make me that I was already interested in another man? I sucked in a deep breath, taking stock of how I felt about what happened.

I wasn’t feeling any kind of regret or loss. I wasn’t humiliated that I’d left the wedding without any explanation. I was confident that Gia had handled it with grace.

After talking to James, he hadn’t felt anything toward me. The entire relationship was a lie. Maybe that’s why it was so easy to put it aside.

It wasn’t like we were close the last few months. If anything, we’d grown further apart.

“Did you sleep okay?” Emmett finally asked.

“Surprisingly. I think I was exhausted from the day. Emotionally drained.” I felt better, hopeful even. There was something about this break with Emmett that I needed. His solid listening skills and his unwavering support.

I wasn’t ready for reality to creep in. I wasn’t prepared for the inevitable questions and the issues surrounding the vendors. I just wanted to be here with him.

“You couldn’t have been comfortable sleeping with me on this couch.” It was surprisingly deep for a couch, but still, he was a big guy.

It might have been my imagination, but I swore his cheeks turned pink. “It was fine.”

I’d woken up with his chest pressed against my back, his arm wrapped around my middle. It was intimate. I wondered if it made him uncomfortable. “I’m sorry about the intrusion. I know how much you enjoy your space.”

“I don’t mind having you here.”

That was surprising, but at the same time, he hadn’t been grumpy since he found me by the waterfall. He’d been more concerned about me than anything.

Emmett set his drink aside. “You want to go back to sleep?”

The clock over the microwave said four o’ clock. “We can try.”

Emmett headed upstairs. I figured he was using the bathroom up there or grabbing a sweatshirt. But he returned a few minutes later with an armful of blankets and oversized pillows.

“What’s all this?” I asked as I stood up to help him.

“We’ll sleep in front of the fire. It’s warmer here.”

I helped him set the oversized pillows and the blankets on the floor. We settled onto separate cushions. It was warm and cozy, but I missed the closeness of when we were cuddled on the couch. We weren’t dating, so there was no reason to ask him to hold me. But I wanted to.

We were quiet for a while, neither of us sleeping, when he finally broke the silence, “Come here.”

I moved slowly toward him, not sure what he wanted. When I was close, he wrapped an arm around me. “Is this okay?”

“Uh-huh.” I couldn’t form words; my throat was too tight for that. Instead, I let my body relax into him as he curled his body around me.

I closed my eyes, reveling in the feel of his hard chest against my back and his breath tickling the strands of my hair. I focused on my breathing.



When I woke, it was bright out. The cushions were empty. Either Emmett hadn’t slept or he’d already gotten up.

I heard the scrape of a shovel outside. He must be shoveling the steps and the walkway. I rolled onto my back and closed my eyes. I wasn’t ready for the light of day.

When it was dark and the snow was coming down around the house, our time together felt infinite and special. Now, it felt like the sun was threatening to break through our bubble. I

didn't like it. When the door opened a while later, I was still lying on our makeshift bed, wishing I never had to move.

I moved to a sitting position as the cold air drifted into the room.

Emmett lifted his head as he shrugged out of his jacket and hung it on a hook by the door. "Morning, sleepyhead."

I smiled despite the fact I had morning breath, and my hair was probably a rat's nest. "Morning."

"You can wash up in the bathroom if you'd like. There's soap and towels."

"I'd love that. I never got a chance to take a bath last night. Thank you." I got up and started to fold the blankets.

"Just leave it. We might need to sleep there again tonight. They're still predicting a second storm coming in tonight. It's a celebration of you not marrying James. Sorry, I didn't mean to bring it up again. It just feels like a sign."

"It's a new beginning. It's like Mother Nature blanketed the land in snow, erasing everything that came before so we could write a new story." I loved that idea.

He toed off his boots and pattered around in the kitchen. "Take your bath. I'll make pancakes and eggs."

My stomach rumbled in response. "That sounds amazing."

"Hurry up. I washed your underthings and put them in the bathroom for you," he said gruffly.

I wondered if he wasn't used to people being appreciative of the things he did, or if he never extended his goodwill past his family. Or maybe he was uncomfortable seeing my "underthings." I'd only worn a tiny white lace thong with blue ribbons holding up the sides. It was sweet and innocent

looking. The bra was more of a bralette because it was see-through white lace. It was made for a wedding night—one I never got.

I really liked Emmett. I made a pact to be friends with him after this weekend. I'd make the effort to check in on him and see if we could do things together. He needed someone in his life, in his corner, and I wanted to be that person. It had nothing to do with these new feelings that popped up for him.

He was a good man, and he deserved the best. Not a woman fresh off a breakup. He'd been through a similar experience and wouldn't want to start a relationship with someone who'd left a man at the altar. Although, I wasn't sure if that applied to me or not.

I went inside the bathroom, seeing my bra and panties carefully folded and placed next to the tub, with a fresh T-shirt and sweatpants. I was so grateful for everything Emmett had done for me. I ran the bath, pouring the bath salts next to the tub inside.

As it filled, I removed my clothes and stepped into the steaming water. I imagined Emmett pulling off my panties with his teeth, and my hand drifted to my folds, where I played with the idea of giving myself pleasure with Emmett in the next room making me breakfast.

It felt illicit. I hadn't even bothered to lock the door. Was he thinking about what I'd look like in the barely there lingerie? What if he came in to say he couldn't keep his hands off me? My nipples were hard points, my core aching to be touched and filled.

I stroked with more intention, needing to ease the ache. I slipped a finger inside, my hips arching up, reaching for

something I couldn't have. The tub wasn't huge, but he'd fit. I could straddle his wide hips and sink down over his cock.

I knew he'd be long and thick. My head fell back as the tension inside me built. My breathing felt erratic as I used my other hand to tweak my nipples.

“Ireland—”

My eyes flew open, my hand covering my breast, and my finger lodged deep inside me. I bit my lip.

“Breakfast is ready whenever you are.” The voice came from just on the other side of the unlocked door.

“Be there soon.” I wanted to say I was coming soon, but I didn't think I could say that without giving away everything that was going on inside my head and with my body.

I heard the shuffle of his feet away from the door, and I wished I'd told him to come inside to take care of me.

CHAPTER 9



EMMETT

I walked away from that closed door, unable to stop thinking of what she was doing in that bathroom. Was she naked in the tub? Was she pulling on that bra and panty set? I imagined being on my knees in front of her, pulling that blue ribbon with my teeth. Then I'd spread her legs wider with my shoulders and devour her pussy with my mouth. I could practically taste her.

I adjusted myself, wishing I wasn't wearing sweatpants because there was no way I could hide the bulge.

I hoped she wasn't coming out for a few more minutes. I needed to push the vision of a very naked Ireland out of my head. I had no business thinking of her in that way. I should be thinking of her as a friend, or even as a sister. I should protect her, not be thinking of all the ways I could ravish her.

I'd reach up and cup her breasts, asking her to unhook her bra. If I wasn't mistaken, her bra was also held up by a bow and could easily be unraveled. Her breasts would be a perfect handful and pert, her nipples hard and begging for my touch.

I wanted my mouth on her nipples, her pussy, everywhere. If I ever got a chance to be with her, I'd trail a path over her skin, leaving her aching and wanting more.

The thought of her riding my cock or me taking her from behind had me hard as a rock. I ran cold water over my hands and put a wet cloth on my neck, hoping to lower my body temperature to a more acceptable level.

“Do you have a headache?” Ireland asked, coming up behind me and placing a hand on the back of my neck. She moved the washcloth, massaging the muscles.

I was glad I was facing the sink because my cock was already at attention. Her hands on me was the best thing I’d ever felt.

“I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” I said as I turned, dislodging her hand from my body.

She stepped back, looking uncertain, and I hated that I put that expression on her face. “Are you okay?”

“I was hot,” I hurried to distract her.

She stepped closer and rested the back of her hand on my forehead. “Are you coming down with something?”

Just lust. Luckily, I bit back my response. “I don’t think so. Just overheated from shoveling.”

“Yeah, that is hard work.” Her face was full of sympathy.

“I’m not afraid of a little heavy lifting.”

“I bet you aren’t, living like you do on the farm.” She smiled, and it made me wonder if she was wearing that naughty lingerie set under my clothes. I shouldn’t have touched them, much less folded them into a neat pile. It felt a little dirty, like I was tarnishing her white lace panties. It sent me down a dangerous spiral I’d never come back from. I wanted her, but she wasn’t mine.

I cleared my throat and rubbed my neck, hoping her gaze wouldn't lower. I thought about my mother, my ex, anything to soften my dick. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving," she said as she rounded the counter and sat at her spot on the stool.

I handed her a plate piled high with pancakes and eggs. Then I pushed the bowl of strawberries in her direction. "I wasn't sure what you liked."

"This is perfect, and way too much. Did you eat?"

"I eat while I'm cooking. I don't have a lot of patience."

"Really?" she asked as she poured maple syrup over the stack.

I wanted to pour that syrup over her body and lick it off. I stepped closer to the counter so she couldn't see anything below my waistband. Inviting Ireland into my space was a bad idea.

She carefully cut the pancakes and placed one perfect bite into her mouth. Her mannerisms at the table reminded me of her upbringing. She'd probably taken etiquette classes. What did a guy who grew up on a farm have in common with someone raised like her?

She had a trust fund, for Christ's sake. All I had to my name was this house I'd built on my parents' property that would eventually be shared between me and my brothers.

"These are heavenly." And the way she sighed made me think she was being genuine.

"Do you not eat pancakes often?"

She laughed. "My mother outlawed them from the house. They aren't healthy. And maple syrup? I haven't had any since

our chef snuck some to me when I was ten.”

“You can eat whatever you want now.”

Ireland gave me a wry look. “She taught me to eat healthy, and those habits are hard to break.”

“You can indulge in anything, if done in moderation.” Although I had a feeling if I ever indulged in Ireland, I’d only crave more.

She pointed her fork at me. “I like that approach. I’ll have to remember that the next time I go grocery shopping.”

I braced my hands on the counter between us. “Do you cook?”

“Our chef taught me. I hung around the kitchen for company, and he took pity on me, putting me to work.” Then she popped another bite into her mouth.

“That’s neat.” And kind of sad.

“We were close to the staff. They were consistent.”

I couldn’t even imagine growing up that way. But she said it with so much nonchalance, I could only assume she’d made peace with her upbringing.

“My parents are only capable of so much, and if I lower my expectations, it doesn’t hurt.”

“You shouldn’t have to.”

“But don’t we all? Our parents all disappoint us in some way. They aren’t perfect. No one is.”

“Sure, my parents made mistakes. They yelled and overreacted to things we did, but we always felt the love. There was an energy in the house. We knew that no matter what we did, they would still have our back.”

“I want that for my kids. I’ll make sure they always feel my love.”

“I know you will. You have a big heart.” She’d be a great mother.

Ireland sighed, her shoulders lowering. “You’re such a big softie under all the bluster.”

My stomach twisted that she thought of me that way. No one had ever said that about me. Other than my mother. “Don’t tell anyone.”

Her laugh rang out. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone your secret. Especially your brothers.”

“I’d never live it down.” Needing to change the subject, I asked, “What do you want to do first?”

Ireland’s brow furrowed. “Don’t you need to clear snow from the farm?”

“Knox said he’d take the first shift. We can build a snowman, go snowmobiling, sledding, or just explore.”

“Let’s go sledding and then build a snowman, or the other way around. I can’t decide. It all sounds amazing,” she said, talking quickly.

“We’ll do everything you want.”

“You know what I’d really like to do?” she asked almost hesitantly as she sipped her coffee.

“What?” I asked, already knowing I’d give her anything she wanted.

“Can we cut down a tree and decorate it here? That way we’ll have something to look at tonight.”

“You really want to cut down a tree during a snowstorm?” I asked her, not quite believing that was the thing she wanted most.

“I’ve never cut down a tree or even decorated one. That was something the staff did.”

“Not even when you lived on your own?”

She smiled sadly. “Don’t get mad, but I had a table-top tree, and”—she hesitated for effect—“it was fake.”

I sucked in a breath and held my palm over my chest. “A *fake* tree?”

“I know. I know. But I never had someone to share it with. I had a roommate for a while, Aria, but now she’s living with my brother, and it’s just me. We can’t take it back to my house, but we can decorate one here. I know it’s a little early, but you said you have a ton of business on Thanksgiving weekend. So it must be a good time to put one up.”

“It might not last until Christmas, but I live on a tree farm. I can get another one.”

“Is that not something you usually do?” Ireland asked.

“We cut one down for my parents’ house and decorate it as a family while we listen to Christmas music and sip hot chocolate.”

“That sounds amazing.”

Things I’d always taken for granted were impossible treasures to her. I wanted to be the one to give her everything, to show her what she was missing, and to ensure she never missed out on anything again. But I wasn’t the man for her.

I didn’t know the first thing about how to have a good relationship, or one that lasted, and I didn’t want one.

Although that excuse was falling flatter with every minute I spent with Ireland. Around her, I wanted to be the man she needed.

“But you don’t have one here?” Ireland asked, looking around at the space before hopping down off the stool. “This is the perfect place for it. You could get a ten-foot tree or more.”

She stood in the space in front of the window, where anyone who drove up could see it. If I put a tree there when I’d never had one in this house before, my brothers were going to think I was crazy or completely gone for Ireland, and they wouldn’t be wrong.

I could do this one thing for Ireland, give her the perfect respite from her troubles, and weather the fallout with my brothers. “Let’s do it.”

Her eyes lit up. “We’re going to cut down a tree?”

“And decorate it.”

She jumped into my arms, her legs wrapped around my waist, and her arms curled around my neck.

I think my heart stopped.

She buried her head into my neck. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

How could I respond? *I’d do anything to make you happy? I’d do anything for you?* All of it was too much for a woman I’d only recently spent any appreciable amount of time with.

Then she lifted her head and peppered kisses over my face.

I wanted to still her movements and press my lips against hers, but it wasn’t the right time. She was recovering from a breakup, and I was incapable of loving someone the right way.

She made me want to be a better man. She made me want to fulfill her every desire.

Then she paused, her eyes widening. “I’m sorry. I got a little carried away.” She tried to squirm her way down my body. When she was on her feet, she looked like she regretted her display of gratitude.

“I didn’t mind.”

Her eyes widened almost comically. “You didn’t mind that a strange woman jumped you and wrapped herself around you like a crazed monkey?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, and you’re not a strange woman. You’re a friend.” I almost cringed at that characterization. Now I was friend-zoning myself. My mind was a jumbled mess when it came to her, although my dick was on board with her body pressed against it.

She waved a hand in my direction. “Do all of your friends do that?”

I ran a hand over my chin. “Not really. But then, I don’t have female friends.” Or any friends at all. It was mainly my brothers and a few guys I worked with as it related to the farm. But I didn’t want to tell her that. I’d sound pathetic when I just didn’t have the energy to cultivate relationships outside of work and family.

“I’ll try to control myself in the future.”

I draped an arm over her shoulder. “But what’s the fun in that?”

She shook her head. “You’re hard to read sometimes.”

I was probably hard to read all the time. But I didn’t correct her. “Let’s get ready to find the perfect tree.”

“I can’t wait. What do I look for? Should it be round and full of branches? Or tall and thin? I’ve never done this.”

“You’ll know when you see the right one,” I said practically, not that I’d ever picked one for myself. I’d just stood by while other families and couples justified the tree they wanted, and then I cut it for them.

“It’s that simple?” she asked a little incredulously.

I shrugged. “Why make things complicated?”

“Yeah, okay. That makes sense.” Then she smiled brightly. “I’m going to get ready.”

“I’ll clean the kitchen.” I’d already gotten ready for a day of working and playing in the snow. It would be cold since another storm was coming though. But we’d have a few hours of quiet before the winds picked up again.

I’d never been so grateful for a storm before, especially at this time of the year. Who would have predicted that I’d be snowed in with a runaway bride?

Ireland skipped away toward her bathroom, and I busied myself putting away dishes and cleaning the counters. We had a few leftover pancakes, so I put those in a container and stowed it in the fridge.

“I’m ready.”

It looked like she’d brushed her hair with a hairbrush I kept in the bathroom for the guests I never had.

“You found the spare toothbrush and hairbrush?” I asked her, trying to distract myself from how beautiful she looked.

She smiled wide. “You are stocked nicely for a bachelor without a bed in the guest room.”

“That’s my mother. She had high hopes for me, but I disappointed her yet again.”

Ireland waved a hand at me. “I’m sure that’s not true.”

“Are you ready for an adventure? I thought we’d take the snowmobile to a few possible fields. Do you know what kind of tree you like? Fraser fir, Douglas fir, blue spruce, or white pine?”

She winced. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I pulled her into my side. “Ah. A newbie. This should be fun.”

She looked up at me as we headed toward the door and our boots. “Are you going to teach me everything I need to know?”

“Probably more than you ever wanted to know.”

When I let her go, she rubbed her hands together. “I’m so excited to cut my first tree.”

“You want to cut it down?”

She stepped into her boots. “How hard can it be?”

“You’ll find out.” I’d never had a woman volunteer to cut the tree. Not saying she couldn’t do it, but I was surprised she wanted to.

“Or maybe it will be more entraining to watch you do it.”

I wondered if she found me attractive and that’s why she was saying that. I handed her a jacket and threw on mine. “These gloves and hat are probably too big, but it’s cold out.”

I opened the door as she tugged everything on.

“I can’t believe we’re getting this weather now.”

“Me either. We weren’t prepared for it. We usually make it through the entire season with maybe one snowfall, and that one usually melts quickly because it’s not that cold yet.”

“Right? An active snow season makes for stressed brides.”

“You get a lot of weddings in the winter?” I asked as we made our way to my shed, which housed everything I needed to get around in the winter.

“We hold a few at Lily’s farm and at local hotels. But I wouldn’t say it’s as busy as the spring and summer. Gia was hoping to change that by using your farm as a possible venue. There’s been an uptick in requests for holiday weddings.”

“The Fraser fir is probably our best bet. It’s the longest lasting. It smells great, and its branches are sturdy for holding heavy ornaments.”

“Do you have any ornaments?”

“I might have a few my mother gave me when I moved in. I always have lights on hand.” I loved to add lights to everything, and I already had them wrapped around the railings on my porch and the ones leading to my loft.

She pretended to wipe her brow. “Whew. That’s the most important part.”

I opened the door to the shed with some effort, given the snow that had drifted after I’d shoveled this morning. I kept the keys in the machines since no one ever came up here. I grabbed the saw and put it in the storage compartment under the seat.

My life already seemed bigger and brighter with her in it. I didn’t want to think about what it would be like to go back to an empty house after having her there.

I swung my leg over the seat and turned the key. “Are you ready to go for a ride?”

She smiled wide as she tucked her hair under the helmet. “I’m excited.”

“Get on and hold on tight. This is the best way to travel in the snow.”

She got on behind me and wrapped her arms around my middle. When I was sure she was secure, I pressed the gas to move out of the shed. I took the scenic route to the best field for Fraser firs. I should have gone to a different field because this one was the top pick for the season, but I wanted the best for her.

The wind stung my cheeks as we drove down the path and through fields of trees until we got to where I thought she’d find her best tree.

I parked and turned off the engine. “This is it.”

“These are beautiful,” Ireland said as she dismounted the snowmobile and walked down the first row of trees. Then she turned in a circle, lifting her face to the sky, and closed her eyes. “It smells amazing.”

I couldn’t think of a better time to cut down a tree, when the air was crisp, the ground was blanketed with snow, and there was no one else on the property. My family lived in various cabins and houses on the property, but none of them would cut down a tree during a snowstorm. It felt reckless but also fun. It was a memory I’d cherish forever.

CHAPTER 10



IRELAND

I stopped spinning, feeling a little off-kilter. “What if I pick the wrong one?”

Emmett chuckled, and the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled. “First of all, you’re not going to pick the wrong one. Besides, I own an endless supply of trees. We can just choose another.”

I clasped my mittened hands together. “This is going to be so much fun.”

My energy must have been infectious because Emmett’s lips curled into a rare smile.

I moved from one tree to the next, mentioning whatever was wrong with each tree—a bare spot, flimsy branches, and leaning one way or the other.

Emmett followed behind me, seemingly content to just observe me.

I never imagined I’d ever have the opportunity to cut down my own tree. Especially with an owner of the farm. It was a onetime experience I’d remember forever. My mother would have asked why I needed to experience it for myself when you could just ask an assistant to deliver a tree to our house and

have a housekeeper decorate it. But there was something about being involved in the entire process that made it more special.

“I wonder what it would be like to monitor the growth of a tree from a seed to fully grown. Can you predict how big it will be, how full and healthy it will look?”

“There are some things we can predict, but not the occasional bare patch or awkward formation. Trees weren’t made to be perfect. Each one has its own flaws that make it special.”

“I love how you look at things. It’s so different.” Emmett was unique, and I was grateful I had this opportunity to learn more about him.

I stopped in front of one. It was tall and wide with full branches. I tested the branches by pulling it down and letting it snap back up. I had no idea if that meant anything. “What do you think about this one?”

“It’s a good option.” Emmett circled it, searching for bare patches, and removed his glove to touch the needles.

“It smells heavenly.” I couldn’t get enough of it. I wanted to bottle the scent to use in my apartment year-round. But I had a feeling I’d always associate the smell with Emmett.

“If you want that smell, you can return anytime and hike through the fields.”

“I’d love that,” I said, with my gaze on the tree. I slipped off my mitten and placed it on the end of one of the branches.

Emmett tipped his head to the side. “What’s that for?”

I backed away from the tree before continuing my path through the rows of trees. “I don’t want to forget that one. It’s a contender.”

Emmett's lips twitched. "I hate to spoil your fun, but you're going to run out of mittens soon, and it's cold."

Then he surprised me by sandwiching my bare hand between his gloved ones and rubbing them.

I blinked innocently up at him, my stomach fluttering. "Why would I need gloves when I have you to warm me up?"

"Because I'm not always going to be around, and you need to look out for yourself," Emmett said gruffly, yet with affection, almost as if he didn't want to mention that this day, this weekend, was just a brief respite from our real lives.

"I'm not ready for reality to set in. I want to extend this day for as long as it will last."

Emmett didn't answer right away, but when I finally pulled my hand from his and continued my walk, I swore he said, "Me too."

I found two more possibilities, but one leaned a little to the right, and another was a little too tall. I had to remember this tree was going in Emmett's space, not mine. Emmett pulled a small red ribbon from his pocket and tied it to a branch.

"Why did you do that? I'm not going to get that one."

"To remember it's the one you love."

"It's too big, though."

Emmett took long strides through the snow. "Let's cut down the one you picked. If we can find your mitten."

"Hey, it's a good way to remember which tree you picked," I called out as I struggled to keep up with his quick pace in the deep snow.

“If you can find it again. You have no idea how many people leave mittens in the fields.” His voice drifted over his shoulders.

I grinned. “I’m not the only one who uses mittens to mark their trees?”

Emmett slowed so I could catch up. “Nope. That’s why I carry the ribbons. We don’t want people losing their things on the mountain. Sometimes we even find stuffed animals and toys from kids.”

“That’s kind of cute. What an amazing memory for a child to cut down their own tree.”

“Some families prefer not to because it is a lot of work. You have to hike to the field. We don’t provide snowmobiles for anyone.”

“I was lucky, then.”

“Uh-huh,” he said as he continued his search for my marked tree.

I saw a flash of red and said, “Found it. Easy peasy.”

“Are you sure this is the one?”

I circled it one more time, noting the height, the fullness of the branches, and the perfect top branch that could hold a star or an angel. I hoped his mother gave him a tree topper. “This is it.”

For some reason, the decision to choose the perfect tree for Emmett’s living room felt significant. We weren’t a couple. It wasn’t my house, but it still felt important, bigger than us.

“You want to do the honors?” Emmett asked, holding up the saw.

“I’d love to.”

“Bend down.” He pulled up the branches to show me where to place the blade of the saw. “Then cut here. As close to the ground as you can get.”

“I can do that.” I dropped to my knees in the deep snow and took the saw from his hand. It was a small saw, so it seemed doable. Then I lay on my side and attempted to slice through the bark. When it didn’t seem to work, his gloved hand covered mine as he showed me the proper motion. As we did it together, the saw dipped into the trunk of the tree. “It’s working.”

It was hard work, but I didn’t pull my hand away. I wanted to be the one who cut down the tree. I felt strong and capable when the tree pitched to the side, and my heart leaped in my chest.

“You keep cutting. I’ll grab it.”

When he moved, I kept sawing through the remainder of the trunk, feeling triumphant when it fell into Emmett’s waiting arms.

I waved the saw in the air. “I did it.”

Emmett held his hand out for the saw. “Let’s put the cover on that blade, and then we can celebrate.”

I smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, I forgot.”

When the saw was taken care of, I walked next to Emmett as he dragged it to the snowmobile. “How will we get it home?”

Emmett handed me the helmet. “I’ll take you home first and then come back and get it.”

“Should we have brought two snowmobiles?” I asked as I put the helmet on.

“You can’t drive one, can you?”

“No, but you could have taught me. I’d love to learn.”

He waved a hand at the snowmobile. “Get on, then. I’ll show you.”

He set the tree in the path, off to the side, and then climbed on behind me. He showed me how to turn the key and how to move by turning the handle. His gloved hands covered mine as we headed toward his cabin. It felt exhilarating to control the powerful engine, and it was fun.

When we pulled into the yard in front of his cabin, Emmett used the brake to slow us down, and we came to a stop. He got off first.

“That was so much fun.” I couldn’t believe that I’d done so many firsts already today.

“I’ll go back and get the tree. Then we can look for those ornaments my mom left at my house.”

I grinned. “I’ll make hot chocolate and get a holiday playlist cued up on my phone.”

I pulled the helmet off and let my hair fall around my shoulders. Emmett leaned toward me, almost as if he was going to kiss me. As if we were dating, and it was something he’d do naturally when we parted ways. But then, he seemed to catch himself and pulled back. “Be right back.”

I placed a hand on his arm. “Thank you for today.”

“You’re welcome,” he said gruffly as he got on the snowmobile. When I stepped back, he took off. I watched until

he disappeared down the path and then went inside. He'd left the door unlocked.

It was warm inside, even though the fire had died down considerably. I added more logs to the fire before making the hot chocolate. By the time I poured the hot chocolate into two mugs, Emmett returned with a roar of the engine. Then he carried the tree toward the house and left it on the porch.

“Can you bring it inside?”

“I need to find the tree stand first. Hopefully, it's with the other decorations.”

“I can't believe you live on a tree farm and never put up a tree.”

“It's more meaningful this way. Now I get to experience it with you.” But he didn't stick around and wait for me to process what he'd just said.

He moved toward the door in the living room. “Are you coming?”

“Where?”

“The storage is in the basement.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said shakily, my mind still on what he'd said. Was he attracted to me, or did he just want to watch me experience it for the first time? My mind was racing as I followed him down the steps.

The basement was finished, with plush carpet and the walls covered in gray paint. There was a pool table, a foosball table, and an air hockey table. There was another large sectional, a screen on the wall for projector-style movies, a large popcorn machine, and even an arcade game tucked in the corner.

“This is amazing.”

“Yeah, my brothers come over and we hang out. I wanted it to be the hangout place.”

“I think you managed that.” I could see him and his brothers drinking beers and having fun.

“It is.”

“Maybe we can play later.”

“I’ll need to help my brothers clear some snow this afternoon before the next storm hits.”

“Right.” I’d forgotten that he had work to do, that this wasn’t the complete break for both of us. But I consoled myself with the fact that another storm was going to hit, and we’d be cozy in his living room with the fire burning and those pillows on the floor.

I’d never wanted to hide away from the rest of the world more than today.

“Have you heard from anyone?” Emmett asked as he opened the door under the stairs, revealing neatly stacked boxes with printed labels.

“I haven’t charged it, so it’s probably dead.”

Emmett pulled out a few boxes labeled *Christmas Ornaments*. “You should charge it for emergencies.”

“I will when we go upstairs.” I opened the flap of the top box and smiled when I saw ornaments. “Jackpot.”

“We need the tree stand before we do anything else.”

I moved the top box to the floor, and he went through the next two. “These are all decorations.”

Then he went inside the closet and pulled out more boxes to sort through. “Found it.”

He held up the metal stand. “You ready to put up a tree?”

“Yes.” I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so excited about anything. I enjoyed my job, but even Gia offering me the possibility of being considered for the head wedding planner position wasn’t as thrilling as it would have been for Aria. I didn’t have to work or do anything. I had enough money in my trust fund to pay my living expenses. I didn’t have any real goals in life. For the first time, I realized why I felt so empty. I wasn’t just missing out on love. I also didn’t have anything that fulfilled me.

I didn’t have Gia’s drive or Aria’s desire to provide for herself. There was nothing motivating me, except doing things I liked, and that wasn’t enough when I didn’t have someone to share it with. I grabbed a box and followed Emmett up the stairs.

“I’ll get the tree ready if you want to bring up the boxes. The ornaments should be light. If there’s anything heavy, leave it for me.”

“Will do,” I said, ducking back down the stairs. It took several trips to get everything that was labeled as holiday decorations upstairs. I stacked the boxes in the living room, giving him room to bring in the tree. He’d placed the stand in front of the window.

The door opened, and a gust of wind filled the house. He set the tree in the stand, and I helped him steady it while he attached it.

He poured water into the stand. “What do you think?”

I stepped back to get the full effect. It filled the space by the window and made the great room more inviting. “It’s beautiful. It just needs lights.”

Emmett nodded toward the stack. “You find any lights in those boxes?”

I pushed the two boxes toward him. “In these.”

“Are they white or colored?”

“White. Your tree will be classic and elegant.”

Emmett’s lips twitched. “Exactly the look I was going for.”

I placed my hands on my hips. “Hey, I’m just trying to be helpful. This was all I could find.”

I hunched down next to him, sorting through the boxes again.

His hand covered my back. “White is fine. Whatever my mom included will be perfect. I’m just grateful she thought to give me all of this.”

“She’s not upset you haven’t used them before?”

“She has five boys; she’s just grateful we shower every now and then.”

I laughed, imagining what it would be like to raise boys. “She must have had her hands full.”

When I turned to face him, I realized we were only inches away, and all I would have to do was lean forward and my lips would be touching his.

But kissing Emmett when he was being a good friend would ruin everything. Instead, I rocked back on my heels and sat on my butt, trying to create space without letting on that I was affected by his proximity.

Emmett pulled out the string of lights and stood next to the tree. “Are you going to help?”

“I’d love to. Can you tell me what to do?”

He hung his head. “You’ve never strung lights?”

“Didn’t I mention that the staff did the decorating? Sometimes, my parents hired people who just handled holiday decorations. So we didn’t even own them.”

“Knox does that. Not the decorations, but he strings lights for those who don’t have time to do it themselves. A lot of times, it’s single moms who just can’t do it. He doesn’t charge much for it. He loves helping people.”

“He does that as a business? How nice.”

“He doesn’t make a lot of money from it. He runs a landscaping business, and customers kept asking him if it was a service he provided. He finally took the hint and bought some lights. Now he does it full time during the season, so he can’t help out much here.”

“That’s so cool. I love these jobs that only make sense during the holidays. You saw a need and filled it. It’s the perfect entrepreneurial endeavor. That’s what Gia would say. She just released her own nonfiction book about women running businesses. She said it’s the best way for women to empower themselves and bring in wealth. When we run our own businesses, we don’t have to worry about taking maternity leave or taking off when our kids are sick. We make the rules because we’re the boss.”

“Is that what you want to do? Run a business?”

“Oh, no. I don’t need to run a business or even work. I do it because it fills the time and it’s enjoyable,” I said, my voice trailing off at the end when I realized how entitled I sounded.

“But it doesn’t fulfill you the way creating furniture out of wood does me?” Emmett asked insightfully, thankfully not mentioning how spoiled I was.

I laughed. “I enjoy creating the perfect wedding day, but I’m not motivated like all the other female entrepreneurs in my circle. Gia has her wedding planning business, and now her book and a digital course. Sophie owns the bakery, Lily has her flower shop and rents out her farm for weddings and other events, Everly creates invitations and sells them online through her shop, and Abby runs a photography business.”

“You’re lucky to have the time and space to figure out what you want.”

“You don’t think I sound like a spoiled rich girl?” I asked him, tensing as I waited for his response.

CHAPTER 11



EMMETT

I never thought Ireland was a spoiled rich girl. Maybe it flashed through my mind when she mentioned Longwood Gardens as her potential wedding venue, but she cared about people and was a genuinely nice person.

I placed my hands on her shoulders. “How could I even think that when it’s not true? You may have grown up with a staff of people catering to your physical needs. But when it came to your emotional needs, those were satisfied by those same people. Even if I grew up with less money, I’m richer than you.”

She blinked. “Wow. I never thought about it like that.”

“You want to love and be loved. You’re just like everyone else. You may wear expensive clothes and drive a luxury car, but underneath the surface, you have the same fears and desires as anyone else.”

“Everyone around me is striving to be successful, to have more money, to provide for their families, and I don’t have that motivation.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re less than anyone else. Maybe your desires are a little different. You like to make people

happy, and you enjoy the holidays. Maybe there's something else you could do."

She laughed. "Well, I didn't grow up on a Christmas tree farm, so my options are limited."

"You'll figure it out. You have the purest heart of anyone I've ever met. You enjoy life. Do you know how rare that is? You relish every moment, every individual flake of snow."

Ireland nodded seriously. "Every flake is unique and different."

I tapped her on the nose. "Just like you. So, no, I don't think you're spoiled."

Every time I was this close to her, I felt something—a pull between us. I wanted to explore it, but she was fresh off a breakup, and I'd sworn off love.

I swore she swayed toward me, and I moved away from her, busying myself with stringing the lights on the tree. She moved behind me and readjusted them on the branches.

When we finished, I plugged it in. "How does it look?"

She stood in front of the tree, her hands clasped in front of her. "It's perfect. I almost forgot the music. We can't decorate without it."

"For someone who's never done this before, you seem to know what you're doing."

She flashed me a smile from where she hovered over her phone that was plugged into the wall. I was pleased she'd heeded my advice and charged it. "I put my phone on DND so I wouldn't be interrupted, and no, I did not look at my five hundred messages."

"You got five hundred messages?"

“No. I don’t know. I was afraid to look. But I created a playlist for us while I made the hot chocolate, which is probably cold by now.”

“I’ll reheat it on the stove.” While I poured the hot chocolate from the mugs back into the pot, I turned on the burner and watched her as she scrolled through her phone and finally hit play. Holiday music poured through her speaker. “Now we can decorate.”

“As soon as the hot chocolate is done.”

“Thank you for doing this. I know you’re a bit of a scrooge, and you might hate having this tree in your living room. But you did it for me.”

I couldn’t deny it. “I’m not a scrooge.”

“Yeah, you kind of are.”

“Just because I don’t give in to the pressure to put up a tree or bake a billion cookies, doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy when someone else does the same.”

“I bet you eat all your mom’s cookies.”

“She can’t bake enough for all of us. She swears she could make enough to have a bakery, but there’d never be any leftover for customers.”

“Has she thought about baking for her customers in the barn?”

“She’s never mentioned it.”

“It might be a nice option with the hot chocolate. Just something simple like sugar cookies and icing in the shape of gingerbread men or snowmen.”

“That’s a good idea. You should talk to her about it. And just so you know, holidays don’t make me grumpy.”

“It’s just everything else?” she asked cheekily.

I reached for her, not sure what I intended to do, but she darted away, laughing and dodging me while I gave chase. When she tripped on the pillow in the living room, she went down. I landed on top of her, straddling her. I drew her hands to the pillows above her head.

Her chest was heaving from the chase. I wanted to kiss her. But I wasn’t sure if she wanted the same thing. I wouldn’t know, not unless I made the first move.

Her forehead wrinkled. “Emmett?”

I had a feeling if I gave in to my baser instincts, there would be no turning back. There wasn’t a pause button when it came to this woman.

Her hand went to my neck, gently pulling me down to her. I lost all sense of reason, reveling in the feel of my body pressed against her soft one. When I hovered over her lips, she lifted her head slightly and closed the distance, kissing me softly, tentatively.

Everything inside of me tightened as her lips brushed against mine. I wanted to crush her against me, but I was unsure if she was okay with this.

Finally, I pulled back and moved off her. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that?”

She sat up. “Why not?”

“You were just engaged to someone else, and we’re stuck in this house together.”

Hurt crossed her face.

“I’m just saying that this isn’t ordinary circumstances. We’re in this weird space where we are forced to be together because of the weather. You wouldn’t be hiding out here if I hadn’t run into you by the waterfall and if it hadn’t snowed.

“It almost feels like fate.”

I shook my head. “I need to help my brothers with the snow removal. You want to finish decorating the tree, and then you can take a nap while I’m out?”

She gave me a look before finally nodding. “Yeah, okay.”

I wanted to know what was going on in her head, but I was afraid to ask. I shouldn’t have kissed her. I shouldn’t have crossed that line. She was staying here out of necessity, and she trusted me. If my brothers found out I’d kissed a vulnerable woman getting over a breakup, they’d have my ass. I wasn’t raised to treat women like that.

Ireland turned up the music on her phone and pulled out the decorations from the boxes. Most were brand-new boxes of bulbs, but there were a few handmade ornaments from my childhood. I appreciated that my mother thought to include them.

We hung the ornaments with the hooks Mom provided. I handled the higher branches, and she took care of the lower ones. Outside, the wind blew the snow, but inside, it was warm and cozy.

I hoped I hadn’t screwed up the relationship we’d built the last twenty-four hours. That kiss hung in the air, and I didn’t like it. I needed to get outside and do something physical. As soon as the tree was finished, Ireland took some pictures and then asked me to take a selfie with her.

She held my arm. “Come on, I want to commemorate our time together.”

“Why do you need to do that?” I asked as my heart beat faster.

“I just do. Please, Emmett.” She stood in front of the tree with her phone outstretched in front of her.

“Let me. My arm is longer.” I took the phone from her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, intending to keep the embrace friendly, but she snuggled into my side, with her palm against my chest and her face tilted up to mine. At the last second, I glanced down at her, and that’s when her phone snapped the picture.

She took it from me to see the image and said, “This is perfect. Look.”

We were gazing at each other as if we were the most important people in the world when we should have been smiling at the camera. “Want to try that again? You probably want a smiling picture for your social media accounts.”

“Oh, no, this is just for me, and besides, this one couldn’t be more perfect.”

My phone buzzed.

You out of bed yet? The snow isn’t going to move itself.

“Knox needs my help. If I can finish the lane, we can go sledding later.”

“I’d love that. Thank you, Emmett.”

I went to my loft to get a few minutes to myself under the pretense of getting ready. When I jogged down the steps, she

was winding greenery around the railing. “Where did you find that?”

“Your mom included it in one of the boxes. I’ll add the extra lights to the mantel, and it will be perfect.”

“You realize I live here alone, and I don’t care about decorations, right?”

“Maybe every time you come home, you’ll think of me. I hope it makes you feel warm and cozy inside. That’s how I feel when I see the decorations.”

If it made her happy, I’d let her do whatever she wanted.

“I’ll be back in a few hours. Why don’t you make yourself a sandwich and take a nap? We might be up late. I love nighttime sledding.”

“I’ve never done it, but it sounds fun.”

I loved how Ireland was enthusiastic about everything. “Stay inside where it’s warm.”

“No worries about that. I’m warm and cozy.”

I couldn’t help but think that Ireland had made my cabin more inviting, not just with the decorations, but with her presence.

I took a snowmobile to meet Knox by the entrance to the farm. His cabin was closer to the road than mine but had a good view of the rolling fields. We chose our spots when we were adults, wanting to keep the homes spread out so we all had privacy.

When I approached, Knox slapped my shoulder. “I’m glad you were able to leave the love nest.”

“It’s not like that.” Even though it was close enough to the truth that my chest tightened.

“Tell me again how the bride got stranded at your house?”

When I texted Gia, I also told my family that Ireland would be staying with me. But I gave him the minimum information over text. “I found her at the waterfall. She said she needed a quiet place to think for a few minutes. She wasn’t intending to stay. I don’t think she even realized how bad the forecast was.”

“Why would she? It was her wedding day, and it wasn’t supposed to come until Sunday.”

“We talked for a bit, and I showed her the pond. Then the snow came down hard, and it was too late to drive her home.” I skipped over our dance in the barn. Knox didn’t need to know the details, not when he was all too willing to assume something was going on between us.

He gave me a dubious look. “I guess you weren’t looking at the forecast either.”

“Did you think there would be this much snow? Sure, they said it was a Nor’easter, but it’s November.”

Knox nodded. “They’ve been wrong before.”

“And she was hurting. I just wanted to give her a distraction from everything.”

“Is the generator working okay for you? We could move her to my place. It’s closer to the road in case she needs to get out or there’s an emergency.”

My jaw tightened, and my teeth ground down. “She’s fine where she is.”

Knox held his hands up. “Whatever you say. I just thought I’d offer.”

I hoped he didn’t ask why I wanted to keep her at my place. It was weird having someone in my space, but it was nice too.

I wondered what she was doing while I was gone. Was she taking another bath? The thought of her naked in my house had everything tightening.

“What did you do today to pass the time?”

“She wanted a Christmas tree.”

Knox paused. “So, you what, cut one down for her?”

“That’s usually what one does.”

“You took her to the family field?”

I stretched my neck, letting it crack. “It was the first tree she ever cut down or decorated.”

“You gave her one of our best trees?”

“It’s in my house, so not exactly.”

“You already put it up?”

“She wanted the full experience. Thankfully, Mom dropped off the decorations we needed a few years ago.”

Knox smacked my arm. “It sounds awfully cozy.”

That was the truth, and I was anxious to get back. “Can we stop talking so I can get this done?”

Knox handed me the keys to the truck. “The plow’s hooked up. I’ll make sure it’s done overnight.”

“You might want to wait until it’s done.”

“They’re calling for another foot of snow. I want to stay ahead of it. What if one of us needs to get to the road?”

“They won’t have plows on the main roads again until this storm is out of here.”

We lived in fear that something would happen to our mother, especially after losing our dad younger than most.

Emmett smirked. “Your girl might want to escape sooner rather than later.”

“I think she’s having fun.”

“Is she, now?” Knox said with a knowing grin.

“You know what I mean, asshole. She doesn’t want to face her family and friends after what happened.”

“Why was the wedding called off?”

I didn’t want to talk about it with him, but he deserved some explanation. “He was cheating on her.” I figured Ireland wouldn’t mind if he knew that much. “The girlfriend told her before the wedding.”

“Ouch. That’s harsh.”

“Apparently, he’d been seeing the other girl first and wanted Ireland for her trust fund. Don’t tell anyone that last part. I don’t think she wants anyone to know.”

“What an asshole. Did you punch him?”

“I didn’t know about any of it until I saw her, and I’ve been with her ever since.”

“I think we need to have a talk with him.”

“She’s grateful to have learned the truth before she married him.”

“You’re not falling for her, are you?”

“She was engaged to someone else yesterday. What kind of man do you think I am?”

Knox raised a brow. “You hate when people are in your space or visiting the farm. Ever since Molly, you never bring women back to the house. Your words, not mine, but now this woman is living with you.”

“Now you’re exaggerating. She’s staying until the snow clears. Then she’ll go back to her life in Annapolis.” A piercing pain went through my heart at the idea of her leaving.

“And you’ll be okay with that?”

“She’s been at my house for twenty-four hours. When have you known me to be a guy who falls in love easily?”

“You were in love before.”

“Even if I was attracted to Ireland, she’s in no position to start anything. She’s coming off a heartbreak.” She was embarrassed and felt stupid for falling for James’s lies, but she didn’t seem particularly hurt. But I wasn’t going to tell Knox that. It wouldn’t help my position, only make it worse.

Knox dipped his chin. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I’m giving her a break before she needs to face reality. She wanted some holiday cheer. It’s the least I can do.”

Knox crossed his arms over his chest. “Why would anyone come to you for holiday cheer?”

I rocked back on my heels. “I lit the paths with lights.”

Knox shook his head. “That was for Mom.”

A muscle in my jaw ticked. “I’m full of holiday cheer.”

Knox snorted. “If you mean you’re at your grumpiest during the holidays, then sure.”

I made a move toward the truck. “I don’t have time for this. I need to clear the roads so I can get back to—”

“Ireland?” Knox said with a knowing smirk.

I growled before getting behind the wheel. I needed to move some snow and get this irritation worked out of my system. My brothers were the best at getting under my skin, and it was worse when it came to Ireland because he wasn’t wrong. I was playing with fire, and I wasn’t sure I’d come out of this weekend unscathed.

CHAPTER 12



IRELAND

When Emmett left, I let out the breath I'd been holding. I was hurt when he pulled away, but I understood his reaction. He was a good guy, and he wouldn't want to be seen as making moves on a woman who was just engaged to someone else.

The snowstorm was unexpected, and I wished he'd see our connection as the same. There was an ethereal quality to the storm and to our coming together. It felt a little bit like fate and a lot magical. I wanted to let go and see where it took us, but would he feel the same?

He was probably too stubborn to go with the flow. I took another bath, enjoying the tub and the bath salts his mother had probably included for guests. Afterward, I was restless, and the only books he had on his shelf were thrillers and mysteries, so I looked in his pantry for the fixings for cookies.

Pleased to find everything I needed, I got to work in the kitchen. Nothing went better with a decorated tree than homemade cookies.

I made chocolate chip cookies and then tried my hand at sugar cookies. I searched until I found some cookie cutters and icing in the cupboard. His mother thought of everything, and I wondered if she realized he didn't even use these things. Or

maybe she held out hope they would come in handy one day, because they certainly had today.

The holiday music played over the speaker on my phone, and the lights on the tree twinkled as it got darker outside. Inside, the fire raged while I waited for the last batch of cookies to get done. The timer buzzed just as I heard a roar of the snowmobile outside, and then a few minutes later, Emmett was opening a door and taking off his boots.

“What’s all this? It smells good.”

“I made cookies.”

He had a strange expression on his face as he approached the island where I’d laid out the cookies to cool. He snagged one of the iced sugar cookies and popped the entire thing into his mouth. “These are good.”

“I like to bake.”

“Your family’s chef taught you?”

I nodded. “He loved to bake. He said it was his way of showing his family that he loved them.”

Emmett seemed to be at a loss for words at my statement.

I scrambled to make up for my slip. “I didn’t mean that I love you, just that it was something he did to show he cared about people.”

“I know what you meant,” he said gruffly as he ate a chocolate chip cookie. “These are good too.”

“Thanks. I had nothing but time to perfect my cooking and baking when I was younger. I didn’t run around as much as Finn. Not that he would let me do the same. I was content to stay at home.”

“You’re not a party girl.”

“Unless it’s a charity event for a good cause, then no. Parties were an opportunity to dress up in a designer gown and get my hair and makeup done. They were such a production.”

“That’s not the kind of party I was talking about.”

I flashed him a smile. “I know. How was Knox?”

“A little irritated that we’re losing a few days of prime tree cutting, but these things happen.”

“People still need trees.”

“Nothing can replicate the rush after Thanksgiving Day. There’s a certain number of people who feel compelled to put up the tree that weekend.”

I smiled. “Kind of like me.”

“But you said you’ve never put up a real tree before. You’re just taking advantage of your stay on a Christmas tree farm.” He tapped my nose. “You have flour here.”

“I probably need another bath. I’m a messy baker.”

“I can see that.”

There were mixing bowls, measuring cups, and ingredients everywhere. “I’ll clean up.”

“I really want to go sledding before the storm gets here.”

“Me too.”

“What do you say we leave this for later and go now?”

This entire weekend felt surreal, and we didn’t need to play by any rules, so I said, “Let’s do it.”

I was hopeful that he’d come around. We still had a few more days stuck in this house together.

I hurried to put on the warmer clothes he'd let me borrow and then headed toward the door, where he was waiting to put on boots, a jacket, gloves, and a hat.

“We can drive separately. I'll hold the sled.”

“Just one?”

“I don't want to carry two, especially since you're a new driver. We can ride down together.”

I loved that idea. I wonder if it was just practicality that had him planning it this way. “That sounds great.”

“You've been sledding before, right?”

My nose wrinkled. “Is that a prerequisite?”

He groaned and pulled me into his side. “You're killing me. You've really never been sledding?”

“I grew up in the city. We rarely got snow, and when we did, where would we sled?” I threw up my hands.

“Okay. Yeah. Good point. Let's go, city girl. We'll make an adventurer out of you before this storm is done with us.”

I secretly hoped the storm did more than that. I wanted Emmett to let go of his preconceived beliefs about relationships and what people would think and give in to this chemistry between us. I had no idea what it meant, but I was willing to explore it. This entire weekend was something out of a book. The only problem was that the ending was unpredictable, but I intended to enjoy the journey.

“I don't know about that, but I intend to have fun.” I was so grateful for this respite from the expectations of my family and friends that I was willing to go outside my comfort zone and try new things.

We got on the snowmobiles, and Emmett anchored the sled to his before he motioned for me to follow him down the path. I loved that it was dark and that the lights lit our path. The snow was coming down lightly now. It was probably just the beginning of the next snowstorm, and it filled me with hope that this could be the start of something new.

I kept my eyes on Emmett's broad back as we made our way toward the hill he'd deemed suitable for my first time sledding. It was close to the main house. I could see the lights in the windows, and I wondered if his mother knew I was here.

When he stopped and turned off the engine, I parked next to him and did the same.

"Wear your helmet down the slope."

"Does your family know I'm here?" I asked as I approached him and waited for him to unhook the sled.

"Knox does, and I'm sure everyone else does too. We don't have any secrets, or I should say, no one can keep a secret around here." Emmett tucked the sled under his arm and led the way to the top of the hill.

"Will your mother wonder what we're doing?" I asked, nodding in the direction of her house.

"For the most part, she stays out of our business. She only gets involved after we screw things up."

I smiled. "You say that like it's inevitable."

Emmett nodded. "We're guys, so I'm sure it is."

He set the sled on the top of the hill.

"Is this where you sledded as a kid?"

He tested the movement with his foot. It glided easily. “When we were younger. As we got older, we went further out, always searching for a bigger hill. We used to create tracks by packing the snow with our feet, which made the sled go down faster.”

“Your mother wasn’t worried about you?”

“She was, but my dad told her she needed to let us be kids. We’d get hurt, but we always got back up and did it again.”

“Aren’t you supposed to learn from your mistakes, not repeat them?” I teased.

“Some mistakes are too enjoyable not to,” Emmett said gruffly, and I wondered if he was talking about our kiss.

It was featherlight and barely there, yet I still felt the ghost of his lips pressed against mine.

Emmett situated himself at the back of the sled with his legs spread wide, then held his hand out to me. “You ready?”

I swallowed before I took his hand and settled in front of him. The position was intimate, but we were wearing a ton of layers. It was unlikely I could feel anything through our jackets. “Sure.”

But then he wrapped an arm around my middle and pulled me back against him. Then he whispered into my ear. “Wouldn’t want you flying off, now, would we?”

I nodded, he pushed off, and we went flying down the hill. The wind stung my cheeks and stole the breath from my lungs, but it was glorious and freeing. I felt like I’d left my worries at the top.

I think I might have even screamed. The entire time, Emmett kept his arm banded around my waist, his body a solid

wall resting against my back. I felt safe and secure.

His mouth was near my ear, and his breath drifted over my ear lobe, sending tingles down my spine. What would it be like if we were in this position in the bathtub? Would his hand drift lower?

We slowed as we reached the bottom of the hill, and I jumped off. “That was so much fun. Can we do it again?”

“You didn’t think it was too fast?” he asked as he got up and grabbed the string for the sled.

“It was perfect. I felt so free.”

We walked side by side back up the hill. “I guess this is the not-so-fun part?”

“It’s a necessary evil. We tried talking my parents into getting lifts, but I’m sure those were out of their price range unless we were going to start a ski resort. And our hills aren’t big enough for commercial skiing.”

“It’s something you seriously thought about?”

“We’ve gone over every possible way to make money.”

“I remember your mom being interested in hosting weddings even before Gia called to inquire about it. Gia said she was excited at the prospect.”

“I was the one who hesitated. You know why. I don’t like people on the farm. We have successful businesses on the side. Mom just wants to see the farm making us more money. She enjoys having people visit. She’s a little more social than the rest of us.”

“Are you all grumpy?”

“I’m probably the worst of my brothers, but all of us are cautious about business endeavors. We don’t jump into things, as much as Mom would like us to.”

I didn’t want to ask what he decided about Gia’s proposal because my wedding was a disaster, and I didn’t want real life to intrude any more than it already had.

He set up the sled again. “You ready to go again?”

“Yes.” I loved spending time with him and experiencing new things, and the feeling of free-falling was my new addiction.

“Are you an adrenaline junkie?” Emmett asked when we were walking up the hill again, stepping in our previous footsteps.

“I didn’t think I was. But then I’ve never really done anything that exciting.”

“It’s pretty sad that you think this is exciting, but I’ll give you a pass since you were raised the way you were.”

“My parents went on ski trips and other adventures, but they rarely took us. They were always with someone new, or they needed time alone because things were rocky. It was always about their relationship. Not us.” I stopped talking and sighed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound like I was complaining.”

“I know you weren’t.”

I tipped my head back, and said, “I wish I could go back and talk to that little girl and tell her everything was going to be fine. Sorry, that sounded crazy.”

When I opened my eyes, his gaze was steady on me. “Not at all. I think that’s what you need to do to heal from whatever

you went through back then.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Talk about it, get the shit out, and then tell your inner child that she’s protected, and you’ll take care of you.”

“Now you sound as crazy as I do.”

He pulled me against his chest, sending my heart rate into overdrive. “You’re not crazy. We’re all dealing with stuff from our past.” He squeezed me tight, then let me go. “I probably should have dealt with the pain of the breakup with Molly, and I didn’t. I kind of shoved it under a rock in my brain and vowed never to date again.”

“Wow. Never?”

“I was feeling a little out of control after it happened.”

“Still.”

“I’ve been cautious since, but I think I can see now that there is a possibility of something out there for me.”

“Was it my failed engagement that gave you that idea?” I teased as I settled in front of him on the sled.

He was quiet for so long that I didn’t think he’d answer. Finally, he leaned closer and whispered in my ear. “It was you.” Then he pushed off the snow, and we were flying again. I let my head fall back onto his shoulder and gave in to the feeling of letting go. Here in this moment, anything was possible. I was addicted to the rush of adrenaline. I’d stay out all night if we could.

We went down the hill too many times to count. We relayed more stories of our childhoods, but his were more interesting and heartwarming. I learned that there were always freshly baked cookies for a snack when they came home from

school, that their father was the one who had the patience to help them with homework, and they were given chores at an early age. His mother wanted them to learn responsibility but still gave them plenty of time to run wild.

I loved the picture he painted of his family. I wanted something like that for my children. I just wondered if I'd find the right guy to create that future with. I'd read somewhere recently that we had the power to create our own futures, but I wasn't sure if I was bold enough to take what I wanted.

I was too nervous to ask him about what he'd said when we went down the hill. If I changed his mind about dating, was he interested in someone else, or was it me? The logical side of my brain said I wasn't a safe bet for anyone. I needed to get my life together before I jumped into another relationship. But my heart seemed to think that Emmett might be the man for me.

The snow came down harder, and the winds were gusting again.

"We need to get home before the storm hits."

Suddenly nervous, I hurried to the snowmobile and turned the key. I knew Emmett would protect me, but I'd feel safer inside the cabin, where we were warm and cozy.

Visibility quickly diminished as I followed his taillights. When we reached the cabin, we parked side by side in front of the porch. I got off, feeling a little shaky.

"Are you okay?" Emmett asked.

"Yeah," I said, my voice wavering slightly.

"I'll put these away. Get inside and warm up."

"Yeah, okay."

Before I could turn and walk away, Emmett pulled me in for a quick hug. “I’ve got you. You’re safe with me.”

His words washed over me like a blanket.

I nodded, the emotion in my throat threatening to overwhelm me. I didn’t let out the breath I was holding until he was safely inside, kicking the snow off his boots. “It got bad quick. I should have been paying more attention to the radar.”

The clock over the stove read midnight. I couldn’t believe we’d stayed out so late either. It was like there was no time on that hill. It was just me and Emmett, getting to know each other and having a great time. I couldn’t remember a time when I’d felt freer or happier.

CHAPTER 13



EMMETT

I was usually cautious about the weather, but I wasn't paying attention to the time or anything else when I was with Ireland. She made me forget about everything. It wasn't a bad thing except when a big storm was brewing, and I was caught unawares.

Thankfully, we made it back to the cabin, and the snowmobiles were tucked safely in the shed. I threw more logs on the fire when Ireland disappeared to change her clothes. I'd placed a few more T-shirts and sweatpants in her room earlier.

When she returned wearing my old college sweatshirt and sweatpants, I said, "I bet you're getting sick of wearing my clothes."

Ireland shrugged. "I don't mind. They're comfortable, and I don't have to worry about what to wear or what I look like. It's nice not to have that pressure."

"You feel pressure around your appearance?"

Ireland smiled at me as she grabbed the cocoa and a pan for hot chocolate. "It's a hard habit to break. My mom raised us to be very conscious of our looks and how we acted in public. It was worse for me since I was a girl."

“I can’t even imagine.” Growing up on the farm, I was picked on for that, but Mom had to bribe us to take showers and brush our hair. We couldn’t have cared less about impressions or whether we were presentable.

“I like it here. I can disappear for a few days. It’s an addictive feeling.”

I wanted to say it was too bad we couldn’t hide out here forever, but that would be overstepping the line between us. She was only here until this storm cleared. The next time the plows came through, she’d be gone.

I didn’t have an excuse to keep her here. Her life was in town, and mine was here. She needed to get over her ex, and I needed to figure out another stream of income for the farm.

Besides, her boss wanted to partner with us, and I had no idea if that was what I wanted. Was it a good idea to see Ireland after this, or was it better to create space between us? She needed to figure out who she was, and I wouldn’t hold her back.

With the fire started, I sat on the stool in the kitchen. Ireland’s hair was loose around her shoulders, and she looked at home as she moved around my kitchen, pouring the hot chocolate and dropping mini marshmallows on top.

“I like having someone in my kitchen.” The words were out before I could pull them back.

Ireland froze as her gaze met mine.

I should have apologized, but I didn’t.

“I’m not usually domestic.”

“You learned how to cook and bake from a real-life chef. I’d say you’re domestic.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew I didn’t know how to operate a washing machine until I lived in a dorm for the first time. My roommates thought I was crazy.”

“But you figured it out.”

“It was important for me to do things on my own. I appreciated the staff we had growing up, but I wanted to know I could do things if I had to.”

“That’s commendable.” And went along with everything I’d already learned about her. She wasn’t a victim of the way she was raised. Yet I didn’t think she was happy, even though she gave off a positive vibe.

“Are you ready for another movie marathon?” I had visions of us cuddling on the couch and falling asleep again.

She nodded eagerly as she cleaned up the pot and ingredients. I carried our steaming mugs of hot cocoa into the living room, where we’d left the fort. “You want to sit on the couch or the cushions?”

“Let’s start on the couch. We have all night, and we might need a change of scenery later.”

“I like the way you think.” I was worried she’d insist on sleeping somewhere else, but I only had one bed. It wasn’t like she could retreat to the guest room.

We sat side by side. I flicked on the TV, and she arranged the blankets. We could hear the occasional gust of wind and the slap of the flakes against the side of the house, but inside, we were warm and cozy.

“It’s a good thing you have a generator. Otherwise, we’d have to make do with games or talking.”

“Yeah, what would we talk about?” I teased, because we’d just spent hours talking as we walked up the hill over and over again.

She elbowed me. “We had plenty to talk about. I learned about your childhood growing up, and you learned too much about mine.”

I threw an arm over her shoulder. It was supposed to be a friendly gesture, but it brought her against the side of my body, and I got a whiff of the lavender bath salts Mom put in the guest bathroom. She smelled heavenly and felt even better. If I made it through the night without making a move, I’d be a saint.

We put on a popular holiday comedy and settled in for a long night.

At some point, Knox texted to check on us.

How was sledding? You all tucked in for the night?

I can control myself.

Mom said you two were cute sledding.

Of course she would have said that, and I should have known she’d be watching. I couldn’t hide anything from her. But that was the best sledding hill. The only one without trees on the path, and I wanted Ireland to be safe.

You shouldn’t spy on people.

I’ll tell Mom the next time I see her.

“Who are you texting? I’m surprised you’re getting a signal.”

“My brother, Knox. We installed something on the property that gives us a signal when the weather’s bad. That way we know if one of us is in trouble.”

“Is he okay?”

I set my phone aside. “Yeah, he’s just giving me trouble.”

Ireland’s forehead wrinkled. “Oh? What about?”

I wondered if it was wise to be honest with her, but I figured, of anyone, she deserved that from the people in her life. “You.”

Her nose scrunched up. “Why would he give you a hard time about me?”

I waved a hand in the direction of the overturned phone. “He thinks we’re going to hook up. Like it’s inevitable and we can’t control ourselves. As if a little snow would make us horny.”

Ireland sucked in a breath. “Why would he think that?”

“I have a gorgeous woman in my cabin for a couple of days. I guess he wouldn’t be able to resist.”

“But you can?” she finally asked.

“I hardly think I’ve been the poster child for restraint this weekend. I kissed you.” If only I’d sent her on her way as soon as I saw her by that waterfall. But I knew that wasn’t what she needed at the time. She needed a distraction, and I wanted to be the man to give it to her.

“I think I was the one who kissed you,” she said softly.

I’d straddled her and even lowered my mouth to hers, but she was the one who erased the distance between us and

touched her lips to mine. “That’s semantics. There were two of us.”

“Do you regret it?” she asked tentatively, as if she was afraid of my answer.

“I doubt you need another guy making a move on you so soon after your breakup. I shouldn’t even be thinking about kissing you.”

She raised a brow. “Are you thinking about it now?”

“I’m always thinking about you. It’s hard not to when you’ve been staying in my house.” I wanted to make sure she was comfortable and taken care of, but it was more than that. I wanted to see her come undone. I wanted to be the man who showed her that a relationship can be honest and real. But I didn’t have an example other than my parents, and that wasn’t enough. “But I’m not the right guy for you.”

“You said you felt something the first time we met. I did too. But I didn’t think you were interested in me. You were so grouchy, and then I met James. He pursued me, and it felt nice.”

“Do you think you were in love with him?” Because she wasn’t acting like a woman torn up over a breakup.

Her lip curled. “I don’t feel anything now that we’re broken up. Shouldn’t I be more devastated?”

She wasn’t in love with him, and she was attracted to me. I should let her get some distance from her wedding. She needed to go home and regroup. Decide what she wanted. And if it was still me in a few weeks or months, then we could make that move. But it wasn’t the right timing.

“Something about this feels right.” She gestured between us. “It seems like we’re suspended from reality, but things are

natural between us. That kiss didn't feel wrong."

During our conversation, she'd edged closer to me. "What are *we* doing?"

"We're doing what feels good, and right now, I want to kiss you." She placed a hand on my chest and kissed the underside of my jaw.

The light touch of her lips felt good, and I wanted to feel them everywhere. Against my better judgment, I dipped my chin and kissed her. Her touch was tentative at first, and when I took over, she straddled me.

Her arms wound around my neck, and her fingers tangled in my hair. It felt so good. I never wanted to stop. I didn't want reality to set in or Knox's words about being careful with her to permeate. I didn't want to think about anything other than how she felt in my arms.

She shoved the blankets out of the way until she was able to settle directly on top of me. There was nothing but a layer of thin cotton separating us, and I was positive she could feel every ridge of my cock. These pants did nothing to hide how I was feeling.

She moaned into my mouth, and I shoved the sweatshirt up so I could feel her warm skin. She got the hint and pulled it over her head, leaving her naked. She must not have put on her bra.

"I had visions of you in that lingerie," I said, even as I got my fill of her perky breasts and pebbled nipples.

"I took it off after we went sledding. It's not the most supportive thing."

"I like you naked more." I tugged her nipple into my mouth, and her head fell back. She was just as lost in this

moment as I was.

Her breasts were a perfect handful, and her nipples were hard. I lavished one, then the other while she writhed on my lap. “Emmett. I need you.”

I flipped her off me and onto the couch where I laid her out flat on her back, and then I tugged the sweatpants off her. She was naked on my couch, her hair spread out on the cushion behind her. She was like an angel, with the firelight flickering over her naked skin.

“I don’t know where to start,” I said as I stood and quickly shucked off my clothes.

With a smirk, she touched her pussy, teasing her entrance.

“You want me there?” I asked. My voice felt like I was talking around rocks.

She bit her lip and nodded. “Please.”

“You never have to ask twice. I’ve got you.” I wrapped my arms around her upper thighs and lifted her pelvis so that I could feast on her. Her finger continued to circle her clit as I flattened my tongue and licked her.

She tasted like honey and felt even better. When her finger fell away, I attacked her clit, licking and sucking, teasing her entrance with my finger.

When she cried out, I used my fingers to pump inside her. I wanted to drive her crazy. I had a feeling none of the guys she’d dated took care of her like I would.

When she left this weekend, I didn’t want her to forget this.

When I sucked hard on her clit, spasms racked her body, and her thighs trembled around my ears. She grabbed my free

hand and held on tight.

“I’ve got you,” I repeated as she came down from her high, and I kissed up her body until I reached her nipples. I teased the hard peaks until she was moaning and writhing underneath me, my cock teasing her entrance.

We were playing with fire because I was bare, and we hadn’t had any kind of discussion about protection. I finally pulled away. “I need a condom.”

I didn’t want to leave her. Her legs were spread wide and her pussy glistening. Her skin was flush, her hair wild.

“I’m on birth control, but—”

“I’ve got you. Be right back.” I hated leaving her like that, but I’d always protect her. I’d always be honest with her, and I’d never try to pressure her to do something she wasn’t ready for.

I hurried to my loft, grabbing the unopened box of condoms in my bathroom. I rarely needed them, and when I went out, I put them in my wallet. I grabbed a strip of them and hurried back downstairs.

Ireland was exactly where I’d left her, but now her finger was lazily circling her clit.

I growled as I fisted my cock and stroked. Her eyes widened. I bet she’d never been with anyone like me.

I ripped open the wrapper and smoothed the rubber down my length and settled between her legs. I lined up my cock with her entrance. “Are you sure?”

She nodded eagerly. “I need you.”

It was exactly what I needed to hear before I pushed into her. The sensation of her tight walls closing around me was

indescribable. As I worked my way in, I paused, needing to make sure she was okay.

Her hands gripped my forearms, and she tipped her hips to encourage me to move.

I eased out and pressed back in, the movement feeling like heaven on earth. I dropped my mouth to hers, feeling her nipples against my chest. I held her ass with one hand, holding her closer to me. I didn't want any space between us.

The orgasm built at the base of my spine, and I eased back on my heels so I could touch that swollen bundle of nerves.

She bit her lip, and I could tell she was holding back. "Let go for me. I want to see you come." And that was all that she needed before she arched into my chest, sending her muscles into spasm.

"Oh, my god. Oh, my god," Ireland said as she came down, and I rode her through the aftershocks. When I finally went over, I groaned into her shoulder.

I pressed my lips against her skin and slowly eased out of her.

"Don't go."

"I need to take care of this. I'll be right back," I assured her, pressing a kiss to her lips.

I took care of the condom, washed my hands, and gave myself a good look in the mirror. I probably crossed some kind of line tonight. It went without saying that you didn't sleep with a woman a day after she ran from her wedding, but we'd spent a lot of time together the last day or so, and I felt like I knew the essence of her.

We'd grown closer, and there was no denying our attraction to each other. It felt good, and I wasn't just saying that because it was sex. It was a different experience with her. I couldn't say I loved her, or ever would, but there was something there.

I was falling for her, and what we'd just shared only made everything more intense. I wasn't scared of those feelings, not when I suspected Ireland was different than Molly or any other girl I'd ever dated.

CHAPTER 14



IRELAND

I couldn't move from my spot on the couch. I felt wrung out in the best of ways. My body still hummed with the aftereffects of that earth-shattering orgasm.

I wasn't proud that I'd felt a little needy after he pulled out. I'd wanted him to hold me, to tell me we hadn't screwed everything up. This could just be a fling for him, a way to pass the time while we were stuck together in this snowstorm.

When he returned, the light from the tree illuminated his tan skin. "Is there room for me on that couch, or should we move to the floor?"

"I can't move."

With a chuckle, he leaned down and scooped me into his arms. I was a little surprised he'd done it so easily. When I was cocooned on the pillows, he grabbed blankets to throw over us. "Are you warm enough?"

"I don't want to get dressed yet."

"Me either." I rested my cheek against his chest, listening to his heart thud under my ear. "Do you regret it?"

He let out a breath, and I wished I could take back the question. "No. Do you?"

“No.” I traced a pattern on his chest, the hair tickling my finger.

He caught my wrist to stop the movement. “Are you sure?”

“For once in my life, I didn’t second-guess anything. I went with my feelings. You’re nothing like any of the guys I’ve dated before. We acted on instinct and attraction, not a list of characteristics you’d have on some checklist.”

Emmett cocked his head. “You have a checklist of things you want in a man?”

“Maybe.”

He adjusted himself so that he was looking down on me while propped on his elbow. “Will you tell me what’s on the list?”

I ticked the list off on my fingers. “Educated—”

“Does it have to be college or post-grad?”

“Honestly? It doesn’t matter. It’s more that any man I like should be interested in improving himself and learning new things.”

“I went to college and I like learning new things.”

“Check,” I said with a smile. “And he has to be nice to me.”

Emmett frowned. “Have you dated a lot of men that weren’t nice to you?”

I rolled my eyes. “Some guys are too caught up in what they have going on to see you, if that makes sense.”

Emmett frowned. “I guess it does.”

I wondered if he thought my list was shallow. “It would be great if he had a sense of humor. But I’m not funny, so I can’t

hold that against anyone.”

“I fail on that count.”

I laughed. “So true.”

He tickled my sides.

“No. Please don’t. I’m so ticklish.”

His fingers stilled, but he kept his hand on my rib cage.
“What else?”

“He has to be a family man, whether that be one he made or his biological family. I guess I’d want him to be willing to spend his time with me and be interested in creating a family down the road.”

Emmett tipped his head to the side. “Men aren’t willing to spend time with you?”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you listening to me?”

He kissed my brow. “I’m just trying to understand you.”

“Some guys are too caught up in themselves.”

“What does that mean? You’ve said it twice now.”

“They are more interested in their work. Like they can’t take a break to spend an evening together. Some guys are just solely focused on work or a hobby and don’t have time for anyone else. That’s how James was, and I don’t want to make that mistake again.”

“What else?” His expression was blank, so I couldn’t tell what he thought.

I chewed my lip. “This last one is important, and I overlooked it with James. He has to be able to love with his whole heart and soul.”

Emmett winced. “I don’t know if I’m capable of that anymore.”

“I get that you were hurt, and I don’t even know if you’re looking for anything serious. Maybe this is just a fling—”

“A snowed-in fling.”

“Exactly. I don’t know what this is. After the disaster of my failed engagement, I know that when I find the man I want to spend the rest of my life with, it will be obvious that he’s in love with me. Work will be important but not more so than me. He’ll be able to prioritize me in his life.”

“I can understand that. You shouldn’t settle for anything else.” He eased down until his arm was under my head.

“What about you? Do you have a list?”

His lip curled. “I think that’s more of a girl thing.”

I lifted up on an elbow, resting my head in my hand, and braced the other on his chest. “You don’t have a type or someone you gravitate toward?”

“I don’t necessarily, but I will say, I’m enjoying your sunny optimism and your willingness to experience anything. You’re more adventurous than I would have expected.”

He’d expertly dodged my question, but I sensed he was being honest with me. He liked me, and that was all that mattered. Not some list I needed to check off.

“It didn’t work with any of my exes, and I’m wondering if I should be looking for something or someone different.”

“Someone like me?”

“I don’t know if you’re a sure bet.”

He raised a brow. “I’m naked, and I was inside you a few minutes ago.”

I shook my head, but my lips twitched. “You’re such a guy. I didn’t mean sex. I was talking about my heart.”

“I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t know what it means other than I like you, and I’m not ready to let you go.”

I didn’t want to push or ask for anything more than he’d already given me. What claim did you have on a man you’d only recently gotten to know?

He moved his hand so that it covered my back. I loved the feel of his hands on me. They were calloused from working outdoors. “I don’t want to let you go either.”

I kissed him and threw my leg over his hips to straddle him. “I want to ride you this time.”

His gaze darkened as his hands cupped my breasts. “I want that too.”

I kissed him, letting his hardening cock slide between my folds. It felt so good that I couldn’t stop the moans from escaping my throat. He swallowed each one, with a hand braced on my hip and the other in my hair.

I could kiss him forever. I never wanted to stop. When the snow ceased, we’d be free of the snow globe we’d been in. I wasn’t ready for that. There was a sense of desperation to our touch.

The snow could fall; all I cared about was the man underneath me. His hand drifted to my ass, and he squeezed.

“Are you ready for my cock?”

I glided effortlessly over him. “Do we need a condom?”

“I haven’t been with anyone in a long time, and I was tested.”

“I went to the doctor for my annual recently and haven’t been with anyone in a long time either,” I confessed.

He reared up onto his elbows. “You’re kidding me?”

I braced my hand on his chest. “Did you miss the part where we didn’t see each other? He wasn’t involved in the wedding plans, other than through calls and texts.”

“How was he with you and not all over you?” Emmett asked, his tone incredulous.

He was sending an intoxicating message, and I was all for it. For once, I wanted to be consumed by a man.

“Can I feel you bare?” I asked as the tip of his cock slid inside, and he groaned.

“You can do whatever you want with me.”

I lined his cock up with my entrance and slowly slid down his length. “You feel so good filling me up.”

“You’re good at the dirty talk,” he murmured as he tweaked a nipple, the sensation zinging from my chest to my clit.

I bit my lip at the overwhelming sensations. “Mmm. I’m just being honest.”

“I like your version of the truth. Don’t ever hold back with me,” he said as he reared up so that he was sitting upright. “I want to be close to you so I can touch you, kiss you.”

“Yes.” My head fell back as he lifted me and lowered me again. The orgasm was building faster than before, and I think it had everything to do with what he’d said to me.

I let his words and the sentiment wash over me, making everything inside me ache for him. I wrapped my arms around his neck and hung on for the ride. He alternated lifting me and then feasting on my breasts. It was the combination that sent me racing toward the finish line, long before I wanted it to be over. Then he rolled me so that I was on my back, and he placed a pillow under my hips. The angle was intense, and he was hitting a spot inside that burned in the best of ways.

My head fell from side to side as it built impossibly higher, tighter, until I burst. I was only slightly aware that he followed me over. He groaned against my skin and held me tight to him. I'd never been so grateful to go without a condom because he didn't let go; he merely shifted so that we were next to each other.

Right before I lost consciousness completely, he kissed my temple and said, "What are you doing to me?"

His tone was a mix of awe and affection, and I loved it. I held on to the feeling throughout the night.



The next morning, I was alone when I woke. Again, I heard the scrape of the shovel, and I wondered if the snow had stopped.

The lights on the tree and the garland I'd wrapped around the staircase were lit, giving the room a cozy glow.

Slowly, I got up and stretched, wrapping myself in a blanket before looking out the window. On the ground, the snow was piled high, drifting in some spots, and the trees were peppered with clumps of the white stuff.

I dressed quickly, shoved my feet into boots, and threw the coat over my shoulders. I opened the door, not seeing or hearing Emmett. The porch was free of snow, and a narrow path was cleared to the shed, where the snowmobiles were stored.

The shed doors were open. I figured Emmett was inside working on something. The world around me was silent except for the occasional clump of snow falling from the roof or a tree.

Icicles hung from the porch, but it was too cold for anything to melt. I'd never seen so much snow.

I waited for a few seconds for Emmett to appear, and when he didn't, I followed the path to the shed. There seemed to be about a foot of snow.

Inside, he was puttering around in a corner, where shovels and salt bags were stored. When he straightened, his brow raised. "What are you doing out here without any gloves or a hat?"

I shrugged, feeling more than a little awkward, considering it was the morning after, and I wasn't sure how he'd react to what happened. "I wanted to see where you went."

He rubbed my arms. "You didn't need to come out. It's freezing."

I looked up at him. "You're out here."

"That's different. I've been shoveling. I warm up quickly."

He wasn't even wearing a coat, and his hat and gloves were stacked neatly on top of a nearby worktable.

"You hungry for breakfast?" he asked as he grabbed his things.

My stomach growled, and we both laughed at the sound.

Emmett closed the door, struggling a bit against the wind. When he finally managed it, he said, “Let’s get inside. It’s not quite over yet.”

We walked single file down the path. When we reached the porch, I asked, “Are they predicting more snow?”

“Maybe an inch or two. Nothing significant. It’s the wind that’s causing problems now. They can’t clear the roads easily because the drifts are so high.

I shouldn’t have been pleased about that, but I was. The longer we were snowed in, the more I could hide from the world. I had a feeling that this thing with Emmett would be over when the snow melted.

We kicked the snow from our boots and took them off.

“What are the plans for the day?”

“I’m going to clear the snow later. Want to come with me this time?”

“I can do that?” I asked him, hesitant to intrude.

“We attached a plow to one of the farm trucks. We can bring lunch and hot chocolates. It will go faster with you there for company.”

I was pleased that he wanted to spend more time with me. “If you don’t mind me tagging along?”

“It’ll be fun, and you can see more of what we do here.”

“When do you need to plow?”

“Not until this afternoon. Knox lives closer to the main road, so he always takes the morning and evening shifts. I take care of the afternoon.”

“You have a lot of responsibilities on the farm.”

Emmett pulled an egg carton from the fridge. “We don’t have any animals, so it’s not too bad. Mom’s been thinking about getting a puppy. I think she’s lonely at the big house. She’d be happy if one of us moved in with her, but we like our own space too much.”

“Do you have family meals at the house?”

“When it’s nice, we hold family functions at the second barn, where your reception was set up. Otherwise, we just stop by for lunch or dinner.”

I sat on the stool in my usual spot while he cooked omelets this time. “You have enough food if we’re stuck here for a few more days?”

“It should just be until tomorrow at the latest. The worst of it is over.”

I tried not to let that proclamation deflate me, but it was no use. My time with Emmett was coming to an end. I’d have to make the most of it.

His life was on the farm, and mine was in town. As soon as I got home, I’d need to deal with the guests, the gifts, and making the final payment to the vendors. I didn’t think it was fair to make my parents pay, and I wasn’t looking forward to handling any of that with James. Then there was the matter of weddings on the farm. Would Emmett agree to them? I had a feeling he wouldn’t.

If the promotion hinged on my ability to secure a contract to hold weddings at the Monroe farm, the odds weren’t in my favor.

Aria was more suited to the position, but for once, I wanted to accomplish something I could be proud of. It would

be nice to say I'd earned a promotion.

“What are you thinking about so hard over there?” Emmett asked as he chopped veggies and placed them into a shallow pot to simmer.”

“Reality will be here soon. I'm not looking forward to everything I have to do.”

Emmett glanced up from the cutting board. “Make James handle the wedding stuff. He's the one who lied and deceived you.”

“He wasn't the one who was supposed to pay for the wedding. My parents were handling that. Maybe I could tell him to return the gifts.”

“I think you can ask him to contribute. This entire thing is his fault.”

My nose scrunched. “Yeah, but then I'd have to deal with him, and I'm not sure it's worth it.”

“I don't blame you there, but it only seems fair.”

“I don't think he could pay for it, even if he wanted to.”

“He shouldn't have asked you to marry him if he wasn't financially ready.”

I pointed at him “But he was after my money.”

Emmett shook his head. “I can't get over what a douchebag he was.”

“Me either, but every day, I feel less embarrassed. Hopefully, by the time the snow is cleared, I'll be over the situation.”

CHAPTER 15



EMMETT

I liked the idea that their relationship wasn't as solid as she'd thought. But I didn't like that she was turning on her phone.

I focused on the eggs while she scrolled through her messages.

Ireland's expression filled with regret. "Finn's worried about me. I should have messaged him back earlier."

"You needed time to lick your wounds. I wouldn't feel bad about that."

Her fingers flew over the keypad, and I tried to soothe myself by telling myself that she was just reaching out to friends and family.

"My mom wants to know who's paying for everything. I guess I'll need to handle it. I didn't go through with it. It's only right that I contribute."

I pointed a spatula at her. "That's why you should tell the douchebag to contribute. I don't care if he says he's poor. He's probably lying about that too."

Her eyes widened. "I hadn't even thought about that possibility."

"I don't trust him."

“I don’t either.” She turned her attention back to the phone, and my gut twisted. Had James reached out to her? Did he realize how badly he’d screwed up? Did he want her back?

“I have a ton of messages from James.”

My heart stumbled. “What did he say?”

“He wants to know who’s paying for the vendors. Apparently, they’ve been contacting him.”

“I can’t leave them unpaid when we work with them at Happily Ever Afters.”

“Can you pay for it if your parents don’t?” I asked, curious about how big of a deal this was.

“I have my trust fund, but I don’t like to touch it. My job pays my expenses. Finn’s the same way. He works as a band teacher at a local elementary school, and he plays gigs at weddings and bars for extra cash.”

I was impressed but not sure it was necessary. “It’s nice to have it as a backup and impressive that you try not to use it. But isn’t it your money?”

“We’re allowed to do whatever we want with it. It never felt like it was my money. I didn’t do anything to earn it.”

“Your family was lucky enough to build generational wealth. They would want you to feel supported.”

“I’ve never looked at it that way.”

I plated the omelet, placed sliced tomatoes and avocados on top, and pushed it in her direction.

She set the phone aside. “It smells great.”

“I excel at breakfast,” I said as I threw more veggies into the pan for mine.

“I can see that.” She cut a piece of omelet and placed it in her mouth. “Thank you for taking care of me, and I don’t just mean breakfast, but with everything. You’ve opened your house to me and taken me sledding.” She smiled ruefully. “I’m the house guest you didn’t want or need.”

I covered her hand with mine. “I like having you here. Sure, it was unexpected, but never think you’re not wanted.”

“You’re better with words than I give you credit for.”

“I don’t usually bother with them.”

She ate for a few minutes and read the messages on her phone while I kept an eye on my omelet cooking. When she groaned, I asked, “What’s wrong?”

“In James’s last message; he asks me if we can meet up to talk.”

“You think it’s about the money or the gifts?”

“Why does he think I owe him anything?”

“I think we should declare this a James-free zone for the rest of our time here.” I didn’t want to hear about her ex. Here, it was just us and this crazy attraction. I had plans for her, and I didn’t want her mind on someone else. If this was the only time I got with her, I wanted to make the most of it.

Ireland nodded gratefully. “Let me tell Gia I’m okay. If not, she might show up here to see for herself.”

“I’d like to see her try. The roads have to be impassible.”

“You don’t know Gia very well. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. That’s her motto.”

“She’s determined.”

“Uh-huh,” Ireland said as she typed out a message, then set her phone aside. “There. No more messages. I don’t want to think about any of that.”

It was selfish of me, but I was all for that plan. Here, there was nothing to distract either of us from each other. I wanted this time because I wasn’t sure she’d look at me the same way after she went back to her real life. She’d forget all about me.

I ate my omelet standing at the counter and cleared the dishes when we were done.

Ireland cued up a holiday playlist. “Let’s take a bath. Then do you want to play some games? I found some downstairs when we were looking for decorations.”

“Why not?”

“Yay!” She grabbed my hand and tugged me toward the guest bath with a sexy smirk. “I have some very specific plans for this tub. It’s just big enough for the two of us.”

She turned the knob for the water and stripped out of her clothes before stepping into the steaming water. “Are you going to join me?”

She didn’t need to ask twice. I got rid of my clothes and sat behind her, drawing her against my chest. Her skin was warm and wet and soft. I couldn’t get enough of her.

She sighed as she rested her head on my shoulder. She pulled my hand until it was right where she wanted it. “When I woke up, you were gone.”

“Did I leave you aching for me?” I asked her as I sucked the skin on her shoulder and lazily circled her clit.

“Yes.”

I probably should have insisted on a conversation about what last night meant. But I wasn't brave enough for that. Relationships never worked out for me in the past. This was all I could expect from a girl like Ireland. She'd realize I was far beneath her soon enough. In the meantime, I'd enjoy this.

I slid my finger inside her, and her eyes drifted shut. "You make me feel so good."

I kissed her neck. "I could say the same about you."

I slowly built her up, cupping her breast and tweaking her nipples while I worked my finger inside her. In no time, she was whimpering and moaning, her body completely slumped against mine. She was literally putty in my hands, and I admired the way her skin flushed in the warm water, the hard peaks of her nipples, and the tightness of her pussy.

There was nothing about this woman I didn't like. The more I learned about her, the more I appreciated her.

Before she went over, I lifted and turned her so she was straddling me. She quickly changed gears and held my cock while I lowered her over it. The expression on her face was pure ecstasy as she took me in.

Her walls pulsed around my cock, and I needed more. I helped her move over me. She went a little wild when I sucked her nipples. She seemed desperate to chase her release.

I made sure her clit ground over my pelvis on every downward motion until her thighs were shaking, and she was crying out my name. I pumped once more, twice, and then erupted inside her. Going without a condom made everything more intense.

I wondered if I'd ever loved Molly because this thing I shared with Ireland was so much more.

I grabbed the body wash and soaped up her body, and then she returned the favor. The act of bathing each other had my heart squeezing. If I wasn't careful, I was going to lose my heart to a woman who wasn't in the right headspace to receive it.

This was a fling, a temporary break from our lives. There was no chance this relationship would survive. I didn't want to believe it was true, but my sinking stomach told me otherwise.

A short while later, we got out of the tub and dried off, neither one of us mentioning anything that was in our heads. I should have asked if she was okay or if she was on the same page as me, but I wasn't a big enough man to do that. I'd take what I could get and hope for the best.

When we were dressed, Ireland grabbed the games, and I made more hot chocolate before putting her cookies on a plate to eat in the kitchen.

When Ireland saw the cookies, she said, "I like how you think. What do you want to play, Monopoly or Connect Four?"

"Not Monopoly. My brothers were competitive when it came to that game. It got intense. We'd set up a card table in the family room, and it would go on for days. Sebastian kept a log of how much we went into debt."

"You're kidding? That sounds kind of awful."

I nodded. "I still have PTSD from it."

Her lips twitched. "Got it. No Monopoly. I play this new version with the kids in the hospital. It might be more your speed. I think it's called Monopoly Junior."

I waved a hand. "I can handle the real game if I have to. You volunteer at the hospital?"

“It started out as something we were supposed to do to earn service hours for school, but I loved it. I visit often and always take gifts of toys with me.”

Ireland continued to impress me. “I’d love to go with you sometime.”

“You might be a little grumpy for the kids.”

I rolled my eyes. “I can be nice, especially when it comes to kids. I like them.”

Her eyes widened. “That’s interesting.”

“Are you surprised?”

“I shouldn’t be. I’m just getting to know you.”

“We dote on Sebastian’s little girl, Ember. It surprised us when Sebastian’s ex, Reagan, got pregnant because he’s always so careful. He was the least likely of us to get a girl pregnant. Reagan’s in her mid-twenties, but you wouldn’t know it with how she’s handled it so far.”

Ireland frowned as she pulled more boxes of familiar games out of the box. “How has she handled it?”

“She didn’t tell him until she was in her third trimester, and when she had the baby, she said she needed time to rest when she went home from the hospital. But every time he asked if he should bring the baby by to see her, she was too busy. Eventually, he got her to sign custody papers so he could enroll her in preschool and make her medical decisions.”

“She doesn’t see her child?”

“Sebastian doesn’t talk about it much. I think he tries to connect with her, but I’m not sure. But every time, it’s hard on him and Ember. He hates to get her hopes up, but then she

wonders why she doesn't have an involved mother like most of the kids in her class."

Ireland rested her palm over her heart. "That's so hard. I feel for them."

My impression of her was that she felt a lot, and it was easy for someone like James to take advantage of her big heart. I told myself I wasn't doing the same, but it felt a little like I was. I had no intention of making this fling—or whatever it was—extend beyond these few days. But it felt like I was fooling myself. Because I hated the thought of her leaving and never seeing her again.

"Maybe you'll get to meet them at some point."

"Does Sebastian live on the farm too?"

I shook my head. "He lives and works in town. He helps us with the books but doesn't need to be on-site to do that."

"One of my friends and coworkers, Harper, is a single mom. The dad was around but not involved. She recently got engaged to a longtime family friend, Leo, whose family owns Giovanni's."

"The pizza restaurants."

"Yeah, they just opened a second location. I don't know why I'm telling you that, other than, maybe there's someone better out there for Sebastian."

"What about me? Is there someone better out there for me?"

"Hmm. I don't know. You're pretty grumpy," she said with a teasing smile.

I tackled her to the ground and tickled her.

“Mercy,” she cried as she wiggled and tried to get away from me.

I let her go. “Are we playing a game or what?”

We played a few of the games we knew from our childhood, easy ones that weren’t too competitive. It was fun, and I couldn’t remember another morning where I was present and in the moment. I wasn’t worried about the trees or the customers or how we’d make the farm profitable. I didn’t need to put on a front for Ireland. She was getting to know the real me, and that felt scarier than anything I’d ever done.

When it was time to plow the roads, I put hot chocolate in to-go mugs and sandwiches into a bag. We rode the snowmobiles down the mountain. Ireland was a pro at driving now, and I didn’t worry about her.

When we parked, she pulled off her helmet, her hair falling over her shoulders. She sported a huge smile as she approached Knox. “You leave some snow for us to clear?”

Knox’s eyes widened slightly as his gaze moved from her to me. “Are you helping Emmett?”

“He wanted some company. I’m Ireland, otherwise known as the runaway bride.”

“Yeah, I’m familiar,” he said and then raised a brow at me. “You wanted company, huh?”

I punched Knox’s shoulder. “We brought lunch. It’ll be fun.”

He straightened. “I don’t think of snow removal as fun, but have at it. I think this will be the last time we need to make a pass. I’ve heard plows in the distance, but they haven’t come down this way yet. I think they’ll be here tonight.”

I swallowed over the lump in my throat. “We’ll be able to get you home, then.”

“Perfect.” Ireland plastered a smile on her face, but it was stilted. Was she as worried about her leaving as I was?

“It was nice to see you again, Ireland. I’m sure you’re eager to head home and get back to your life.”

Ireland smiled at me. “It’s been nice to have this break, especially with everything that happened.”

“Your fiancé was a jerk. You’re better off without him.” Knox tended to say things how they were, so I wasn’t surprised he was so blunt about Ireland’s situation.

Ireland opened her mouth and then shut up, probably at a loss for what to say.

“I’ll leave you to it. Have a nice time,” Knox said as he got on his snowmobile and headed to the main house. He was probably checking on Mom, and I only felt a small pang of guilt that I hadn’t bothered to do the same since Ireland was staying with me.

I’d had my hands full, literally as well as figuratively. Knox wasn’t involved with anyone at the moment, not that he ever was for long.

“You told him about James?” Ireland asked.

“Yeah, when I met up with him yesterday. I didn’t want anyone to think you left him at the altar. My family has strong feelings about that sort of thing.”

“Oh, sure. That makes sense, and I don’t mind. It’s the truth. James should deal with the consequences of his actions.”

We climbed into the cab of the truck, and I handed her a sandwich and a mug.

“You can eat while you work?” Ireland asked as I unwrapped my turkey sub.

“I’ve gotten used to eating when I can. There’s a lot of work to be done around here. I don’t take much time for myself.”

“You should. Self-care is so important.”

I flashed her a smile. “I think that’s something women seem to be more concerned with.”

“Self-care can be anything—working out, taking a shower, or even getting a haircut.” She leaned over and tugged a strand of my hair.

“You think I need a haircut?” I asked as I ran a hand through it.

She scrutinized me for a few seconds before she said, “It’s a little unruly.”

“I like my hair and my scruff.” But for the first time in a while, I wondered if she preferred clean-shaven men. I’d never seen James, but I bet that’s how he looked.

“I do too. I was just giving you a hard time. You’re a rugged mountain man. It fits.”

It wouldn’t hurt to shave a bit more and get a trim. But then I wondered why I would do that. I shouldn’t have to change for a woman. Not that she was asking me to.

I took a large bite of my sub and then got to work clearing the snow.

Ireland peppered me with questions about what I was doing and why we did it and didn’t hire someone. It was easier to do it ourselves than to hire out. But I could see if we all had

families and were busy with other things, we'd need to. For now, this worked out perfectly for us.

“I love how quiet it is out here. Is this how it is in the off-season?”

“This time of year, the line of cars coming in stretches down the road, and we have to get police in here to direct traffic.”

“I can see why you find it so disruptive and want to keep the events that take place here to a minimum.”

“Now you see why I don't want to add weddings.”

“I get it. But you were looking for other streams of income, and that's what this is. I don't want to pressure you, and it's Gia's proposal, not mine.”

“You don't care if I agree to it?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“I can see why you wouldn't want it, but I sympathize with her too. I don't want to pressure you either way.”

“We've thought about adding another lane for traffic that we could use for secondary events. We just haven't done it yet.”

“Is that something you could do yourselves?”

“We can clear the trees and lay the gravel. That would help with traffic. I don't know if I want to commit to multiple weddings a year. A onetime wedding wasn't a big deal.”

We spent the rest of the time talking about our favorite things to do in the snow and made plans to build a snowman when we got home.

CHAPTER 16



IRELAND

*B*y the time we got back, the sun was setting. We built a snowman and then made dinner. I helped with the salad and potatoes while he cooked the chicken. It was simple and domestic, and I enjoyed it more than I thought I would.

I'd always enjoyed cooking, but I saw it as more of an escape from my reality as a child. Now I was free to do whatever and be whoever I wanted, and I still felt a little caged in. Like I hadn't quite reached my full potential.

I enjoyed my job, but it didn't excite me in the way that it did Aria. Maybe if I was the head wedding planner, I'd feel differently.

We sat down to eat at the surprisingly large table, and I asked, "Did you make this?"

"I did. It was one of the first I built. It took me a long time to get it right."

I ran a hand over the smooth wood. He'd kept it a natural color, and it fit the cabin décor. "It's gorgeous."

"My tables are one of the most sought-after items, especially before Thanksgiving. People want a large table everyone can fit around."

“Is that why this one is so large?” I would have expected a small table for a bachelor who admittedly never invited anyone over.

“I made one for my mom after this one and wanted to make sure I could do one this size. Hers is even bigger. She has to accommodate all five of us. We don’t have much extended family now, but she wanted it to work for future grandkids and wives.”

“Does this feel strange to you? To have someone to share meals with?”

“It feels odd to have someone in my space, but I’m enjoying spending time with you. Honestly, I’m worried it will be even weirder when you’re gone.”

I wondered about that too. Was I brave enough to ask for more, or did I wait for him to make that move? I didn’t have a lot of experience in a relationship like this. We burned so hot and got close so fast that I worried it wouldn’t withstand our return to normalcy.

There was only one way to find out. When it was time to go, and if he didn’t ask for more, I’d leave without any tears or regrets. I pasted on a carefree smile. “You’ll get used to your solitude again and wonder why you let a runaway bride share your home for so long.”

“I don’t know about that,” he admitted as he shifted in his chair. “I didn’t know what it was like to be any other way, and now that I’ve experienced it, I’m worried it won’t feel the same.”

I shrugged. “Isn’t that just growth? If you don’t change and evolve, you’re just standing still.”

“Maybe that’s what I’ve been doing all these years—standing still.” He speared a slice of potato and ate it.

“You take care of your mom and your brothers, and I bet you have a sweet spot for that niece of yours.” I pointed my fork at him.

Emmett’s entire body softened, and his shoulders lowered. “She’s the best of all of us.”

“Do you have a picture?” I asked him, eager to see more of this side of him.

Instead of grabbing his phone, he opened his wallet and pulled out a wallet-sized picture.

“I didn’t know anyone kept these anymore. My dad used to keep them in his wallet, too, with his ever-revolving stepkids.” I turned it so I could see the image of his niece with a large gap-toothed smile, pigtails—her hair curled into blonde ringlets—and the most adorable pink glasses. “She’s precious.”

“She’s even better in person,” Emmett gushed.

“I can imagine. I’d love to meet her someday,” I said, handing him the picture.

“Mmm,” he said noncommittally as he carefully placed her picture back into his wallet. “I have images on my phone, too, but that one is my favorite.”

“It reminds me of our school pictures. Back when we handed them out to relatives and hung them on the fridge. I was always embarrassed when it was a bad picture, but now I know why my parents did it. They were proud of us.”

He tipped his glass back, taking a long drink of water. “Of course they were.”

“Did your mom hang yours in frames?”

“She didn’t frame them. She always said she was too busy to make a proper photo album, but she hung them on the fridge along with our artwork, which was rudimentary at best.”

“I would think if you’re good with your hands and wood, you’d be equally skilled at drawing.”

“I can draw the measurements for a bookshelf, but that’s the extent of my artistic ability. Knox has always been good with growing things, so he helped in the garden, planting and tracking the tree growth. Sebastian was more into numbers and school. Talon and Heath were more interested in fixing and building things around the farm. Mom could barely get us to sit still long enough to eat dinner. She always asked us how we’d ever grow to be big and strong if we didn’t take the time to eat a good meal.”

“You seemed to have turned out okay,” I teased. His brothers were large and muscular. I thought it had something to do with growing up on a farm and engaging in manual labor. The men I dated tended to be leaner and pale, as if they were indoors all day and never lifted a finger.

Emmett puffed out his chest. “We proved her wrong, but by the time we were teenagers, she was complaining we were eating her out of house and home. She said that all the time. My parents would go to bed early, and we’d stay up, eating everything we could find. We made the mistake of not cleaning up after ourselves.”

“Your poor mother.” I bumped his shoulder with mine.

“She loves us.”

“I like how you look after her. My mom always tried to fulfill her needs with other men, so Finn and I aren’t that

protective of her. What could she need or want from us?”

“That makes me sad for you,” Emmett said.

I waved a hand at him. “I didn’t tell you that so you would feel sorry for me. We were just talking about our childhoods.”

“Do you want to try and get home tonight? I’m a little worried about icing over, even if the roads are technically cleared tonight,” Emmett asked carefully.

“I can wait until morning.”

Emmett nodded. “The sun’s supposed to be out, and that should help warm the roads.”

We were talking about practical things, but I had a feeling that neither of us was ready for me to leave. One more night. That’s all I wanted, and all I could reasonably expect. Who knew what tomorrow would bring, but I’d leave everything in this cabin tonight.

We both stood to clean up and hurried through the chore as if we knew our time was limited.

“I guess we don’t need to sleep in the living room tonight.” The power had come back on at some point during the afternoon while we were gone.

“I want to make sure we did everything you wanted to do while you were here.”

“When will I ever have another opportunity to stay overnight at a Christmas tree farm? You’d hate this idea, but you could build cabins and rent them out.”

“No,” he said immediately, and I burst out laughing. It hadn’t been long, but I felt like I knew him inside and out.

“Would you like to decorate outside?”

I loved that he wanted to share his family tradition with me. “Do we have enough decorations?”

“Let’s see.”

We went through the boxes of ornaments and placed everything that could work on an outdoor tree in a box. Emmett hoisted the box in one hand and took mine in his other. “Let’s go find our tree.”

Outside, he paused on the porch. “Which direction? Do you want to walk or take the snowmobile? There is no limit on where you can go. That was always the rule.”

“I’d love to decorate one of the trees by the waterfall.” It was in the woods, but there were a few trees that looked like Christmas trees, although I’d never be able to relay the kind of tree it was.

“My brothers and I liked to take the seeds and see where the trees would grow without our attention. We used to complain about how much time and effort the trees took. We wanted to experiment to see if we just dropped a seed if it would grow.”

“And did it?” I asked, always eager to hear more about him and his childhood.

“Most didn’t, but the few by the waterfall did. I always took that as a sign that the place was magical. That’s why I built the structures there.”

“I love it too.” We walked in silence for the rest of the way. It wasn’t snowing anymore, but the occasional gust of wind blew the snow, making it feel like it was snowing. The only sound was our boots crunching the snow.

What would it be like if I lived here? Would I go for walks in the snow? Would I take the paths in the morning? Would I

be happy living somewhere so remote when I'd grown up in a house with staff and people coming and going at all hours of the day and night?

Warmth settled around my heart. I would love to live here. Whether I'd get tired of the seclusion remained to be seen. I'd have to wait and see how I felt when I was back in my apartment.

Maybe I would be happy to be home and would quickly forget about the farm.

When we reached the top of the hill where he'd built the various structures, he asked, "Which one were you thinking of?" There were a few by the seats built out of logs, but it was the one by the waterfall that held my attention. "That one."

"Great choice. We named the trees after the seven dwarfs, and this one is Grumpy."

"Do you remember why you chose those names?"

Emmett shrugged. "I never asked why, but it's funny because you're the only one who calls me grumpy."

I let my head fall back on a laugh. "I love that the tree is named after you, but not really."

"If they're named after people, then yours is happy."

I clasped my mittened hands together. "Show me which one that is."

He led the way to the benches made out of logs. The tree was small and kind of squat. "My brothers always said this one looked the most cheerful."

I walked around the perimeter of the tree, noting the thick and full branches. "I'm not sure how a tree can look cheerful, but I see what you mean."

“If you step back and look at it this way, it almost looks like the tree is smiling.”

“Oh, my. You’re right. I can’t believe it, and I never would have noticed it if you hadn’t pointed it out.” I lowered my hand from my mouth. “We should decorate both.”

“Whatever you want.”

We couldn’t do any lights because the trees blocked the sun in the woods. Instead, we pulled out large white and red ornaments and placed them on the tree. Then we added a string of garland. The one on Happy was thick and full, and the one on Grumpy was thinner with colorful wool balls.

When we were done, my arms ached, and my back was tight, but the trees looked fabulous. “I love it. You should decorate these trees every year.”

“Make it a new tradition.”

I could see it if we had kids, hiking through the snow to find the perfect tree to decorate and listening to their reasons for picking each one. The image was so real and so powerful, I sucked in a breath. I’d envisioned a dark-haired girl and a boy hanging garland and giggling as they decorated the tree.

Everything inside me ached for that reality. I’d never felt anything so strongly before. As if it were meant to be, and I was seeing the future.

“Are you okay?”

I shook my head. “Yeah, I just got a vision of something, and it seemed so real.”

“What was it?”

I couldn’t be completely honest with him. I had no idea if he even wanted kids, much less a relationship. “Kids

decorating the tree. Maybe you could have the visitors decorate one by the cut trees. Each guest could add their own ornament.”

“That’s a great idea,” Emmett said, but his gaze narrowed on me as if he didn’t quite believe me.

I couldn’t tell him the truth. He’d think I was crazy for seeing into our future when we’d only just hooked up. Something like that would send him running from me in a panic. He wasn’t ready for commitment, much less talk of a future with marriage and kids. Besides, I’d look like the kind of woman who was desperate to be married. That I jumped from one guy to the next. I didn’t want him to think of me that way.

“You should take a picture. The ornaments won’t look this good in the morning.”

“Great idea,” I said as I pulled out my phone and took pictures of the trees by themselves and then selfies with us.

When we were done, I was exhausted.

“Let’s get cleaned up.”

Part of me wanted the night to last forever, but the excitement of the last couple of days was catching up with me. I did yoga but nothing as physical as hiking, snowmobiling, and sledding. My body was protesting loudly.

“A bath and then bed,” he murmured as he took my hand.

“I can get behind that.” I felt like I could sleep forever.

We made our way slowly to his cabin. “You need a wreath on your door.”

“That would look nice, but no one ever visits.”

“I’m here.”

He didn’t answer, but we both knew I’d be gone by morning.

Inside, he ran the bath, and we both stepped in, my back resting against his chest. We were quiet, as if contemplating the weight of the next day. I’d leave, and he’d be back to his normal life. Would he be relieved to see me go, or would he be sad?

I hoped for the latter but didn’t want to get hurt. There was a good possibility he’d never call or text me again, and then what? How would I get past these few days? Or maybe these two days were meant to stand on their own. Our entire relationship could only exist when the outside world didn’t intrude.

“One more night. No worries. No plans for the future.”

I nodded, even though I didn’t like that last statement. My conscience was making all sorts of plans. But I had to be careful because he might not be. He never said he wanted to be in a relationship again, just that he was open to the idea of meeting someone.

“I can see I’m going to have to distract you to get your mind off of whatever you’re thinking about.”

His fingers touched my nipples, and my head fell back on his shoulder. I was all for this plan.

“Make me forget everything,” I said as he turned my chin and kissed me.

I followed the movement to face him and straddled his wide hips. His cock rubbed between my folds, and I wanted to take him inside me. But at the same time, I didn’t want to rush anything.

He lifted me slightly so he could suck on my nipples, and the sensation shot straight to my core. “Please, Emmett. I need you.”

I was desperate for him. Instead of waiting for him to make the move, I fisted his cock and sank over him. Both of us let out a groan as he filled me.

“You’re greedy tonight.”

“I can’t get enough of you.” I’d never get enough of this. His calloused hands caressing my breasts, his mouth on mine, and his cock filling me up. It felt so good that I felt like I might burst. I let the sensations take over until all I felt was the heat of the water, his slick skin, and the pulse of his cock inside me.

He lifted me and lowered me until I found my rhythm. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to devour him. I wanted to be so close to him I couldn’t tell where I ended and he began. I never wanted this night to end.

He reached down to press on my clit, and the orgasm that had been hovering on the edge of my consciousness came over me like a wave on the beach. It was never-ending. He pressed up inside me a few more times until his head fell forward, and he bit the skin of my shoulder.

“That was so good.”

“It’s always so good with you.” I’d never felt anything as natural as when I was with Emmett. It was more than the physical. I felt more connected to him. And it wasn’t just the sex. It was the time we spent getting to know each other, listening to the stories of our pasts, and even our hopes and dreams. I was closer to him than I’d been to anyone else.

We embraced like that until the water in the tub cooled.

Finally, Emmett said, “We should get out.”

When we got out, he wrapped me in one towel and dried me with the other. The towels were warm, and it was the first time I noticed he had a rack that heated the towels. It was a luxury I was surprised he had in his house.

He caught me looking at it. “It was my mom’s idea. You know, in case I have any lady friends over.”

“She did not say *lady friends*.”

He chuckled as he wrapped a towel around his waist.

I wanted to lick the droplets off his chest, but the chill in the air made me want to get dressed.

We went to our separate rooms. When I returned to the living room, he was sitting on the couch in sweats. “I vote for a holiday movie.”

“Fine with me.”

He stood and handed me the remote. “Pick a comedy, and I’ll make some popcorn. Do you prefer spicy or cheesy?”

“How about cheesy.” I found a movie that was popular and waited for him to bring bowls of popcorn to the couch. “Do you make popcorn when you’re here by yourself? You have that media room and that huge popcorn machine in the basement.”

He handed me the bowl. “I love popcorn, so yeah, I do. But I won’t use the machine unless my brothers or Ember are over.”

I wanted to see him interact with his niece so badly.

“Sebastian will probably bring her over when the roads are clear to go sledding.”

“You look forward to seeing her?”

“She’s like you. She has this ability to light up the room just by being herself.” He flashed me a smile before grabbing a handful of popcorn and dumping it into his mouth.

For me, his words sucked the air right out of my lungs. It was one of the nicest things anyone had ever said to me.

He nodded toward my bowl. “You going to eat that?”

“Of course,” I said as I curled up on the couch with the bowl balanced on my legs. Being around Emmett was dangerous for my body and my heart. He had this way of innocently saying something that was earth-shattering for me but seemingly didn’t affect him.

He turned on the movie, and we talked and laughed like we did the first night. When our popcorn bowls were empty, he lifted his arm so I could snuggle into his side.

I wished this night could last forever. My lids were heavy, but I tried to fight them as long as I could. If we fell asleep, the night would go faster, and morning would be here before I knew it.

I must have lost the battle at some point. The next thing I knew, the room was moving, and it was dark except for the twinkling lights on the tree and winding up the staircase.

He carried me up the stairs to his loft and set me gently on the floor. “The fire will keep us warm.”

It felt good to be in a bed after sleeping on cushions, but I didn’t want to drift off to sleep. I wanted to feel his arms around me.

I couldn’t see anything more than shadows, but I sensed he was taking off his clothes and getting ready for bed. I reached

for him, and he placed one knee on the bed before kissing me. My hands ran over his warm, bare skin as he pulled at my clothes until they were off.

It was dark and quiet in the room. There was nothing but the sound of our breathing and the occasional moan. He kept close to me, his skin pressed against mine. He took his time moving down my body, kissing and licking seemingly every inch, until his broad shoulders were pushing my thighs wider, and his mouth covered my clit.

I arched my body off the bed, a little surprised by his full attack. He didn't ease up. He wanted to pull an orgasm from me as fast as possible. I wondered if he wanted me as badly as I wanted him and if he couldn't wait one more second for our bodies to join.

When I went over, the waves of pleasure seemed to go on forever. Before I even came down, he eased inside me, murmuring words, like, *"You feel so good. You're so beautiful. I want to be inside you all night."*

"Yes," I hissed. I wanted the same. I never wanted this night to end, even if I lost a little more of my heart with each passing minute.

He lowered himself so that he was braced on his forearms and my breasts were pressed against his chest. I wrapped my legs around him, wanting to be as close as I could get. He pulled out to the tip and then eased inside again, each pass taking me higher.

I bit my lip to stop the moans from escaping. I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. I couldn't control my body's reaction to him. I felt wild and out of control.

He dropped his forehead to mine. "Let go with me."

I felt like I was building up to a free fall, and I couldn't deny him anything. I closed my eyes, concentrating on the sensations, and when he touched my clit, I detonated. I bucked into him as he thrust hard and roared into my shoulder.

I was out of breath, my heart was racing, and my skin was covered with a sheen of sweat. I'd never felt anything so intense, and it was missionary position. It shouldn't have been anything special, but it was the most intense, best thing I'd ever shared with someone else.

He rolled to his side and gathered me into his arms. He kissed my temple. "I've never experienced anything like that."

"Me either."

"I don't know what any of this means."

I turned in his arms so I was facing him. There were no words.

He kissed me again, slowly this time, like we didn't have a destination in mind. Like neither of us wanted to fall asleep. We didn't want this night to end. Tomorrow, the sun would come out, the snow would melt, and we'd go back to our normal lives.

It never felt so empty before. I clung to him, unwilling to let him go.

CHAPTER 17



EMMETT

When I woke the next morning, Ireland was on top of me, her hair brushing my chin and spread out over my arm. She was warm and heavy and real. I closed my eyes and reveled in the feeling of her in my arms.

Tomorrow, I'd wake up alone with nothing to look forward to. I'd be busy with the holiday season and wouldn't have a minute to breathe until January.

My chest tightened.

Ireland must have sensed my unease because she stirred in my arms. "Is it morning?"

The light was drifting through the open windows. I didn't bother to hang curtains because I lived alone, but it meant that I woke with the sunrise.

Neither of us spoke but were deep in thought. There was a sense that as soon as we started moving, we'd be rolling down a hill, racing toward a finish line neither of us wanted to cross.

When her stomach rumbled, I said, "I'll make us some breakfast."

She rolled off me and sat up with a pinched expression on her face. "I'll shower."

"Eggs?"

“Whatever’s easiest,” she said as she moved off the bed.

I stopped her by wrapping my hand around her wrist. “I don’t mind cooking you breakfast,” I said, even though I wanted to tell her nothing had to change. That felt like a lie because everything was going to.

“Thank you.” I let her go and folded an arm under my head while she scooted off the bed. She moved around the room, rooting for her clothes. “Your bedroom is nice. I’ve never been up here before.”

The space was dominated by large windows and a king bed with nightstands on either side. There was an armoire built into the wall and a walk-in closet. It was simple but just what I needed. I never imagined someone being in this space, at least not since I had been engaged to Molly. Even then, she didn’t want to live on the farm. She’d pressured me to buy a house in a neighborhood. Looking back, that was probably the beginning of the end for us.

Ireland disappeared into the bathroom, the door shutting and the lock clicking into place behind her. The lock felt like the beginning of the end. Even if I wanted to join her, she didn’t want that.

I dressed quickly and headed downstairs to brush my teeth and wash my face in the spare bathroom. My heart felt heavy as I pulled out the eggs and made us breakfast for the last time.

“Have you heard how the roads are?” Ireland asked when she came downstairs a few minutes later.

“Knox said they’re clear.”

Ireland let out a breath. “Oh.” Then she smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “That’s good news.”

“You can finally go home.”

She looked away from me. “I can’t even imagine everything I’ll need to do when I get home. The people I’ll need to call.”

I covered her hand with mine. “Only do what you feel like doing. Don’t forget he’s the one who put you in this position, and he can handle the upset vendors or family members, especially the guests on his side.”

“I’ll have to remember that when I’m feeling overwhelmed.”

I wouldn’t be there when that would happen. I couldn’t pull her back from the edge or comfort her when she was feeling like the world was too much. It wasn’t my role in her life. I gave her one weekend away from everything, and it had been wonderful, but not enough to make a real dent in her life.

She’d move on, and so would I, just like with Molly. It might take some time, but eventually, I’d enjoy my solitude again. I would stop looking for her in my house or down by the waterfall.

I plated the eggs and poured her coffee. By now, I knew exactly how she liked everything—a dash of creamer and a light sprinkling of cheese over her scrambled eggs. My heart pinched, but I busied myself with the bacon.

I wanted to make something special for our last morning, but this was all I could find. I was getting low on fresh ingredients. I’d need to place an order for the grocery delivery service.

“What are your plans for the day?” Ireland asked as she took a bite of her eggs.

“I’ll help Knox clean up from the storm so we can open the farm later this morning.”

“Oh, wow. I didn’t realize you’d be open again so soon.”

“As soon as things are clear, we’ll have a line of cars out front. They won’t take no for an answer at this time of the year.”

“I guess you’ll be busy.”

“’Tis the season.” I should have been grateful for that, but my heart hurt.

“I have a New Year’s and a Valentine’s Day wedding to plan, but that’s it. Gia gave the rest of my weddings to Aria. I’m supposed to be a newlywed, after all.”

“Maybe you can ask her to return those weddings to you. It will be good to stay busy.”

It was my best trick to keep my mind off things. After Molly left, I buried myself in work. My family had to force me to come to meals with them. I resisted at first, but eventually, it got easier. And it would this time too. Or maybe once Ireland left, things would go back to normal. I’ll realize she didn’t have a huge impact on my life.

I had a feeling I was lying to myself. Ireland had changed me. I’d never be the same. I wasn’t even sure I wanted the same things out of life anymore.

I needed space to figure out what was going on. In January, things would slow down. We usually planned a brothers’ trip, and I was looking forward to it more than ever. I needed to get out of this cabin and away from the farm, and maybe even my family. Knox wouldn’t like it, but I had to do what was best for me.

Far too quickly, the food was gone, and our mugs were drained.

Ireland flashed me a smile. “I’d better gather my things.”

She disappeared into the guest room, and I braced my hands on the counter, the pain ricocheting around my chest. I told myself I’d get through it. As soon as I dropped her off at her apartment, I could get back to my life. That was a good thing. So why did it hurt so much?

I quickly finished the dishes, marveling how much easier it would be once it was just me. It would be a good thing.

I never liked having anyone in my space. Ireland was no exception. I’d feel settled as soon as her things were gone, and she was safe at her place.

I closed the dishwasher and turned to find her watching me. “Would you mind driving me? If you’re busy, I’m sure I can order a driver.”

Before she could pull out her phone, I held up my hand. “No one comes out this far. I’ll take you.”

She chewed her lip. “Are you sure? I don’t want to be a bother.”

“I’ve got you.” *I’ll always have you.* There was no doubt in my mind Ireland held a special place in my heart. I just wasn’t sure how big a space it was.

I grabbed my keys off the hook by the door and shoved my feet into my boots. “We’ll take my truck.”

She hesitated at the door. “I’m still wearing your clothes, and I don’t have any shoes other than heels. Gia had my travel bag at the wedding, and I left before I could grab it.”

I waved a hand at her. “You can borrow my mom’s boots again. Give them back whenever.”

I wasn't sure I wanted to see her again. It might be too hard. Maybe she could just leave them on the porch when I wasn't here. Odds are, I wouldn't be spending much time here anyway.

We got into the cab of my truck, and I turned it on to heat it.

Ireland rubbed her hands together. "I can't believe how cold it is for November."

"It's almost December," I said as I drove slowly down the mountain. Knox had cleared the road all the way to my house at some point last night. I was glad he'd left it for last. I enjoyed the feeling of being snowed in with Ireland.

But now it was time to go back to reality. We passed Mom's farmhouse, where the smoke was curling out of the chimney toward the main road. Knox was fiddling with something by the front gate. When he saw us, he came over to Ireland's side of the truck.

I rolled down the window. "What are you working on?"

"The snow was so heavy it knocked a few of the fence logs down." Knox pointed to where he'd been working. Sure enough, one end was on the ground.

"I can help you when I get back."

"Are you going home?" Knox asked Ireland.

"Yup."

"I bet you're looking forward to being back."

"Yeah, it will be nice," Ireland said, but her voice sounded flat.

Knox shot me a look.

“Let me get her home.”

Knox nodded and stepped back. “Good luck, Ireland.”

“It was nice seeing you again,” she said as I pulled away. “Does it get lonely living out here?”

“I like it,” I said, even as my chest tightened further.

“Does Knox?”

I felt her gaze on the side of my face. “I guess he does, or he wouldn’t live out here.”

“Mmm,” she said as she looked out the side window. “It’s hard to believe it’s only been a couple of days. It feels longer.”

I grunted in response because I felt the same way.

She rested her head on the back of the seat. “How can everything change in such a short time? When I arrived, I was James’s fiancée, and now I’m—”

“Don’t you dare say *nothing*,” I interjected, feeling irritated.

“I wasn’t going to. I wasn’t sure what I was going to say. But it wasn’t that. James doesn’t define who I am.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“But I feel different. Like I’m a different person somehow.”

“More jaded maybe? Less trusting?” I speculated.

“More open to the possibilities out there. But I think I need to figure out who I am.”

“We all need to do that at some point.” Was this her way of letting me down easy? She had to find herself and needed space to do it? If so, I’d let her have that time. I didn’t have a

claim on her. She said it herself. She was someone else's a couple of days ago. You don't switch gears to become someone else's that quickly. What we had was a fling. A temporary break from reality.

"Do you feel different?"

"Sure, I do." I looked over at her and then turned my attention back to the road. I felt a little foggy. I needed to get her home and away from this conversation. It was doing all sorts of weird things to my insides.

She fell silent and didn't attempt any conversation other than telling me where to turn. She lived in an apartment in Annapolis. "I would have thought you'd live in one of the historic homes," I said as I pulled up to her place and put the truck in park.

"This is enough for me. Aria used to live with me, but now she's living with my brother."

"Your brother and your best friend. That must have been tough."

"He's happy, and I'm happy for him," she said as I helped her gather her things, and we stepped onto the pavement. At her door, she unlocked it. "Thanks for everything."

I shoved my hands into my pockets. Was I supposed to kiss her? Or ask if I could go up? I was at a complete loss.

Then her palm was on my chest, and she went on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. "Bye, Emmett."

I was still processing the brush of her lips against my face when the door clicked shut behind her. The burst of pain in my chest was excruciating. I hustled to my truck, needing to get out of there.

Had I hesitated too long? Had I screwed up royally in not defining what we were or asking for something more? I didn't know what I was supposed to do in this situation. I drove home, my mind a complete wasteland of what-ifs. I parked at Knox's and got out to help him with the fence.

"How'd that go?" Knox asked when I walked up to him.

I drew in a short breath. "She's home."

Knox straightened. "That's all you have to say?"

I waved a hand at the main road. "The roads are clear, and I got her home safely."

His brow furrowed. "You spend the weekend with a woman, and you just let her go?"

"How do you know anything happened between us?" I asked, grabbing one end of the fence to lift it back into place.

Knox stood where he was, not helping me. "It did, didn't it?"

My jaw tightened. "I don't kiss and tell."

"I don't need to know the details, but you can admit it to yourself."

I managed to get the fence back in place without his help, and then I moved on to the next one. "It was a nice diversion. Is that what you want me to say?"

"Is that true, though? Or did it mean more?"

"Why would you even think that? You hook up with women all the time," I said, even though I knew that wasn't fair.

Knox shook his head. "It's not like that, but way to push things back on me so you can avoid talking about yourself."

“What do you want me to say? That I like her? That she completely changed my life in a matter of two days?”

Knox grinned. “That’s a good start.”

I growled as I grabbed the next fence post. “What I think or feel doesn’t matter. I was just a fling for her, a nice diversion. She feels wanted and needed after finding out her fiancé was cheating on her.”

Knox placed his hands on his hips. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

I struggled with this fence post to get it into place, but my frustration seemed to give me extra strength. “I don’t know what to believe. She didn’t ask me for anything.”

“You didn’t either.”

“Why does it matter? We’re going to be swamped in a few hours. I won’t have time to think about anything, much less her.”

“I’m just worried about you. You’ve never done anything like this.”

“You mean completely let go with someone and let them walk out of my life?” I asked, more to myself than him.

“I meant I’ve never seen you like this. You were so happy when you were with her, and when you were leaving, I just sensed that you were both twisted up about it. You have the emotional spectrum of an ant—”

I dropped the fence into place and punched his shoulder. “Like you’re any different.”

He rubbed the spot. “I have the good sense to acknowledge when I’m hurting.”

“You don’t. You’re not any different than I am.” Mom always complained that we were tight-lipped and closed off when it came to relationships. I think that’s why Molly left. It wasn’t all about the farm and my house. She said a lot of things after we broke up about how I never talked to her or said how I felt. “Don’t women just know these things? I shouldn’t have to spell it out.”

“I’ve never been in this situation, but I think you do. She might have been waiting for you to make the first move, to admit that you like *her*.”

“That’s just the thing—I don’t know if I do.”

“You’ll have a lot of time to figure it out.”

“Not really,” I said as the first car signaled a right to pull down our lane.

“Are you ready for this?” Knox asked, his voice tinged with amusement as the driver rolled down his window.

“Am I ever?” I asked as the car pulled to a stop next to us.

The driver stuck his head out. “You open?”

“We are now,” Knox said as he directed him where to park and which lots were open for cutting. When he drove away, Knox said, “He’s going to cut his own.”

“I’ll finish this. Why don’t you let Mom know we’re open for the day, and we need someone at the barn.”

“You got it. But, Emmett?”

“Yeah?” I asked, the band around my chest tightening even more.

“Don’t ignore what happened. You need to process it, then act on your feelings.”

“Get to work.” I wasn’t proud that I’d brushed him off, but I wasn’t sure what to say. I had no idea what I wanted or what just happened. I was discombobulated and mixed up inside. If Ireland didn’t want me, none of it mattered.

I was waiting for her to say something on the ride home. For her to acknowledge that what we had was real, and not a onetime thing. But she hadn’t, and it hurt too much to think about.

So, I pushed the weekend out of my mind and focused on the task in front of me. Whatever needed to be done, I was on it.

I didn’t break until the farm was closed, and I fell into bed with an aching body. I should have felt good to be done with the day, but my sheets smelled like her, and I was too tired to wash them.

I’d left my phone at the house all day, so I had no idea if Ireland had contacted me. I told myself it didn’t matter if she did. It was just a fling. Neither of us caught feelings. She was looking for a rebound, and she got it.

I just didn’t know where that left me.

CHAPTER 18



IRELAND

Ever since Emmett dropped me off, there had been this ball of something in the middle of my chest. I tried massaging it, but it wouldn't go away. I showered and put Emmett's clothes in the wash so I could give them back to him at some point. It should have felt good to be in my own place and dressed in my own clothes, but it didn't.

I felt like I should have after I found out about James and his infidelity. I felt sharp pains in my chest, the sting of rejection, and there were a million questions swirling in my head. But it boiled down to two: *Did our weekend mean anything to Emmett? Or was I alone in this?*

Did he assume I wasn't ready for anything more because of my recent breakup? I didn't have the answers, and I was too scared to ask on the way home or when he dropped me off.

His face was a blank mask. He was back to the Emmett I knew before, completely closed off. If he was determined to not feel anything, then nothing I could say would change his mind.

After my failed relationship with James, I wasn't sure if I could trust my instincts, even though everything inside me was screaming Emmett was the guy for me. The practical part of me knew we'd only been together for two days. It wasn't long

enough to judge his character or know how our reality would work.

Part of me argued that I did know Emmett. He'd revealed more to me over the weekend than James had during our entire "relationship." I knew how much he loved his family and how he would do anything to support them. I knew that he put his own dreams aside to make sure the farm was profitable for his mother and his brothers.

How would I plan weddings while living on his farm? We didn't make sense on paper or in any other way. I knew how I felt, like I'd missed out on something huge, or I'd walked away from someone who could be in my future, but now was firmly left in the past.

I should have said something, demanded he tell me what he was thinking, but I sensed he wouldn't want to be pushed. Men like Emmett sensed any kind of pressure and would immediately retreat.

I needed to give him space and hope he'd come around. I just wasn't sure how long I'd last.

I texted Gia as soon as I got home that I was back, but the apartment was quiet—too quiet. I should go to work.

Gia wouldn't expect me to come in, but what was I going to do with myself? I was worried that Emmett would get wrapped up in his business and forget all about me. But the stronger part of me reasoned that if that were true, then he wasn't the guy for me. But it hurt too much for me to think about it.

I pulled out my journal to write out my feelings, something I'd learned to do when I was a little girl and dealing with the

absence and neglect of my parents, and a knock sounded on the door.

Seeing it was Gia, I pulled open the door. “What are you doing here?”

“I figured you could use some sustenance.”

I waved a hand at her as she came in with a box of baked goods from Sophie’s Sweets and placed it on the coffee table in the living room. “Emmett made me breakfast.”

She opened the box and pulled out a croissant. “He did? Tell me everything.”

I sat on the couch with my knee folded in front of me so I could face her. “That’s it. We ate, and he dropped me off.”

Her brow furrowed. “What aren’t you telling me? You stayed with the grumpy mountain man for two whole days and nothing happened?”

“Did you expect something to happen? I just broke up with James.” I wanted to feel her out before I admitted to anything, but I really wanted someone’s advice. I’d been alone with Emmett for so long and had no one to talk to.

Her face pinched. “No. But a girl can hope, can’t she?”

I took a deep breath, my heart racing in my chest. “*If* something happened—”

Gia squealed as she threw her croissant into the open box and wiped her hand with a napkin.

I waited for her to calm down. “Would it be completely and totally crazy?”

“Tell me everything, and I’ll let you know.” Then she held up her finger before I could start. “But I will say, if you were

attracted to him, and he was good to you, then I don't see a problem with it. What James did to you—I can't even say it out loud because it's so deplorable, but you deserve a good rebound.”

“What if it's not a rebound?” I asked, almost afraid of her reaction. Before Gia hooked up with Silas, she wasn't into long-term relationships. I wasn't sure she'd be the right one to ask about my confusing feelings.

“I think you need to tell me the story so I can give you advice. So far, you haven't told me much.”

“I left the trailer before your driver showed up, and I'm sorry for that, but I needed a few minutes to myself. I went to this place in the woods where Emmett and Knox built a waterfall. I just needed to think, and he found me there. We went for a walk to the pond, and you wouldn't believe it, but the entire property is outfitted with twinkly lights. They light the paths around the property and the pond.”

“I think I heard someone mention it before.”

I held my hand over my heart. “They did it when their father died, and their mom was walking the grounds at night, unable to sleep.”

“That is the sweetest thing I've ever heard.”

“Right? And now everyone can enjoy it. It's just perfect.”

She waved her hand in a hurry-up motion. “Get to the good stuff.”

“We went to the reception hall in the barn so I could see it decorated, and it was everything I wanted and envisioned. Thank you for bringing that to life.”

Gia touched my hand. “Of course.”

“Then we danced.”

Gia’s eyes widened. “Dancing is so intimate.”

“It was. I felt cherished in his arms. He made me feel like I wasn’t crazy for what happened with James. That I wasn’t an idiot for believing him. Then we went back to his cabin, made hot chocolate, and watched a movie. We fell asleep on the couch, and when we woke, the snow had already come down. I was stuck there, and another storm was coming.”

Her face fell. “Nothing happened?”

I’d woken up with him spooning me on the couch, but I didn’t need to relay that information. “It wasn’t until that night, but, Gia, it wasn’t just the sex that made everything seem like more. He talked about his family, and we cut down and decorated a tree for his living room. His mother had given him decorations, but he’d never put up a tree. Can you imagine?”

Gia’s nose scrunched. “He is a bit of a scrooge.”

“On the outside, maybe. But I think they’re so busy with the holiday season that they don’t have time to enjoy it themselves. We went sledding that night, and he talked about growing up on the farm and his brothers. We got to know each other, and I felt closer to him than I have with anyone. Even Finn.”

“Wow.”

“I know, and I think that’s why it was so easy for us to take that next step.” I didn’t share with her the details of the trees we decorated by the waterfall. I’d look at the pictures when I was alone again.

“Then you fucked like bunnies.”

I gave her a look. “It wasn’t just sex, but I’m not a romantic.”

She gave me a pointed look. “You kind of are.”

“Ugh. Fine. I’m a bit of a romantic, but I don’t think I was alone in feeling like it was more than sex. I felt close to him. Like nothing I’ve ever experienced with anyone else. And I think he felt the same way, too, but now I’m not sure. He dropped me off without a word about seeing me again or what the weekend meant.”

“You were waiting for him to make a move?”

I nodded miserably. “Was that a mistake?”

“I’m not an expert on relationships, and Silas was the one who convinced me to give us a chance. I’m not sure I’ll be helpful.”

“I don’t have anyone else to talk to. I can’t go to Finn, and Aria’s a bigger romantic than me.”

Gia nodded seriously. “It looks like you’re stuck with me. I think you have two options. You can tell him how you feel, or you can move on. If he comes around, then you can hear him out. What do you want to do?”

“The mature thing to do is to talk to him, tell him how I feel and what I want.”

“Probably, but being vulnerable when you don’t know that he feels the same is tough.”

I nodded. “It would be easier just to move on.”

“You could see if he comes to you.”

I gave her a look. “I don’t think Emmett is like Silas. He’s not going to decide I’m the one for him and go after me.”

Gia shrugged. “He might. You never know.”

“He’s out of touch with his emotions. He probably doesn’t even realize what we shared, or he’s denying it. He’s so busy with the holiday stuff, he won’t even have time to think about it.”

“That’s the risk you take, but if it was as earth-shattering for him as it was for you, then he won’t be able to deny it for long.”

After the breakup with James, I wasn’t sure I was cut out for this so soon. “I kind of want to hole up in my bedroom and not come out for a month.”

“You’re not going to do that because you’re better than that. You’re a strong, confident woman, and you know your worth. If Emmett doesn’t, then that’s his problem.”

“James lied to me. The entire relationship wasn’t real. He had a girlfriend before we met. He used me for my money.”

“He didn’t get any of it, did he?” Gia asked.

“Other than what I paid for with the wedding.”

She lowered her chin. “His actions reflect on him, not you.”

“You don’t think I was too trusting?”

“Only you can answer that, but I don’t think we can protect ourselves from someone like that. He was determined to deceive you.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“Are you ready to be in another relationship so soon after James?”

“I don’t think I should be, but who could have predicted I’d run to Emmett, and we’d have this undeniable chemistry?”

“You can’t always choose your partners. Not the way you think when you’re younger.”

“Tell me about it. I have a list of attributes I wanted, and Emmett blew it out of the water.”

“I never would have picked Silas. He was my competitor, but I think we clashed because we were denying the attraction. We both knew that we shouldn’t act on it because of my brothers. That’s what made it even better for us. We resisted it for so long that when we finally came together, we were explosive.”

“I remember Harper predicting something like that.”

Gia rolled her eyes. “She thinks she knows me best, and in this case, she was right. Do you think Emmett’s the one for you?”

“This weekend, I would have said yes, but now, I’m not so sure. Reality is different than the four walls of his house or the farm. I have to deal with the aftermath of the wedding, my family, friends, and then there’s James.”

“I think only time will tell.”

If Emmett disappeared from my life, then I’d have my answer. Or I could be brave and tell him how I felt. That felt like the mature thing to do, but I was feeling anything but mature. “There’s still the matter of weddings on Monroe Farm.”

Gia leaned in closer. “I didn’t want to bring that up, but did he say anything?”

“Just that he hadn’t decided. He needs to talk to his family, but everything he said to me over the weekend makes me think he doesn’t want people on the farm. Even though he wants his mother to be happy and the farm profitable. I don’t know. If he wants to put space between me and him, it would make sense he’d say no.”

“Do you think I should talk to him, or should it be you?”

“I don’t know. I’m all tangled up over him. I don’t know if it’s a good idea.”

“Let’s put it this way. If you can secure the deal, I’ll give you the position of head wedding planner.”

“Are you serious?” It was the confirmation I needed that I’d accomplished something in my life that wasn’t just because of my money.

Not even graduating from high school or college was that worthy of praise. I had tutors available to me whenever I needed one. When I graduated, I spent my time helping out charity foundations. It was fulfilling work, but I wasn’t paid for my time.

This was the only thing I’d done for me. I was surrounded by entrepreneurs and women who were ambitious in business. I never had that desire, but I wanted to have something for myself.

“I want this contract. I want to be able to offer an amazing holiday venue to my brides, and I won’t be able to plan those. I’m going to be spending more time with Silas.”

“Are you moving in with him?” I asked, genuinely curious if she would move away from her main business.

“I don’t like being apart from him.”

I never thought I'd see the day when Gia stepped back from her business. She was still a hard worker, but she'd always been physically in the office. Now she worked from Silas's home and checked in virtually. It worked, but it was still surprising.

“One day, you'll feel that way about someone.”

I wondered if I already had because my heart ached when Emmett dropped me off at home. It hurt to walk away from him. But I wouldn't be the kind of girl who assumed anything.

“James pursued you, but he wasn't real or genuine. Maybe Emmett having some difficulty in telling you how he feels is a good sign. He's being real. He either isn't sure or isn't able to express his emotions yet.”

“That's not great either.” I didn't want to be with a guy who wasn't available emotionally. “What if he doesn't realize how he feels?”

“You'll move on and be better for it. You'll learn something from the experience you can use later. You're not like me. You don't close yourself off to possibilities. It will hurt, but it will make you a better person.”

“Are you saying I'm not afraid to get hurt?”

“You have a big heart. You put everything out there and hope they reciprocate.”

“I don't know if I want to be that person anymore. I don't want to be a doormat.”

“That's not what I was saying at all. You're in touch with your emotions, and that's good. You just need to find someone who's willing to meet you on the same level.”

We talked for a few more minutes, and then Gia left. I hadn't asked her if I could come back to work earlier, but I was sure she wouldn't turn me away.

I wasn't sure if I was ready, even if I didn't want to hang around my apartment feeling sorry for myself.

The more I thought about what Gia said about Emmett not expressing his emotions, the more I thought she was right. My only worry was that he didn't feel the way I did, or if he did, he'd never acknowledge it. And even if he did, how could I trust someone after James?

Then there was the other problem of convincing him to hold weddings at his farm. It would secure me the position with Happily Ever Afters, and I could finally tell my parents that I accomplished something career-wise. But could I do that when I was fairly sure I was falling in love with Emmett?

Would he trust me or want to pursue anything with me if we had a business deal together? The whole thing had me twisted up inside. I didn't know what the answer was, and I was worried I wouldn't get it right.

CHAPTER 19



EMMETT

That night, we worked until eight and directed everyone to leave once when they'd paid for their tree. If we allowed it, people would stay even later, but we had to stick to a schedule. Mom needed rest, and the act of emptying the farm cleared my brain.

I didn't relax until the taillights of the last truck trailed down the road.

Knox closed and locked the gate. "Mom wants us to stop by for a snack."

We hadn't eaten dinner, but all I wanted to do was head home and go to sleep.

Knox gave me a pointed look. "She wants *everyone* there."

"Are you serious?"

Knox raised a brow. "Would I lie about something like that? She wants to see everyone. It's the least we can do. It's not like we have far to go home."

My family was used to me being grumpy, so I didn't even bother to respond. We headed on foot to the main house since it wasn't far from the red barn.

When we opened the door, we heard our brothers, Heath, Talon, and Sebastian, in the kitchen.

Ember ran to greet us at the door with a stuffed animal tucked under her arm. I lifted her in the air while she squealed in delight, and I held her tight.

“Don’t hog her,” Knox said, elbowing me.

“She loves me the best.”

Ember rolled her eyes. “I love both of you.”

“How diplomatic of you, but you still love me the best, right?”

She rolled her eyes. “Be nice, Uncle Emmett.”

“Fine.” I handed her over to Knox, who squeezed her.

“There you are,” Mom said as she came over to us, hugging first me and then Knox. “I’m glad you were able to make it.”

I gave Knox a look. “I was told it was mandatory.”

Knox grinned. “It was a surefire way to get you here.”

“Now you’re lying about Mom?” I asked him.

“Enough of that. What kind of example are you setting for Ember?”

I looked down at my adorable niece, who propped a hand on her hip and raised her eyebrow. “Yeah, what kind of example are you setting?”

“A good one,” I said as I picked her up only to throw her in the air. She squealed and giggled as I did it a few times.

Then I pulled her down to my side and held her on my hip. I never thought I’d want kids, but I loved the hell out of my niece.

There was a spread on the counter, but it had already been picked over by the others.

Knox grabbed a handful of grapes and popped them into his mouth, talking around them. “Way to leave us some food.”

I grabbed cheese and crackers. “We’re the ones doing the hard work.”

“We all chipped in tonight,” Talon said.

Heath stacked cheese, pepperoni, and crackers into a double-decker sandwich and handed it to Ember. “Don’t forget, I’ll be working more on the contracting side and can’t be here during the week.”

It sucked, but it was understandable. The contracting job was a year-round position as opposed to Knox’s landscaping business.

“I’m getting more requests to hang lights,” Knox said, his eyes shifting away from us.

“What are you saying?” I asked, even as my stomach tightened.

“I want to add the service to my website and make it an official part of my business. Right now, it’s just word of mouth, one neighbor telling another, but it’s a legitimate stream of income, and I want to pursue it.”

“But you live here. It was always our plan for you to work here during the season,” I said, feeling betrayed.

“Things change. I can help in between jobs, but I assume I’ll be busy from now until maybe a few days before Christmas.”

I hadn’t anticipated my brothers backing away from the farm when we needed to do more work to make it profitable.

“We can’t hire a lot of help, especially not at the last minute. It’s already November.”

“We’ll make it work,” Mom said.

“We already have more business than we can handle. How are we going to handle it all?” I asked the room.

“I can help, Uncle Emmett,” Ember offered.

I chucked her chin. “I appreciate that, but you can’t cut down or carry trees.”

She bent her arm and pointed at her bicep. “I have muscles.”

Sebastian chuckled as he patted her head. “You sure do. You’re so strong.”

Ember nodded solemnly. “See? I told you.”

“How can you resist?” Knox said, slapping my shoulder.

My shoulders were tight. “Seriously, what are we supposed to do? Work harder?”

“We’ll figure it out.” Heath popped a cracker and cheese into his mouth. “We can see if Joey wants to help.”

“Our cousin isn’t always reliable.” There were a few cousins that had helped us in the past. I rolled my shoulders back, feeling the tension there. I wasn’t a roll-with-the-punches kind of guy. I needed to know that we had a plan to deal with this.

“What happened to the bride at the wedding? I heard she ran from her fiancé, into your arms,” Talon teased.

A muscle in my jaw ticked like an uncontrollable spasm. “It wasn’t like that.”

Heath smirked. “Mom said you were sledding on the hill.”

“She needed a few minutes to herself, and I gave it to her, but then we got stuck with the snow.”

“Since when do you not pay attention to weather reports? You’re the one who’s usually all over that,” Heath added, unhelpfully.

“I think it’s lovely. She seemed like she was having a great time.”

I should have known Mom would be watching us. What had she seen? Two people having a good time, talking and laughing? It was innocent, but I didn’t usually do anything like that. It was completely out of character.

“You stole the bride? Was that your way of shutting down the weddings on the farm?” Sebastian asked, wiping milk from Ember’s cheek.

“I didn’t steal the bride. I found her by the waterfall. She needed a few minutes to herself, so we went on a walk.” I waved a hand at them. “You know the rest. We got stuck in the snowstorm.”

“The wedding was at five, and it didn’t start snowing until hours later,” Heath said, licking his fingers.

“Use a napkin,” Mom reminded him, “or go wash your hands. I swear I tried to teach you manners.”

For whatever reason, we reverted to being kids in Mom’s kitchen. I usually enjoyed the camaraderie, but today I was strung tight. I’d been off ever since I dropped Ireland off at her place, and now this unexpected news about Knox and Heath working less was stressing me out.

“Ireland’s fiancé cheated on her. His girlfriend confronted her in the bridal suite.”

“Wow,” Heath said as my mom sucked in a breath.

“She was waiting for a driver to get her out of there, and she needed a few minutes to herself in the woods. I don’t blame her.”

“Good for her that you were there to keep her safe and warm,” Heath joked.

I shot him a dark look, not in the mood for my brothers’ teasing tonight.

“You guys hook up?” Talon asked as Heath smacked him. “Oh, shit. Sorry, Mom.”

“No swearing in my kitchen,” Mom said as if she’d said it a billion times, which she had when we were growing up. Usually, we were more respectful, but tonight, my brothers were rowdier than usual. I wondered if it had something to do with Ireland.

“Does this mean we won’t be hosting any more weddings?” Mom asked.

I was grateful for the change in subject, but I wasn’t ready for this question. “This one didn’t go that well.”

“Was there any disruption to the farm?” Knox asked the room in general.

Sebastian pushed his glasses up on his nose. “I didn’t see a dip in sales.”

“How was the store?” I asked Mom.

“I fielded a few inquiries about the tents. When I said there was a wedding scheduled, people were excited, wanting to know if that was something we’d be doing regularly. I said I wasn’t sure yet, but trees will continue to be our number one priority.”

“What about traffic? Any issues?” I asked the room in general.

“As expected, we had some wedding guests stuck in the line for trees, despite the signs and people directing traffic. I think if we’re going to do this for real, we need to add that second lane.”

“I agree. It would be nice to have wedding guests entering and exiting from a separate location. That way, vendors can get through without any issue.”

“That would make it easier. So, are we seriously considering this?” Mom asked us.

“The question is, do we want to handle the weddings, or do we give a percentage of the money to Gia?” I said.

“What are you saying?” Sebastian asked.

“We only get a venue fee for hosting it here as it stands now. But what if we did everything?”

“We’re not a wedding planning company. We don’t have silverware, arbors, or chairs.”

“There are vendors like Harrison’s company that provide everything. We have tables and chairs in the barn where we held Ireland’s reception.”

Mom nodded. “That barn cleaned up nicely. I loved what Ireland did with it. It’s a shame her wedding didn’t happen, and no one saw the beautiful décor.”

Knox raised his hand. “Gia was the one who suggested hosting weddings here, and you were against it.”

“That’s right,” I said, my jaw tight. I hadn’t even thought of this until I was standing in the kitchen.

“But now you want to handle the weddings from start to finish?” Heath asked incredulously.

“We’d get a bigger cut,” I said to everyone, knowing that money talked, at least when it came to Sebastian.

“But we’d do more of the work,” Knox griped. “I can’t believe you’d be okay with this.”

“I’m just throwing ideas out there, but I think it’s enough of an imposition that we should get more of the profit, especially if we need to clear a lane.”

Knox shook his head. “I don’t know. None of us know anything about weddings.”

“He’s right. I’d like to keep the shop open year-round, but I don’t want to host parties,” Mom said.

“Unless you’re saying that Ireland would do it, not as part of Happily Ever Afters, but as a solo planner?” Sebastian asked.

“Are you saying Ireland would work for us?” Mom asked.

I held up both hands. “I just thought of it now. I don’t have any plans or ideas about Ireland planning the weddings. I barely know her.”

Mom raised a brow at me, but I refused to acknowledge her silent question. I wasn’t ready to talk about what happened with Ireland. Not until I got a handle on how I was feeling.

“We’ve been in talks with Gia for a while now. I don’t think it would be good business to break things off with her and do our own thing,” Mom said.

“It’s business,” I said, even as I wondered what Ireland would think.

“It makes some sense financially, but we don’t have any wedding experience. We’d have to hire more vendors. It would be a lot, especially at a time when Heath and Knox are doing less around here,” Sebastian said.

“Unless *you’re* planning on being the wedding planner?” Talon quipped.

I shook my head. “Forget I brought it up. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Sebastian tipped his head in my direction. “You’re on the right track. If someone else can do it, why can’t we bring it in-house? I’ll look into it, pull some numbers, and get back to you.”

I loved that he was taking my suggestion seriously, but I was a little worried about what Ireland and Gia would think if they got wind of it.

“Will you be able to handle having more people on-site?” Heath asked.

“I don’t like it, but we need to make this place sustainable.” Especially with my brothers stepping away from it. The responsibility for the farm rested on me.

I didn’t want Mom to lose it. This place was part of her.

“I don’t want you boys killing yourself to make this place sustainable. I’ll figure something out,” Mom said.

I didn’t want her to figure anything out, or for her to make the difficult decision to sell a piece of property for a housing development. I’d hate having a subdivision near us. It was the last thing I wanted.

Sebastian held up his hand. “I don’t think we need to do anything drastic yet. We’re getting by.”

“For now. But how long can we go on like this? If you guys are going to be busy with other things, we’ll need to hire help,” I erupted, unable to hold my anxieties inside.

“I ran this farm with your father long before you guys were involved. We’ll be okay.”

No one wanted to argue with her, but Sebastian had private talks with us when she wasn’t around. The financial part didn’t look good. We couldn’t go on like this. The farm was too expensive to run off ten weeks of income. We needed more, and no one wanted to become a pumpkin farm.

“If we agreed to Gia’s contract, we’d have extra income but a few extra expenses with traffic control and building another driveway.”

“Can we make changes to the contract and ask her for concessions for the money we put out?”

“We can. But my impression of Gia is that she’s ready to walk away. There are other tree farms.”

“Pine Valley?” That was our biggest competitor.

“I’ve heard rumors that they’ve talked to her.”

“If Gia came to us first, it’s because she preferred what we have to offer. Pine Valley is smaller.”

“I just don’t know how much more Gia is willing to work with us. She seemed like a woman determined to walk out of the room without a deal. She’s smart. She won’t be jerked around for long,” Sebastian said pointedly.

I ran a hand through my hair. “I get that.”

“We don’t have to decide tonight, but we need to figure it out sooner rather than later,” Sebastian said.

We ate and talked about our day, and everyone left. Knox was the last to leave, squeezing my shoulder before kissing Mom's cheek.

"You want to talk to me?" Mom asked as she cleaned up the kitchen.

"Not especially," I said, even though I was dying to talk to someone about Ireland.

"You like that girl." It wasn't a question.

Not seeing any censure in her voice, I asked, "You're not mad?"

"Of course not. You can't control how you fall in love, or with whom. Your heart wants what it wants."

"She was engaged to someone else just a few days ago."

Mom's lips quirked. "It sounds like they didn't have a great relationship."

"Isn't that a red flag?" I asked, needing to talk it out.

"I know you're a little gun-shy after what Molly did, but you can't predict or control everything. Sometimes, you just have to have a little faith and trust yourself."

"I don't know if I can do that."

"How do you feel about her?"

"I'm falling for her, but how can that be? We only spent a couple of days together."

"I guess it depends on how you spent that time."

My face heated.

"Did you talk about yourselves, your pasts, your hopes, and your dreams?"

“We did. She knows about Molly, and she told me about James.”

“That’s good. I don’t think there’s a timetable for this kind of thing. How did you leave it with her?” Mom met my gaze.

“I dropped her off at her apartment.”

She tipped her head to the side. “Did you say you wanted to see her again?”

I sighed. “No.”

“Did she say she wanted to see you?”

“No.”

Mom frowned. “Hmm. Maybe both of you are afraid to put yourselves out there, but one of you has to make a move. Why not you?”

“You know I’m not good at these kinds of things. Maybe I should put it off until things die down.”

Mom’s eyes widened. “You want to wait until January?”

“It makes the most sense. I’m busy, and she’s fresh off her breakup.”

“I think that’s a huge mistake.”

Whenever I thought about doing something about Ireland now, I felt this pressure in my chest.

“I don’t want to push you into anything, but a woman like that won’t wait for long. She’ll assume you didn’t like her and move on.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“I think this is something that will come to you. It’s important that you allow yourself to feel however you do.

Don't ignore it or distract yourself with work."

It would be so easy to focus on the farm and put it off for later.

She patted my cheek. "Give it some time."

"I can do that."

"But don't put it off forever. A woman like Ireland only comes around once in a lifetime."

"How do you know that?" She hadn't spent much time with her.

"If she caught your eye, then she must be an amazing woman."

"Thanks, Mom. I'm not sure whether to be insulted or not."

Mom chuckled. "I'm not saying you're hard to love or anything. But you're special, and if she loves you, and you love her, then of course, it's one of a kind and special. Unless you think she's like Molly, and she doesn't like the farm."

"She loves the farm. I found her by the waterfall because it's one of her favorite places. She'd never cut down a tree and decorated one before, so we did that. She loved everything we did, snowmobiling, sledding, taking walks in the woods."

"It sounds like she'd be good for you. What's holding you back?"

"I'm not sure how she feels. She didn't say anything at the end either. I could be just a rebound for her."

"That's possible."

My heart sank because that wasn't what I wanted to hear.

“But I think you need to talk to her, tell her how you feel, and then you’ll know. No more speculation.”

“I’ll give it some time like you said.”

“I know you’ll make the right decision,” she said when I kissed her cheek.

And I said, “Good night.”

I wasn’t sure how she was confident that I would make the right move. But I thought about what she’d said and how I needed to trust myself and have a little faith.

When I went home, I grabbed a beer and sat on the couch with the fire blazing. Now that I was home by myself, with nothing to distract me, I missed her.

I liked having her in my space. I liked talking to her and joking around. I liked her.

I closed my eyes and tipped my head back. If she were here, we’d have a snack, watch some TV, and probably strip off our clothes. I’d reach for her once or twice in the night, and maybe we’d even enjoy ourselves in the shower the next morning.

But it wasn’t just about the sex. It was how I felt when she was here and when she wasn’t. I missed her. I liked her. And when I thought about her not being here again, I thought I might even love her.

I picked up my phone, but there were no messages from her. She presumably wasn’t working today, so she’d had plenty of time to reach out.

Maybe I was looking for something that wasn’t there. I’d give it time like Mom said. The right decision would come to me. I just hoped I wouldn’t be too late.

CHAPTER 20



IRELAND

I hadn't slept well in my bed. It wasn't Emmett's cabin, and I wasn't sleeping in his bed. I kept checking my phone, and, in general, I was driving myself crazy. I wondered if I'd imagined the weekend with Emmett. If I'd made it bigger in my head.

I decided to go back to work early, hoping to distract myself from my disaster of a personal life.

"What are you doing here?" Harper asked when I walked by her office.

I paused in her doorway. "I needed something to do. Do you think Gia will mind that I'm back sooner than planned?"

"You know Gia. She won't care." Harper's expression was filled with concern.

"Is she in?" I'd noticed her door was closed.

"She's at Silas's house. She was planning on looking for a physical office nearby this week."

"That's a great idea." I admired Gia. She was always thinking of ways to elevate her business, whether that was offering a digital course and coaching other wedding planners or expanding her reach. I don't know how she did it, but I was

more than a little envious that I didn't seem to have that same drive.

“She said you're going to talk to the Monroes about holding more weddings on the farm, so she didn't need to worry about that.”

I let out a breath. “You think they'll be open to the idea after my wedding was a failure?”

Harper frowned. “I haven't heard of any problems.”

“Except for the bride leaving her own wedding,” I pointed out.

“You had a good reason for that. But I don't think that makes it a failure. From all reports, it ran smoothly. Even when Gia told everyone the wedding was off, there weren't any major issues.

I didn't want to think about what people thought when Gia told them there wouldn't be a wedding. “I need to handle some phone calls related to the wedding, and I need to figure out how to deal with the Monroes.”

“You want me to hold all calls?” Harper asked helpfully.

“Am I getting a lot of calls?” I advised my clients I wouldn't be working this week and that Aria would be handling any issues that arose.

Harper shifted in her seat. “People are asking why you called off the wedding.”

“Are *my* clients asking that?” I asked, my heart rate spiking.

Harper nodded. “Everyone is talking about what happened. You know how small-town gossip can be. A few of the brides feel like it's bad luck.”

My heart rate picked up. “You don’t think they’ll want to switch planners, do you?”

Harper’s face pinched. “Gia thought it would be best for Aria to take over those brides.”

My shoulders slumped. I thought it was a possibility, but now that it was reality, I was worried about my future at Happily Ever Afters. The only way to prove to Gia that I wasn’t a screwup was to secure the Monroe farm for future weddings.

I smiled tightly. “I’ll be in my office if you need me.”

“You got it. And, Ireland? You’ll get through this.” She smiled sympathetically at me.

I nodded because my throat was tight, and tears were threatening again.

I went to my office with a ball of anxiety rolling in my stomach. I closed the door behind me, not wanting to face my client list. How many would be okay with moving forward with me? Would I lose all of them? Would the word get out and no one would want to work with me?

I scrolled through the messages, and there weren’t many. It looked like Harper or someone else was handling anything that came in.

Then I took a steadying breath before I checked the contracts for the vendors we used for my wedding to see what the cancellation policies were. Technically, everyone had performed their end of the contract, so they were due in full. They didn’t care if the wedding happened. The flowers, the cake, the food, the silverware, and the linens were delivered to the venue on time.

According to Gia's after-wedding report, the ceremony chairs were removed before the storm hit, and they had plans to clean out the reception barn after the snow cleared. I wondered what Emmett did with the special arbor he made. I'd been looking forward to seeing it and forgot about it when we were cocooned in our little snow globe the last few days.

I made the final payments to the vendors instead of asking my parents to handle it. I'm positive they only wanted to pay for a wedding that went forward, not one that was canceled. Then I sent the invoices to James, asking him to pay a portion.

I wasn't expecting him to contribute, not when he said he was short on money, but I felt better taking that step. I felt better knowing I'd handled things.

When I checked the online portal for my wedding clients, there were only two who were willing to work with me going forward. I was on shaky ground, with Aria handling most of the Annapolis weddings. She'd also trained the two new planners since I'd been wrapped up in my wedding.

I couldn't shake the feeling that Aria was already acting the part of head wedding planner. Why would Gia give it to me? Except she'd said if I could secure the deal with Emmett, then it was mine.

All afternoon, I brainstormed possible ways to approach Emmett. None were ideal because sleeping together had complicated things, and he was reluctant. I had a feeling that increasing our offer wouldn't sweeten the deal for him.

A few hours later, Harper burst into my office. "You're never going to believe it, but they're calling for more snow. I'm heading home to play in it with Leo and Evie."

“That sounds like fun.” I felt a pang of jealousy. Leo lived outside of town on a few acres of property. Watching the snow fall from my apartment window didn’t have the same appeal as spending it with someone I cared about on their farm. Especially since I had no one to go home to.

Harper sobered. “Don’t stay too late. You don’t want to get stuck in the snow.”

“There’s going to be that much?” I asked, wondering how I’d missed checking the weather.

Harper nodded. “It’s another Nor’easter. Apparently, the same weather pattern is here to stay for a while.”

I smiled. “That’s something, at least. Have fun with your family.”

Harper smiled, and then her expression fell. “I feel bad leaving you—”

I waved a hand at her. “Don’t. I’m glad I found out about James before we got married. It doesn’t hurt as much as it should. I obviously wasn’t in love with him. I was in love with the idea of someone loving me.”

Harper’s forehead wrinkled. “It will happen for you.”

And what could I say? I thought it had, but I was wrong? I was such a mess. “Thank you, Harper. That means a lot.”

Harper smiled and said, “I’m out of here. See you tomorrow.”

She hurried down the hall. She was eager to get home to Leo and Evie. Her life was full. Mine was like Gia’s before she met Silas. I had work, and that was about it. I didn’t do as much charity work living in Annapolis as I did in Baltimore.

But maybe I should think about getting involved with more here.

I needed something to fill my time if I wasn't able to secure weddings on Monroe's Christmas Tree Farm, and I would be single for the immediate future.

I logged off the computer and headed to my car, where fat flakes were already beginning to fall.

On the way home, I turned on the radio, and the announcer mentioned that the snow would fall hard and fast, and there would be reduced visibility. Even white-out conditions at times.

I white-knuckled it all the way home. The light dusting on the ground made it slippery. I wasn't used to driving in a lot of snow, so I was glad I made it before conditions worsened.

The town was quiet as I got out and made my way upstairs to my apartment. Everyone had already headed home for the night, waiting for the snow to fall.

I felt sluggish. Tonight, people would hunker down with their significant others and family, drinking hot chocolate and watching movies while they waited with excited anticipation. In the morning, they'd venture out to play in the snow.

I'd never felt this lonely when I lived alone before. It was nice to have Aria as a roommate, but I enjoyed my quiet time too. I had a feeling everything would be more pronounced, the emptiness of my apartment, the absence of holiday decorations and a Christmas tree. I'd missed the one we put up at Emmett's. I hope every time he looked at it, he thought of me.

When I stepped inside, I saw a note on the floor just beyond the door. My heart raced as I picked it up with shaking hands.

It was a note from Aria. *I still have your key, and Emmett wanted to give you something, so I let him in. I hope that was okay.*

My heart surged. What did he bring? The small table in the foyer was bare. My stomach sank. What if I left something at his place, and he was just returning it? He probably asked Aria to let him in so he didn't have to communicate with me.

My mind searched for other possibilities as I slowly made my way into the kitchen and then the living room.

I smelled the evergreen before I saw a tree in the corner of the living room, decorated with twinkling lights. It stood next to the window, where the snow outside was coming down in sheets.

I circled the freshly cut tree with tears in my eyes. It was so beautiful, and I couldn't believe that Emmett had thought of this. He knew I'd never had a tree, and he wanted to give me one. It was an amazing gesture. I wondered if he'd done it because he felt friendly toward me, or did it mean something more?

There weren't any ornaments on the tree, but there were two boxes with a note on top with my name on it. I slowly unfolded the note with shaky hands.

This time, the note was written by Emmett. *Ireland, I hope you love the tree. You said you'd never had one before, and I thought you could use the same cheer in your living room that you brought to mine. I wasn't sure if you had any ornaments, so I brought some of mine and bought a few more at that cute shop down the street, Lavender. Maybe you'll want to shop for your own. I don't know. Hope you love it. —Emmett.*

The note was friendly and sweet. He hadn't signed it with any words of endearment. I was more confused than ever. Yet it felt intimate as I opened the boxes and pulled out a few familiar ornaments, and some new ones. There was even a star for the top of the tree.

I dragged a kitchen chair over so I could put it on top. Before I could step up, something hit the window with a thud.

I pressed a hand over my racing heart and moved toward the window to peer out. I wondered if it was a clump of snow that might have fallen from a tree or the roof.

I wiped the condensation from the window, seeing a figure outside. Was Emmett out there, throwing snowballs at my window? I struggled to unlock and open the window. I'd never even bothered to try before, and the window was difficult to move.

When I finally got it open enough to stick my head out, I could see that it was Emmett bundled in his jacket, with gloves and a knit hat. "What are you doing here?" I asked tentatively.

"I wanted to see you." His tone was strong to be heard over the wind.

"Thank you for the tree." Wasn't this how every romance movie ended? With a man performing a grand gesture underneath her window? He didn't seem to have a boombox, though.

He tipped his head slightly. "Can I help you decorate it?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Be right there." I smiled as I lowered the window before I hurried downstairs to greet him. I opened the door and raced outside to throw my arms around him. I didn't even feel the cold on my feet, I was so intent on getting to him.

“What are you doing out here without shoes?” Emmett asked, lifting me into a bridal hold as he carried me through the open door and shut it behind us.

“I wanted to let you in. I wasn’t thinking.” My heart still thudded hard underneath my ribcage. Had I read this situation right? Was he here to ask if we could continue to see each other?

“Obviously,” he said with a wry smile.

I had so many questions. Like what did the tree mean? Was he here to tell me how he felt? After he shut the door, he set me on my feet. “It looks great in here.”

“It certainly brightens up the place. I told you I never had more than a table-top tree here before. I love it. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Emmett picked up the star I’d left on the chair and asked, “Do you need help with this?”

I nodded. “I couldn’t quite reach that top branch.”

Emmett easily placed it on top of the tree and then plugged it into the same outlet as the string of colored lights.

“It’s perfect.”

“I wasn’t sure if you’d prefer an angel or a star, so I got both,” he said, rifling through the box until he found a delicate angel with dark hair and a white gown. “She reminded me of you.”

“I don’t know which one I like better.”

He shot me a look. “You might need two trees. Maybe one for your bedroom.”

I shook my head even as my heart leaped at the idea. “That would be too much.”

He cocked his head. “Is it, though? You need one to look at when you’re cooking or watching TV and another in your bedroom.” Then he took my hand and led me to my bedroom.

“You brought me two trees?” I asked, seeing the second one in the corner by the window. This one had all-white lights.

He chuckled softly. “You know I own a tree farm, right? It wasn’t hard. I have a truck, some help, and Aria let me in.”

I could feel the lightness in him. It made him happy to do this for me, and I wanted to ask why. He wouldn’t have gone through all this trouble unless *I* meant something to him. I wanted to know what it meant, but he dropped my hand and placed the angel on top.

“I just hope we have enough decorations for two trees. I brought some of mine and then bought a few more. I wasn’t sure if you wanted to pick your own.”

“This is perfect.” The trees, the ornaments, him being here. It was everything. “But you know there’s another storm brewing, right? You should get home before it gets too bad. Don’t you need to help Knox on the farm?”

“He won’t mind.” Emmett pulled out his phone and clicked something that made holiday music play. Then he set it on my dresser and pulled me close. “I heard about the storm, and I didn’t want to spend it without you.”

“Are you serious?” I was almost afraid to believe it was true. It was the single most romantic thing anyone had ever done for me.

He dropped his head slightly. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too.”

He held me as we swayed to the music. It reminded me a little of the night we danced at my reception.

I didn't want to interrupt the moment with questions, but I had to know. Finally, I asked, "Emmett, why are you here?"

"I enjoyed your company the last few days, and I wanted to see you again. I like you."

"I like you too," I said quietly, almost not believing any of this was real.

Emmett was thoughtful for a few seconds before he said, "My mom said to take some time to think about what I wanted, and I did. I want you."

"You do?"

"I know it's soon after your breakup, but I don't think we can plan who we fall in love with, or when we do."

"I agree." This felt right. The whole night felt magical, and the trees were only a small part of it.

He grinned. "I thought we could decorate the trees, maybe bake some cookies, and watch a movie."

Something warm and fuzzy settled around my heart. "That sounds perfect."

His lips pressed against my temple. "I don't have all the answers. I just know I don't want to be without you."

"Me either."

We danced for a bit longer, then decorated both trees. When we got hungry, we made sandwiches and baked cookies. After we made the dough, Emmett lifted me onto the counter, stepped between my legs, and kissed me.

We quickly removed our clothes. I was desperate to feel him again. He pushed me down onto the counter, and with a wicked grin, placed chocolate chips all over my body. He licked each one off before kissing his way down to the area where I needed him most.

He drove me higher and higher, but before I could give in to the rising wave, he straightened and entered me in one swift motion. I fell back on my elbows as he widened my legs and fucked me.

It felt like a claiming, a declaration that I was his. He was unleashing his emotions and his desire for me. When we went over together, he kissed me and rested his forehead against mine. We were sweaty and out of breath, but it was everything.

“We made a mess,” I said as he finally pulled out and grabbed a washcloth to clean me.

“Should we save the cookie dough for later?” Emmett asked as he covered the bowl and placed it in the fridge.

My back was covered in flour from the counter, so he carried me down the hall and into the shower. Mine was smaller than his, but we made do in the small space, laughing and kissing and washing each other.

It was sweet and intimate. We got out before the water went cold, dried off, and laid in my bed, covered in soft blankets, admiring the lights of the tree.

“I can’t believe it’s snowing again.”

“It sounds like we are in for a lot this year.”

“Will it impact your tree sales?” I asked as he played with the ends of my hair.

“I don’t know. We’ve never had this much snow before Christmas. Maybe one small storm at best, and it melted quickly. This is different.”

“Hopefully, people will still need trees.”

He tensed. “They might go to tree lots because it’s easier.”

I kissed his shoulder. “Don’t they know that picking the right tree and cutting it yourself is more satisfying than getting one precut?”

He turned to face me, propping himself on an elbow. “Maybe they don’t know. You’d never done it before.”

“True. You should tell them why it’s so much better. That they’re missing out on the magic you can only find at a tree farm. You could do a whole marketing campaign. I can hear it on the radio now.” I smiled as I held my hand in the air.

His face pinched. “You know that stuff costs money, right?”

“It was just an idea. I don’t know anything about how much that stuff costs.”

“More than we want to spend.”

“You could have a reporter come out and do an article on your farm and what makes it so special...” I trailed off, not sure if he was open to my suggestions.

He settled onto his back. “You think they would want to do that?”

I rolled to follow him, propping my chin on his chest. “There are always fluff articles like that in the *Lifestyle* section.”

“Does anyone read papers anymore?” He gave me a dubious look.

“They read the one online at least. It’s just a thought. I think it’s so amazing that everyone should want to go.”

He kissed me as if he couldn’t resist.

Then we fell silent, content to watch the lights and the snow coming down outside while we were warm and cozy inside.

I never thought I’d see Emmett at my place. I associated him with the farm and his cabin.

But to have him here gave me hope that we could be something more. That there was a future for us.

CHAPTER 21



EMMETT

When I heard there was a storm coming, I knew I wanted to spend it snowed in with Ireland. I would have preferred that we were at the farm, but it was an opportunity to give her trees for her place. She enjoyed them so much that it was worth the effort.

Knox didn't like that I'd now cut down three prime trees for personal use, but everyone had always gotten one during the season, and I'd never taken any.

It was worth it to see the smile on Ireland's face when she realized I'd brought two trees for her. I wanted her to know she was special, that she deserved everything.

I wasn't sure what any of it meant beyond the fact that I missed her when she was gone. The thought of waiting until January to figure things out didn't feel right.

I felt good with her sleeping in my arms. The snow was still coming down, just not as hard as last night.

When Ireland stirred, I held her tighter. I didn't want to let her go.

She finally lifted her head. "You're still here."

I didn't want to go anywhere. "I haven't heard any plows."

“They’re loud. You’d know if it they’d been here,” Ireland said wryly.

“Can we make a snowman in the city, or is that frowned upon?”

She thought about it. “I see them occasionally.”

“We can do some of the same things we can at my house.”

She rested her head on my shoulder. “We can’t go snowmobiling or sledding.”

“That’s okay. We can create new memories at your place. I kind of liked the one we made last night on the counter. Speaking of which, should we bake the cookies this morning? We could eat them for breakfast.”

“Why don’t I cook some eggs, and then we can have the cookies for a snack.”

“That’s probably healthier. I just felt like something sweet this morning.”

I rolled over and settled myself between her legs. “I’ll give you something sweet.” I kissed her, then sucked on her nipples before placing kisses down her body until my mouth was where she needed me the most. Her body arched off the bed, and her mouth dropped open as she gave in to the sensations and let go.

I entered her, slower than last night, needing to feel every inch of our joining. Last night had been a relief of sorts, a coming home feeling. There was a desperate quality to it. But this morning, we could take our time.

I interlaced my fingers with hers as she tipped her hips to meet mine, thrust for thrust. Moans escaped as I leaned down to kiss her. I’d never get enough of being with her like this.

I ground against her clit with every pass, needing her to come with me. She cried out my name when she went over, and the sound of it sent an orgasm barreling through me.

I collapsed on top of her, certain I wouldn't be able to move for a long time.

"I like waking up to you." Ireland's fingers were playing with my hair.

"Me too."

"I wish it could be like this all the time."

"I can't make any promises, but I want to be with you. I'm just busy during the season." I'd only gotten away because of the impending snowstorm. Mom had closed the farm early so people could get home before the roads got bad.

"I know." She wrapped her arms around me. "I'm just glad you're here now."

We drifted off for a nap before finally getting up and making breakfast and the cookies from the leftover batter. We watched movies and ate cookies, stopping to make out. In the afternoon, I helped her dig out her car, and we made a snowman in front of her building. I doubted it would last long, but it was something I enjoyed doing with her.

I hadn't appreciated the snow or the holidays until she came along. Ireland took so much pleasure in everything that it was easy to enjoy it with her.

We made dinner together and made love on the couch in front of the tree. Later, Knox messaged, asking when I'd be home to help with the lane. We needed to open on time tomorrow, and we'd already heard the plows come through.

"I have to go," I said as I reluctantly sat up.

“I figured that.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to.” I leaned down to kiss her.

She smiled softly. She was naked under the blanket, and I would have given anything to stay the night with her again. “Maybe I could come with you.”

“Are you sure? Don’t you have to go to work tomorrow?”

“I can work from home. Since my wedding fell through, I have fewer clients anyway.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“A few of the brides don’t want to work with me anymore. They think I’m bad luck since my wedding didn’t happen.”

I couldn’t get a read on her feelings. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Gia’s understanding about it, but I’m worried I might not get the head wedding planner position.”

I couldn’t tell from her tone if that was a good or a bad thing. “Do you want it?”

“I don’t have to work, but I like to. And I want to be rewarded for what I’ve done. I think it would just be an acknowledgment that I achieved something.”

“I think your gifts are different than what everyone else gets rewards for. You’re so full of love; you lift everyone around you. It’s your energy that attracts people,” I said, wishing that she saw what I did.

“Is that what you think of me?” Ireland asked, her eyes swimming with emotion.

“I think your accomplishments far exceed a promotion at work.”

She smiled. “You’re sweet.”

“It’s the truth,” I said firmly. “And I’d love it if you’d come home with me.”

She grinned teasingly. “I don’t know. I’m so comfortable here, naked under my blanket while I look at my tree.”

In one swift motion, I picked her up and carried her to the bedroom, dumping her onto the bed. “Get dressed, woman, so I can take you home.”

“You’re bossy.”

“I want you in my bed with me tonight.”

She smiled, so I didn’t think she was upset with my orders. Although, I wouldn’t have pushed if I didn’t think she was already leaning in that direction.

“I’ll drive separately so I can leave whenever I need to come back.”

“That’s fine, but pack a few days’ worth of clothes. If you don’t have to go in, you can work at my place. I’m usually in the fields anyway. I won’t bother you. And if you have to meet clients, you can leave and come back to my place.”

She smiled as I kissed her. “I’d like that.”

I rolled her out of the blanket so that she was naked, and my dick was already perking up. “Get dressed or we’ll never leave.”

Ireland’s giggles warmed my chest. “Don’t tell Knox what kept you.”

“I’m sure he can guess.”

She pulled on a pair of lace panties and soft-looking sweats. “Does he know about us?”

“He doesn’t know the extent of it.” He suspected, but I’d only confided in my mom.

“Is your family okay with us seeing each other, or do they think it’s weird how we met?”

“All that matters is what we think. My family understands that you can’t pick when you fall in love, or with whom.”

Ireland smiled as she hooked her bra and pulled a T-shirt from her drawer. I found a bag in her closet and tossed it onto the bed, throwing in panties, bras, and sweatpants. She grabbed a few jeans and sweaters and a pair of boots. “Just in case I want to look nice.”

I moved over to her, pulling her against me. “I like you naked, with nothing but a blanket on.”

She raised a brow. “Maybe that’s how you’ll find me tonight when you get home.”

“Yesss,” I hissed, then kissed her.

She followed me home, and we parked at the main house, taking snowmobiles to my cabin. I made sure she was settled before I rode to the main house to get the truck with the plow that Knox kept at the main house. Then I plowed the driveways to my house, the barn, and the fields that customers could drive to. Tomorrow, we’d be busier than ever. We’d already lost so many days to snow. It was good for my personal life, but not so good for the bank account.

I’d need to focus on other streams of income. But all I could think about was the naked brunette hopefully wrapped in a blanket and waiting for me at home.

When I finally opened the cabin door, it was close to midnight. The lights on the mantle, tree, and stairwell were lit, and Ireland was sleeping peacefully on the couch. She was

wrapped in a plush maroon blanket. I carried her upstairs to my room, which was toasty from the fire burning all night.

Her eyes blinked open as I slowly unwrapped her. She was naked, her skin flushed from the heat. “You’re gorgeous. I couldn’t wait to come home and unwrap you.”

Her eyes perked up a bit at the heat she must have seen in mine. She spread her legs in invitation. “I told you I’d wait for you.”

I kissed her as I moved over her, settling between her legs. She gasped into my mouth, probably from the friction of my jeans against her bare skin.

“You’re cold.”

I leaned back and pulled off my T-shirt and shoved my jeans down and off. “I’m going to need you to warm me up.”

She sat up and met me at the end of the bed on all fours, gripping my cock. She swirled her tongue around the head before swallowing me whole.

I could get used to this. Ireland waiting for me at home, naked and needy. There was so much more to our relationship than sex, but I couldn’t deny the connection that only grew stronger the more time we spent together.

I resisted thrusting inside her mouth as she took her time, sucking me deep and pulling off to squeeze the base of my cock and lick the head. “You’re driving me crazy.”

Ireland smirked. “That’s the idea.”

The glow of the lights from the tree flickered over her skin, giving her an angelic quality. I couldn’t believe she was here and that she was mine. I touched her cheek. “You’re mine.”

She pulled off my cock with a soft plop and sat on her heels. "I'm yours, Emmett."

"I don't share."

I placed one knee on the bed and moved over her until she laid back on the bed.

She gazed up at me, her hand brushing a strand of hair off my forehead. "Yeah, I got that."

"I need you more every day. I'll never get enough."

Then I kissed her as she wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me down to her so that we touched everywhere. She was warm and pliant and mine.

There was nothing I'd ever wanted more. In that moment, I wasn't worried about the farm or what anyone would think. It was just her and me and how good it felt when I was inside her and she was looking at me like I was everything. It was an intoxicating feeling.

I couldn't seem to move my lips from hers. I wanted to be touching her in every way possible. When she moaned into my mouth and arched, her body spasmed around my cock, and I couldn't help but let go. When we recovered, I settled on my side with her in my arms, kissing her shoulder. "I love having you in my cabin."

"I love being here," she said over her shoulder, and I couldn't resist kissing her again.

Then I pulled the blanket over us. I was too tired to get under the covers. I fell asleep with her in my arms and the smell of evergreen surrounding us. It was the perfect combination, and I hoped it would last forever.

The next morning, I was up before Ireland, but I kissed her forehead and left her a note about where I'd be if she needed me. For the first time in forever, I carried my phone with me so I didn't miss a message from her. We used them for work, but I routinely forgot mine. My brothers joked that it was on purpose so that no one could find me on the property, and that was close to the truth.

I liked my space, and the crowds of people today threatened to crush the air out of my lungs. Every few trees, I went off by myself to take a few deep breaths. It helped to know that Ireland was at my place, waiting for me.

By evening, I was exhausted and ready to head home to see Ireland, but Mom intercepted me after I said goodbye to the last visitor and shut the gate.

"How are you doing with the crowds this year?" Mom asked.

"It's fine." Even though it was one of the toughest days I'd had in a while. People had complained about the quality of the trees in the cut lot and the prices.

Mom nodded. "Did you talk to your girl yet?"

Everything inside me softened. "She's waiting for me at home."

"You told her how you felt?" Mom asked, her eyes wide.

"You could say that." I told her I missed her and that I wanted to spend time with her. "I don't want to make the same mistakes I did with Molly."

"If you love her, tell her," Mom said with a little more force than she usually used with us.

My stomach knotted. Did I love Ireland? Our relationship felt like I was free-falling without a safety net, and there was no one to catch me at the bottom.

“Just be honest with yourself and her.”

“I think I can do that.” We were great at the physical connection. I just had to make sure I told her how I felt the other times. That I was grateful she was staying in my home now.

“I’m proud of you, son. You don’t enjoy the crowds, but you’ll do whatever’s necessary to run the farm. I have a feeling Ireland sees the real you.”

“I do that for you.”

“Maybe it’s time you do something for yourself too.”

Before I could ask what she meant, she made a move to go inside. “Have a good night. Tell Ireland I said hi.”

“Will do.” I got into my truck and made the short drive to my cabin, where, for the first time, lights were on inside.

Instead of feeling exhausted from spending the day cutting and hauling trees and talking to people, I was energized. Inside, the fire was blazing, the TV on, but Ireland was asleep on the couch, with a blanket covering her.

I ate the dinner she’d made and left covered in the microwave, then sat next to her on the couch. She sat up, eyes blinking. “I wanted to wait up for you.”

I slowly shook my head. “You were asleep.”

Ireland groaned. “I’m sorry. I wanted to spend time with you.”

I pulled her into my arms, her warm body feeling perfect there. “We are.”

She snuggled into my side. “Do you mind if we go to bed? I’m tired.”

“Not at all.” I was just pleased she was here. We cleaned up the living room, turned off the TV, and folded the blanket before making our way to bed.

I waited for Ireland to clean up in the bathroom, my arm folded under my head while I looked at the stars through the skylight. I listened to the water turn on, then off, the tell-tale sound of her brushing her teeth. Everything about this moment was domestic, and I loved it. My heart felt so full. I knew I should share my thoughts and feelings with Ireland. But being this honest was new for me.

My stomach turned and twisted when she opened the door and joined me. “The bathroom’s all yours. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just wanted to say that I like having you to come home to.” It wasn’t much, but her face brightened.

“I like it too.”

Then she kissed me softly.

I forced myself to go to the bathroom and get ready for bed. Being that honest felt good, not scary. Maybe this feelings stuff wasn’t so bad.

When I returned, she was already asleep. I gathered her in my arms and watched the stars. My heart felt so full, like it might burst in my chest.

This is what love felt like—like I might jump out of my skin at any moment. I wanted to share everything with Ireland.

I wanted to spend every night with her in my arms. It might be too soon to tell her that, but I would soon.

I didn't want to lose Ireland. I'd do anything to keep her.

CHAPTER 22



IRELAND

The next few weeks flew by. I worked hard on the two weddings I still had, the one on New Year's and the one on Valentine's Day. Since they were coming up soon, they kept me busy. I wanted to prove that I was still a good wedding planner, so I went above and beyond for the brides.

I spent my nights with Emmett, and occasionally, we'd schedule lunch or dinner, depending on whether I was working from his house or not.

Sometimes I cooked, and other times, I picked up takeout on my way to his house. I rarely stayed at my apartment. I loved the trees he'd given me, but I loved coming home to him more than anything else.

I sensed that his work took a toll on him. He didn't like to be around a lot of people, and the more he had to talk to them, the more drained he felt. I suspected he was an introvert. If so, asking him to hold more weddings on the farm wouldn't be good for him. But what choice did I have? Gia wanted his farm, and I wanted the head wedding planner position.

Tonight, I was meeting Finn and Aria at their house for dinner. Emmett couldn't make it because he was working late again. I think he was working more than normal because his brothers' side businesses was taking more of their time.

When I knocked on the door, Finn's daughter, Paisley, answered. "Auntie Ireland."

"How's my favorite niece?" I hugged her tight.

She wiggled out of my arms. "We're eating burgers."

"Yay! My favorite," I said as she grabbed my hand and pulled me into the kitchen, where Aria stood next to Finn.

Their faces were flush. I had a feeling they'd snuck a kiss while Paisley greeted me. "How are you guys?"

"Good, but we haven't seen you in a while," Finn said.

"I don't even see you at work," Aria added, her tone laced with concern.

"I've been busy with my brides. Their weddings are coming up."

"You have two now, right?" Aria asked.

"I'm sorry you got dumped with so many of mine. Apparently, it's bad luck to leave your fiancé at the altar, even when they cheated on you."

"The new planners took a few, too, so it's not a problem."

"That's good."

"I stopped by your place the other night, but you weren't home," Finn said.

"I've been spending nights with Emmett at his cabin," I said, wondering what they would think.

Aria's eyes widened, and Finn's concerned gaze met mine. "You just broke up with James. Don't you think you should take a minute before you move on to someone else?"

Aria asked Paisley if she wanted to play a board game in the living room, leading her out so we could talk.

“I didn’t plan it. There was a connection there, one that I didn’t have with James. I felt like I owed it to myself to pursue it.”

“You know, growing up the way we did, I worry about you. I avoided any long-term relationship, but you’re jumping from one to the other.”

“I’m not our parents.” I pressed my lips together.

Finn braced his hands on the counter. “I never said you were.”

“I like Emmett.” I might even love him. “What we have is real and genuine. My trust was blown with James, but I’m not getting the same vibes with Emmett. He has a hard time telling me how he feels, but he’s honest with me.” He was so appreciative that I was at his house when he came home from work. Our relationship wasn’t traditional, but it would only be weird during the holidays. His schedule would settle down soon.

“This thing with Emmett is different.”

“I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

My shoulders slumped. “You can’t stop me from getting hurt.”

“I know, but I want to.”

“I want what you and Aria have. I want the real deal. That might mean I make a few missteps and date the wrong guys before I find the right one. But I have a good feeling about Emmett. I love everything about him. I even love his farm.”

He gave me a pointed look. “As long as you’re aware of what you’re getting into.”

“I’m the one coming off a relationship. He should be worried about me,” I said to Finn.

“You’re my sister. I’ll always worry about you.”

I moved around the counter and kissed his cheek. “That’s why I love you so much.”

“Is dinner ready?” Paisley returned to the kitchen.

“It is. Can you set the table?” Finn asked.

Paisley helped Aria and me set the table, and we sat down to eat the sliders and salads.

“Have you made any progress securing more weddings on Monroe Farm?” Aria asked.

I set my fork down and sighed. “I haven’t broached the subject with him again. He doesn’t like people on the farm, and weddings will make it worse for him. I know I’m already in a precarious position since I lost so many brides.” I needed to do something about the farm weddings. “Maybe I can call around and see if another farm is available.”

“Gia already did that. Pine Valley is too small. They don’t have the same charm as Monroe Farm, and the others are too far away.”

“So, Monroe Farm is our only option.”

“It sounds like it. But do you really want the position?” Aria asked as she took a bite of her slider.

“I’d like more responsibility, but you want it too.”

Aria waved a hand at me. “It will be fine either way. I would be happy if either one of us got it.”

“It’s too bad she just doesn’t put both of you in charge. It would eliminate any competition,” Finn said.

“I’m sure it’s easier to have only one person in charge,” I said, moving the lettuce around the bowl but not eating it.

Aria was working her way through school while also working as a wedding planner. Plus, she had time for Finn and Paisley. She was doing so much, and I felt like I wasn’t doing enough. I didn’t have to work for my education. I didn’t have a résumé that supported me getting this job. I’d only done charity work up until then. Gia took a chance on me that I was good with organizing and planning events. She was right, but what had I done to earn anything in my life? “It would be nice to secure the farm for Gia. I know she wants to offer holiday weddings.”

“Won’t that be awkward since you’re dating Emmett?” Finn asked.

“It’s not the best situation. But all I can do is ask. If he says no, then that’s it.”

“You’ll take no for an answer? No hard feelings?” Finn asked.

“What I have with Emmett is too good to mess up with business. But I have to try. I don’t want to let Gia down. I want to prove that I deserve this job.”

“You really think you need to secure weddings on this farm to prove that you deserve the promotion?” Aria asked.

I nodded. “Especially since my brides didn’t want to work with me after my wedding plans fell apart. I feel like I owe it to Gia.” How could I explain to Finn and Aria that my sense of self-worth was tied up in this deal? I’d never really accomplished anything that was hard.

“You’re happy with Emmett?” Finn asked as he helped Paisley with her slider.

“Yeah, we’ve only just started dating, but it feels bigger, like the real thing, you know. He cares for me, and he’s honest about his feelings.”

“Do you love him?” Paisley asked.

“Paisley,” Finn chided.

I opened my mouth and closed it. “You know? I think I might.”

“I know Gia can be tough when she wants something, but I’m sure she wouldn’t want you to destroy what you have with Emmett.”

“Of course not. If he says no, then that’s my answer. I just need to try one more time.”

“You don’t have to work. You can do whatever you want,” Finn reminded me.

“You don’t either. Yet you work as a band teacher.”

“I enjoy what I do. And I perform on the side. That fulfills me. Is wedding planning what you really *want* to do?”

“I love planning events, whether it’s for charity or a wedding. It doesn’t matter.” And it didn’t have to be with Happily Ever Afters, did it? What if I organized events for Emmett’s farm? Maybe preschool trips or other tours? It would mean more people on the farm, but if it was kids, maybe Emmett would be okay with it. “I promised Gia I’d try to secure the Monroe Farm for holiday weddings, and I won’t let her down.”

The topic changed to Paisley’s soccer season and a field trip she’d taken to a pumpkin farm. I was happy that Finn had

someone to share his life with.

When I went to leave, Finn walked me out. “I’m still worried about this situation. You and Emmett. It’s so soon after your engagement.”

“I can handle myself.” I didn’t want Finn worrying about me, not when he had Paisley and Aria.

He raised a brow. “Are you sure you’re not jumping into things with Emmett too fast?”

“It didn’t take you long to figure out Aria was the one for you.”

“You were just engaged to James.”

“Do you trust me? I’m going with my feelings, and everything inside of me is telling me Emmett is the guy for me.”

Finn’s face softened. “I trust you. I just want you to be happy.”

“I’m happy with Emmett. I just need to figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

Finn hugged me. “You’ll figure it out, and the best part is, you have the money to take your time.”

“You know I don’t like to touch the trust fund.” And I dipped into it to make the final payment to my wedding vendors.

“If you need me, I’m here for you. Just because I’m with Aria doesn’t mean I can’t also be there for you.”

“Thanks, Finn.” I believed him, but I didn’t want to divert his attention from his family. I could handle this work thing.

I'd ask Emmett about it one more time, and if he said no, I'd be okay with it.

Emmett was already home when I pulled up. I was excited to see him as I knocked on the door and then walked in. He'd been leaving it unlocked for me, but I suspected he didn't feel a need to lock it.

"Honey, I'm home," I couldn't help but say when I closed the door.

Emmett was on the couch with his feet kicked up.

"I brought some leftovers if you didn't have a chance to eat."

"I ate already," he said without looking at me.

"I'll just put the container in the fridge for later," I said tentatively, feeling a little unsure about his mood.

"You don't need to make sure I have dinner. I've lived alone for a long time."

"Okay." I was just being nice, but maybe I'd overstayed my welcome. I sat next to him on the couch. "Do you want me to head home?"

"It was a long day. The snow means more people coming through every day. I'm exhausted."

I said I'd ask about the weddings, but now I wasn't sure it was a good time. But then again, when would it ever be? "I know it's probably not the right time, but Gia wanted me to check in with you about the possibility of holding more weddings here in the future. It wouldn't have to be this holiday season." Although I wasn't so sure about that. We hadn't discussed the timing.

He stood abruptly and started pacing. “How can you ask about that?”

“You know Gia was still interested in the farm. I said I’d give you time to think it over.”

“I was never going to say yes. I only allowed your wedding because it’s you.” His voice raised with each word.

I swallowed over the lump in my throat. “I just wanted to be sure.”

“I need space. Maybe you should head home.”

My eyes stung with unshed tears. I shouldn’t have broached the subject. I knew he was in a bad mood, and it wasn’t a good time, but I’d plowed ahead anyway.

I blinked away the tears. “I know you don’t like to have people on the property.”

“I don’t like to be around people period.”

“Are you saying that includes me?” I asked. This conversation was hitting on something inside me that I hadn’t dealt with in a while. When my parents went from partner to partner, never considering my or Finn’s feelings, it felt like we didn’t matter. That we were expendable.

“I just need some space and time,” he said tightly, and it stung.

I gathered my things from the bathroom and his bedroom, feeling just like that little girl, packing up her things to move to yet a different home.

I looked around the bedroom, wondering if I’d ever see it again. I took the steps slowly, hoping Emmett had reconsidered his stance and was ready to apologize for his

outburst. But he stood by the door as if he'd been waiting for me to leave.

"I'm sorry about this," Emmett said, but he wouldn't look at me.

"I don't get it." I wanted to reach out and touch him, but he felt distant.

"I need my space. You know this about me."

"But you invited me here. You said you wanted to give us a chance."

"And you used that goodwill to pressure me about the weddings when you know how I feel about it," he said with force.

I shook my head. "I hope you'll feel better tomorrow, and we can discuss this further."

He opened the door but remained silent. "Drive safely."

It felt final, even if he hadn't officially broken up with me. I wondered if this was just the first step for him. Get me out of his place, and then I'd receive a text that he didn't want to continue with a relationship.

I kissed his cheek, but he didn't move a muscle. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for us to fight."

"What did you expect when you asked about the weddings?" he asked, his voice trembling before he looked away.

"I expected that if you said no, I'd be okay with your answer. I didn't think you'd throw me out over it."

This time, he met my gaze head-on. "I'm not throwing you out. Those are your words. Not mine."

“Got it.” I averted my eyes and made my way to my car. I opened the door and slid inside, but Emmett didn’t move from his spot at the open door. Before I pulled away, he closed it, and it hurt more than anything else he’d said or done.

Tears swam in my eyes as I made my way down the mountain. At the gate, Knox was just closing it for the night.

He came up to the window, and I reluctantly opened it. “Ireland? Emmett didn’t say you were leaving tonight. I should show you how to open and close the gate so you can get in and out if I’m not here.”

I waved a hand at him. “There’s no need.”

“Are you sure?” Knox’s forehead wrinkled. “Did you and Emmett have a fight?”

“It was stupid,” I said, trying to fight the threatening tears. “I asked him about holding weddings here, and I shouldn’t have. He wasn’t in a good mood.”

Knox winced. “I’m not sure it would matter. The rest of us would love to hold more events here, but Emmett is reluctant. People seem to be complaining more about the prices this year. It was a rough day for everyone.”

“People don’t realize all the work you put into this place, and that the money you earn for these few weeks sustains everyone for the year.”

“That’s why we want to add more events, but I don’t think Emmett will ever be on board. I’m sorry.”

“It’s my fault for asking about it. I should have known he’d say no. I just didn’t expect him to ask me to leave. He said he wanted space, but it felt permanent, you know?”

When Knox's face screwed up, I rushed to add, "I shouldn't even be talking to you about this. You're his brother. I'm sorry."

Knox shook his head. "It's okay. Emmett can be difficult and closed off at times. He'll come around."

"I hope so." But I was positive he wouldn't. I was no better than the customers who visited the farm, wanting something from him or using him for something. "Have a good night."

Knox backed away from my car. "Take care of yourself."

"I really enjoyed my time on your farm. It's a special place."

Knox opened his mouth as if to say something else, but the tears had spilled over, and I didn't want to cry in front of him, so I let my foot off the brake and drove through the gate. I'd feel better when I was in my own space.

At home, the tears only fell harder when I smelled the evergreens in my apartment. I turned on the lights to the trees, even though it hurt to remember that Emmett placed them here as a surprise only a short while ago.

I put on pajamas and crawled into bed. I missed the skylight at Emmett's house. I missed the fields of trees just outside the window. I missed him.

It was possible he'd call and apologize, but I didn't want to feel like I was one bad mood away from a breakup. Emmett would have to realize when he was spiraling out of control and calm down. I couldn't do it for him.

I turned on my side, never taking my gaze off the twinkling lights. It was the happiest season of the year. The time when I hoped for a love that would sustain me.

This thing with Emmett was just one more sign that it wasn't meant to be for me. I was destined to be alone.

CHAPTER 23



EMMETT

*M*y head was pounding, so when there was a heavy knock at the door, it took me a few seconds to process that it was coming from an external source. I slowly made my way to the door and pulled it open without even looking to see who it was.

When I saw it was Knox, I let go of the door and grabbed the liquor bottle I kept under the sink.

Knox closed the door with force. “What happened between you and Ireland?”

“You talked to her?” I asked as I set the bottle on the counter and grabbed two shot glasses. He could join me in drowning my sorrows, or not. I didn’t care either way.

“She was leaving when I was at the gate. She was upset.”

I ground my teeth together. “She shouldn’t have kept pressuring me about the weddings on the farm. She knows it’s the last thing I want.”

“How can she know that when you agreed to have hers here? It stands to reason that it was a legitimate possibility.”

“I did that to make her happy.”

“We won’t be able to sustain the farm much longer if we don’t find an additional source of income. Mom won’t take

handouts from us. It has to come from the farm.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “It was a rough day. Then she asked me about the weddings, and I just snapped.”

“I get that. But you need to talk to her when you’re feeling like that. Don’t just snap at her. But with the way she left tonight, I’m not sure she’s coming back.”

“Why would you say that?”

“I offered to show her how to use the gate, but she said it wasn’t necessary. It was also the look in her eyes.”

“I didn’t break up with her if that’s what you’re asking. I just asked for space.” Irritation at the situation bubbled up in my gut. I wasn’t great with people, but today, I was at my worst.

“Did you tell her to leave?” Knox asked.

“That’s what you do when you need space,” I ground out.

“Not when you’re in a relationship. You can go somewhere, you can ask for space, but you don’t kick her out after asking her to stay.”

I shot him a look. “You know I’m not good at this relationship stuff.”

“Do you love her?”

I thought about how I felt when she wasn’t here. The ache in my chest that could only be soothed when she was near. “I do.”

“Then what are you thinking? You need to get your shit together. If you love that woman, you need to go after her and tell her.” Knox’s tirade sparked something inside me.

“It doesn’t sound like she’d be receptive to what I have to say tonight.”

“Well, I wouldn’t wait too long. She’s not the kind of woman you kick out of your house.”

“When am I going to find time to do that? We have the tree-lighting ceremony in Annapolis tomorrow, and Mom said *I* need to be the one who speaks for the family.”

“We all agreed.”

“Why? I’m the worst with speaking in public.”

“You’ll stand up for the family and thank the town for picking a tree from our farm. How hard can it be?”

“But why does it have to be me?”

“You’re the one who takes care of the trees and picked that tree for the town. You can say why you picked it. What makes it a good tree. Whatever you want. But you’re the one who has to do this.”

“I hate this.” I sat on the couch, my elbows on my thighs.

“I know you do, but it has to be done. The more towns that pick our trees, the better things will be for us. It will get our name out there too.”

I raised my head. “Which means we’ll be even busier.”

“More customers equals more money. You know this. It won’t hurt your furniture business either. We’ve already had a couple of people ask about that unique arbor you built Ireland.”

I dropped my head into my hands. “She never even saw it.”

“Maybe you could add it somewhere on the property as a permanent fixture and use it as an advertisement, like we did for the waterfall.”

I lifted my head. “I could put it by the waterfall. Ireland loves that place.”

Knox nodded. “It would look great there.”

I sighed. “I fucked up royally, didn’t I?”

“As soon as I saw Ireland’s face, I gathered that. But I’m not surprised. You’re not the best with feelings and relationships.”

“I dated Molly for two years.” That had to mean something.

“You were younger then. She probably didn’t communicate that great either. Ireland’s not someone who will put up with how you acted tonight. I’d be surprised if she takes you back at all.”

Panic clawed at my throat. “What should I do?”

“Hope she takes you back?” Knox asked as if it wasn’t the best-case scenario.

“You’re sure all I need to do is talk to her when I’m not good at communicating?”

Knox patted my shoulder. “There’s only one way to get better. You have to practice, and maybe she’ll be impressed with your sincerity. Just tell her what you told me.”

I raised a brow. “You think it can wait until after the tree lighting?”

“I wouldn’t wait. I’d apologize as soon as you can.”

“Tomorrow we’re busy transporting the tree and then the ceremony. I don’t see how I’d have time to give her the attention she deserves.”

Knox paced the room. “Do you know if she’s going to be there?”

“At the tree lighting? I didn’t ask her to be.”

“It’s a popular event, and she’s friends with a lot of the Main Street shop owners.”

“Won’t it be busy?” I was worried I’d be irritated with the large crowd of people and not be able to control the pressure that built in my chest.

“I think you have to do something to earn her trust, to prove that you’re the man for her.”

“You think I should talk to her during my speech in front of everyone?” I asked, wondering if I could do that.

“It wouldn’t hurt. Women like grand gestures like that, or at least, that’s what my ex said. She made me watch a lot of romantic comedies.”

“I’d need to ensure she was there, then talk to her in front of a crowd of strangers. It sounds a little overwhelming.” Panic clawed at my throat at the idea of never seeing her again. I had to do whatever it took to convince her to give me another chance.

“How badly do you want her back?”

I didn’t like not seeing her at the house. I felt like I was missing a vital piece of myself. Now I was worried that Ireland was done with me. That no matter what I said or did as a way of explanation, she wouldn’t give me another chance.

“I would think about it. Only do it if you’re all in with her. It won’t work otherwise.”

The empty shot glasses were still on the counter. I no longer wanted to drown myself in alcohol, but now I was nervous about what Knox was proposing.

“I’m going to bed. We have another big day tomorrow.”

“You’ll handle things here while I’m in Annapolis?” I asked him.

“I got Heath to take your place for the night.”

I walked him to the door, and when I held it open, he said, “I’ve never seen you like this with a woman.”

“She’s not like anyone else I’ve ever been with. She loves the farm.” She seemed to enjoy spending time with me, and she appreciated the farm and what we were trying to do here.

“If you’re not going to allow weddings on the property, we’ll have to come up with a plan for something else.”

“I have a few ideas,” I said to him, not willing to share them just yet. I wanted to talk to Ireland first. Everything hinged on her.

“I hope things work out for you. I want you to be happy. It’s better for everyone,” Knox said lightly.

“Before she came into my life, I thought I was. But now I see I was just passing the time and going through the motions.”

When Knox left, I tried to sleep, but my mind was racing. I practiced what I would say, but nothing felt right. I wished I could just talk to her one-on-one, but Knox was right. A woman like Ireland deserved a big apology. And what better way to do it than at the tree-lighting ceremony?

After tossing and turning most of the night, I called Gia first thing in the morning.

“I have a favor to ask you.” My voice was rough, as if I hadn’t slept much last night.

“What’s it about?” Gia asked cautiously.

“I need to apologize to Ireland, and I’d like to do it tonight at the tree-lighting ceremony.”

The line was silent for a few seconds. “Wow. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“I screwed up. My brother, Knox, thinks I need to do something big.” My heart was already pounding at what I needed to do.

“What do you need from me?”

Appreciation shot through me. “Can you get her there?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I can’t thank you enough for helping me. You certainly don’t owe me anything.”

“Emmett, I don’t want my business proposal coming between you two, and I’m worried that’s what happened.”

“That’s not why we fought. Not exactly. I just had a bad day on the farm, and she brought it up. I didn’t handle it well. The fact is that we need more streams of income on the farm. It would be good for my family, even if I don’t like it.”

“I don’t want to pressure you or ruin anything you’ve found with Ireland.”

“It won’t.” Because I wouldn’t let it. This thing between me and Ireland was too big to let something as trivial as a business deal come between us.

“Good. I’m glad. And don’t worry about Ireland. I’ll get her there. You just focus on your part.”

I thanked her again and got off the phone. Then I showered and got ready for the day. I helped Knox and Heath get the tree onto the transport truck. We hired a delivery service to handle the transportation. All I needed to do was be in Annapolis when it arrived and speak at the ceremony.

I wasn’t looking forward to sharing my feelings in front of the crowd, but it would be worth it if I could fix things with Ireland.

On the way out, I stopped at the main house to speak to Mom. She raised a brow when she opened the door. “Are you ready for Annapolis?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Mom followed me into the kitchen, where I snagged a cookie that was cooling.

“You ever think about selling these in the red barn? Ireland mentioned doing one or two options and keeping it simple. Like gingerbread men or a Santa sugar cookie.”

Mom’s lips quirked. “If you boys would stop eating them, I could attempt to sell them.”

“I think it would be worth trying. But you might need to increase your production.” I snagged another one. “By a lot.”

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” Mom asked, pulling out the milk and pouring it into a glass for me.

I drank the cool liquid to chase the cookies. “I messed up with Ireland.”

“What did you do?” Mom asked.

“When she left, I realized how much I liked and missed her. I invited her to spend more time on the farm, and, Mom, she loves it here. She thinks it’s a magical place. I never thought I’d meet someone who felt the same way I do about this place.”

Mom smiled softly. “She sounds perfect for you.”

I shook my head. “I had such a bad day on the farm yesterday that when she brought up hosting Gia’s weddings here, I snapped. I said some things I shouldn’t have, that I didn’t mean. I asked for space, but it was more like I kicked her out of the house after inviting her.”

Mom winced. “Oh, Emmett.”

“Yeah, Knox already gave me the talk. I know I screwed up. I acted like the emotionally stunted guy Molly accused me of being.”

“You aren’t perfect. None of us are. If you didn’t mean to say those things, then you should apologize.”

“That’s the plan, except it’s a bit more complicated than that. Knox seems to think I need some grand gesture to convince her to give me another chance, and the tree-lighting ceremony is the perfect place to do it.”

Mom was quiet for a bit after I finished going over my plans. I still didn’t have the exact speech worked out in my head, but if I said what was in my heart, hopefully, that would be enough.

“The other thing is that I wanted to invite her to be more involved on the farm. She could host events here—preschool field trips, that kind of thing. It would mean talking to our insurance company to be sure we have the right coverage, but it’s something she might want to do.”

Mom frowned. “What about the weddings?”

“I’m going to propose we do a few, maybe cap it at five, and we charge a premium for them. We need to add a lane and bring a trailer in for the bridal party to get ready and provide bathrooms. It’s not an easy thing. Plus, we have to consider any disruption to the other events that happen on the farm. You could open your shop year-round and offer decorations for the various holidays. Maybe Ireland could work for both Gia and us. I don’t know how it’s going to work or if she’d be interested. But it’s worth a shot. She has amazing ideas, and she’s passionate about the farm.”

“If Ireland wants to work here, we’ll discuss it as a family. I want to do whatever makes you happy. And we do need more help around here. If she wanted to work the shop, I could take more time off.”

“First, I need her to remember what she liked about me.” That she might be a little in love with me, like I was with her. “I think she’s the woman for me. We’re opposite in a lot of ways, but the same in the ones that matter. It feels like we were meant to be.”

“You found someone who’s special. I think you’re doing the right thing. I’m happy you’re finally considering other options.”

“You heard Sebastian; we have to do something.”

“I want you to be okay with whatever we decide.”

“I love Ireland’s ideas. I wouldn’t mind kids coming here for field trips. It would be a short tour, and I could talk to them about the trees. I think I’d like that. And if we keep the weddings to a few a year, it will be manageable.”

“You’re keeping it limited, which will drive up the desirability for them.”

“And we could charge more. I’ve thought about that. I’d prefer to have fewer events but charge more.”

“That makes sense. We don’t want to be overwhelmed. But these are a few good options to get started on.”

“The shop is yours. Whatever you want to do with it, you can. You’ll be the one who works there or hires someone to help you. As long as Sebastian says it’s financially okay, let’s do it.”

“I’m proud of you, Emmett. You’re dealing with things head-on instead of avoiding them.”

“I hope I can be the man that Ireland needs.”

She touched my face. “You’re on the right track. You’re thoughtful, caring, and kind. She’d be lucky to be with someone like you.”

I hugged her, a little overwhelmed with emotion. “Thanks, Mom, for always being there for me when I needed a push.”

“It sounds like that won’t be necessary anymore.”

“As long as everything goes well with Ireland tonight.”

Mom patted my hand. “I don’t think she can refuse you after she sees how sincere you are.”

“I’m in love with her. I can’t wait to tell her, but I’m scared that she doesn’t feel the same way.”

Mom frowned. “What is your intuition telling you?”

I thought back to the time we spent together, at my place and hers. She was as into me as I was her. I didn’t feel like I’d

misjudged her or the situation. “We fell hard and fast, and I couldn’t imagine not moving forward with her.”

Mom beamed. “Then you have your answer.”

“What if she doesn’t forgive me after last night? I was awful.”

“You’re going to make mistakes, and the right woman will understand that. It’s how you deal with those situations going forward that will define your relationship.”

I nodded, sensing that her advice would get me through a lot of hard times in the future. “I want to be the man she needs.”

“Then tell her that. I think she’ll understand what happened. And I wouldn’t worry too much about what happened with Molly. She wasn’t the right person for you. The right woman will stand by you and give you space to grow.”

“I think so too.” Right now, I couldn’t imagine Ireland anywhere but at my side and on my farm. I loved having her here, and I think she felt the same way. We’d fallen hard and fast, but the rest of our relationship would be us growing together. I just hoped she was up for the challenge.

“Good luck tonight. I’ll be rooting for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Bring her by for dinner so she can spend time with us. She should know what she’s getting into.”

“I think she knows. We talked a lot about our families. She loves hearing stories about us as kids.”

“Then we should get along just fine. I love telling them. You boys kept me on my toes.”

“If you pull out the photo album, I can’t promise we’ll be back.”

“I think I need to win over Ireland at this point. I think she’s going to love it here.”

“I think so too. She didn’t have the same upbringing. Her parents were divorced numerous times, and she was raised by nannies and household staff. It’s sad, but she has this unshakeable positive outlook on life.”

“She’s just what you need, and our family can be hers.”

“She’ll love that.”

“Go get your girl. I can’t wait to hear how it goes.”

I was going into tonight with zero expectations. I’d be putting my heart on the line and hoping she’d take care of it.

CHAPTER 24



IRELAND

“Weddings at Monroe Farm are a no-go.”

Gia raised a brow when I burst into her office.

“I talked to Emmett, and I just don’t think he’s going to come around. He said he only offered to host my wedding because it was for me. He wanted to make me happy.” My throat tightened. As upset as I was with him asking me to leave last night, what he’d said got to me.

Gia frowned. “I hope this didn’t come between you two.”

“He was upset last night. I’m not sure what it means for us, but I wanted to try one more time. It might not have been the best time since he was already upset about something else. But I’m not sure it would have made a difference. I understand if you want to give the position to Aria.”

“Do you want more responsibility?”

“It was important to me that I get the promotion. I know Aria needs it more, but I thought it would prove that I was worthy.”

“You’re an amazing wedding planner. You’re great with the brides and grooms, you have unique ideas, and you’re a hard worker. But I’m not sure your heart is in it.” Before I could protest, she held up her hand. “I’m not saying you’re

doing a bad job. I'm just wondering if this is what you want. There's nothing wrong with changing your mind. You grow, and your desires do, too."

"I love Emmett's farm, and it got me thinking about how much I enjoyed helping with other events. I'm not saying I'd want to leave Happily Ever Afters, but I might want to do something else on the side." My ideas were centered around Emmett's farm, organizing school field trips, giving tours of the farm, and learning all about the various trees and what goes into growing them. I thought it was fascinating, and I had a feeling other people would too. It was something I was passionate about. The only problem was I wasn't sure Emmett wanted to see me again or would welcome my help. If he didn't, I'd explore other options.

"I want you to be happy. Just let me know if things change or if you need to cut down on your hours."

"Thank you. Aria deserves that position. She's always wanted it. It was just a way to prove I'd accomplished something."

"Achieving things isn't always about grades, money earned, promotions, or even accolades for a job well done. It's how you make people feel when you're around them. If you decide to leave, we'll understand, but you'll be missed. And make no mistake, you're worthy because you are. You don't need initials beside your name, a degree, or a job title to make you that way."

"Thanks, Gia." Hearing her say that I was someone who could help those around me just with my energy surprised me. I'd never thought of that as valuable before, and I loved it.

"Now, we have the tree-lighting ceremony to go to tonight."

I tipped my head to the side. “We do?”

“Monroe Christmas Tree Farm supplied the tree, and I think it would be good for us to be in attendance. I’m still interested in hosting weddings there.”

I smiled. “You never give up, do you?”

“I was wrong to put the pressure on you to close that deal. It was always mine to handle.”

“Good luck. Emmett’s a tough one.” Although, there were times when I stayed at his house that I suspected he was really a teddy bear, soft and cuddly on the inside and bristly on the outside. I thought I’d gotten under his skin, that I was special, but it was clear last night that I was wrong.

“The town invited all the local businesses.”

“You don’t think Emmett will be there, do you?” I wasn’t sure I was ready to see him again. I needed more time to process what happened.

“Someone from the participating farm usually gives a speech thanking the town and provides some information about the farm and the tree. I don’t think Emmett would be the one representing the farm, do you?”

“He’d hate doing something like that, and he never mentioned it to me.”

“Then you’ll be there? We’re planning on meeting here at six and walking over. It will be crowded.”

“I’ll be there.” I didn’t have any other plans, and I was curious about the lighting ceremony. I loved everything holiday related.

I focused on my New Year’s wedding, since that was the first one coming up, and checked in with the bride and groom

about any concerns. Having only two weddings allowed me to take more time with them.

When I looked up, flurries were coming down, and I wondered if this thing with Emmett wasn't done quite yet. Every time it snowed, Emmett surprised me. I wondered if he would this time too.

I wasn't ready to have that conversation with him, though. I needed more time to think everything through.

I went home to get dressed in warm clothes, boots, and my heaviest jacket, with a hat and mittens. When the sun went down, it was cold.

I met the rest of the Happily Ever Afters crew on the sidewalk.

"I'm so glad everyone could make it. It's good for us to be involved in community events."

"I brought hot chocolates," Sophie said, handing them out from the drink carriers she was holding.

We walked to the harbor, where the tree was set up. Nerves fluttered in my stomach. I wasn't sure what to expect. Would Knox or Lori speak?

I talked to the other girls about upcoming weddings and holiday plans. Thankfully, no one asked about my failed wedding. I assume Gia explained what happened to everyone, and they were being polite by not bringing it up. It was such a non-entity in my life at this point, that I didn't even feel the need to talk about it.

Abby leaned close and said, "I heard you might have spent some time with a certain grouchy mountain man after your wedding fell through."

“Where’d you hear that? Gia?” She was the only one who knew I was snowed in with him.

“You don’t have to share if you don’t want to.”

“It’s fine. We got close, and we were dating, but then we had our first fight last night, and now I’m not sure about anything.”

“The first night I spent with Nick, I ran because I was scared. We had such a deep connection. Maybe that’s what happened with you two.”

“I’m not sure Emmett’s ready for a relationship.” If he was going to push me away whenever the mood struck, I wouldn’t survive it.

Naomi, the town event coordinator, stood at the podium in front of the tree. “Good evening, everyone. I’m so excited to invite you to this year’s tree lighting.”

She waited while everyone clapped and cheered. There were even a few whistles. “This year’s tree was provided by Monroe Christmas Tree Farm, located twenty minutes from Annapolis. They have hundreds of quality trees for you to cut, and some pre-cut for those of you who don’t want to hunt for your tree. I’m excited to announce that Emmett Monroe is here tonight to present the tree he chose for Annapolis.”

The crowd erupted again in cheers, and I felt lightheaded. I wasn’t expecting Emmett to be here. My stomach was a mix of anxiety and concern for him.

Abby elbowed me. “Did you know he would be here?”

I slowly shook my head. “No. He hates these things.”

Emmett made his way from the front row to the podium. His eyes darted around the crowd before finally settling on an

index card he clutched in his hands. “I’m pleased that Annapolis chose Monroe Christmas Tree Farm to supply their tree this year. I chose the biggest one for you. What do you think?”

Everyone cheered again, and Emmett seemed to relax slightly.

“Light the tree,” someone shouted from the back, and Emmett grinned.

“We’re getting there.” Then he fell silent for a few seconds, as if he was gathering his courage. “I just have one thing to take care of first. Not long ago, a certain wedding planner got snowed in on my farm. I showed her around and took her for a walk along the path to the pond and one of our barns. I didn’t expect we’d get snowed in, and I was even more shocked when I realized that the connection I felt the first time we met was growing stronger every minute.”

My heart skipped a beat, and the nerves in my stomach erupted into full-blown flutters.

Abby clutched my arm, as if she wanted to make sure this was real.

His gaze rested on me as his voice softened. “I couldn’t resist you, and it was futile to try. I’ve said to everyone that I fell hard and fast for you, and I can’t describe it any other way. It might have been unconventional, and our relationship is new, but I can say with confidence that I love you, Ireland Evans. I’m sorry for saying what I did last night. I feared how deep my feelings had grown. But I’m not scared anymore. I know what I have, and I’m not letting you go without a fight.”

There was a murmur in the crowd, everyone looking for me. When they found me, the crowd parted so that there was

an open path between me and Emmett. He moved around the podium and toward me.

He didn't stop until he stood in front of me and cupped my cheek with his palm. "I love you, Ireland Evans."

My vision blurred. "I love you too."

"I'm sorry about last night. I was an idiot." His eyes were filled with regret.

My lips twitched. "Don't let it happen again."

"I won't shut you out anymore. Will you give me another chance? Will you be mine?" His voice was earnest, and he'd left the microphone at the podium, so it felt like it was just us.

I nodded as he lowered his head for a sweet kiss.

The crowd clapped, and the mayor took over the tree lighting.

Emmett put his arm around me, and we faced the tree. I couldn't hear anything and was only vaguely aware when the mayor lit the tree.

While everyone else was enjoying the tree, Emmett squeezed me tight. "I'm so glad you came."

Looking up at him, I said, "I didn't know you'd be here."

"I asked Gia to help me, but I wasn't sure you'd stay and listen to my speech. I was worried you'd walk away after last night, and I wouldn't blame you."

"I was afraid to hope that you'd come around. I worried I was too much for you. That you wouldn't want anyone to interrupt your life."

"I let work get to me that day, and I took it out on you. I'm not proud of how I acted, but there's a possibility I might

screw up again. I hope you'll be patient with me."

"We're here for each other through the good days and the bad. If you talk to me and don't shut me out."

"I'll do my best."

I smiled. "Want to get out of here?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

We headed back to my place because it was closer. We held hands as we walked, neither one of us wanting to let the other go. I unlocked the door and led the way to my apartment.

When the door was closed, Emmett held me to him, squeezing me tight. "I can't believe I almost screwed this up. You're the best thing that has ever happened to me."

"Me too."

"It doesn't matter how we met or what the circumstances were, we were meant to be together."

"I think so too."

"I was so afraid I was going to lose you. I'll prove to you every day going forward that I'm the right man for you."

My eyes swam with tears again.

Then he kissed me, slow and sweet, as if he were taking his time to savor me. I held his neck and pressed my body against his. I didn't want anything between us.

He lifted me into his arms, my legs going around his waist as he walked toward my bedroom.

He lowered me onto the bed, following me down and covering me with his body. He was heavy and warm, and he felt so good against me. We kissed for a while before he finally lifted to remove his shirt.

I couldn't believe he was here and that he was mine.

He quickly removed his pants and shoes, and I followed to stand in front of him, touching his chest and placing kisses on one nipple, then the other. He was hard muscle and warm skin, his hair tickling my fingers. I wanted to memorize every inch of him.

He let me explore for a few seconds, and then his hands were all over me, urging my sweater over my head and pushing down my jeans.

He dropped to his knees and carefully removed each boot before helping me remove the jeans and panties. When we were both naked, he wrapped a hand around my thigh and looked up at me, his eyes filled with awe. "I'll never get enough of you. You're so beautiful."

He tapped my inner thigh, urging me to widen my stance. He leaned closer, breathing me in. Then his mouth was on my core, and I swayed on my feet.

Emmett was on his knees for me, licking me, sucking me, driving me higher and higher. He added his finger, pumping inside, the need curling deep inside. I needed him to help me go over.

I bit my lip hard to stifle the moan that threatened to erupt.

With a naughty grin, he reached up to cup one breast and tweak the nipple. The look on his face, combined with his fingers pumping inside of me and his hands on my breast was too much. The orgasm came over me fast, making me tremble with its intensity.

He easily lifted me and placed me on the bed. It felt even better with nothing between us. He kissed me with my essence

on his lips as he nudged my entrance with his cock. I widened my legs for him. “Emmett, please.”

I couldn't wait any longer for that connection with him filling me up. He eased inside in one swift motion.

“I love you so much.”

“I love you too.”

“Can't get enough.”

He murmured phrases in my ear as he slowly pumped inside me, keeping our connection and his body tight to mine. It was overwhelming in the best of ways. I let my feelings loose, and I felt love, gratitude, and hope.

I'd finally found the one for me, and we'd stick by each other through anything. I knew it with every fiber of my being.

This time when we crested, we did it together, making the moment that much more special. He grabbed a washcloth and cleaned me before bringing me to him.

The lights of the tree illuminated the bed in a white glow. His hand brushed circles over the skin on my hip. “I can't believe I'm here with you.”

I kissed his chest.

“Was Gia upset about what I said about the weddings?”

“She didn't say much about that. She was more worried that it came between us.”

“I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Nerves fluttered to life again. “What about?”

“Would you be interested in helping us on the farm? You said you love it there, and you enjoy organizing events, and we could use some help in that area.”

“I think it would be fun to offer school trips and guided tours of the farm. But keep it limited and simple. Why, are you actually considering it?”

“If that’s what you want to do, we’d love to have the help. We’d pay you, of course. Mom could use some help in the store. I have a feeling she’d love your input on how to keep the shop running year-round.”

“I’d love to help out. I have so many ideas.”

“And I’d like to talk to Gia about the possibility of holding maybe five weddings a year. We’d get to talk to the couples and decide which ones are a good fit. We’d need to add that second lane for traffic, and we’d need help with the trailers, tents, and other things.”

“I’d love to help you with that. Are you sure you won’t get sick of having me around?”

His hold on me tightened. “I don’t want to ever let you go. I want to spend all my time with you. If you help on the farm, I’ll see you more. And you were looking to add something to your life. If you decide you want to do something else, that’s fine. I just want you to be happy.”

“I have so many ideas for your farm, and I love it there with you. I’m excited about this.”

“Yeah?” His brow raised, and his expression was still uncertain.

“I can’t wait to get started.” I kissed him, knowing this was the start of something beautiful. I pulled back slightly so I could see his face. “I’m so lucky I get to spend Christmas on your farm. I can’t wait to celebrate starting a new year with you.”

“I already got everything I ever wanted when you agreed to give me another chance.”

“So, you don’t need anything for Christmas?” I teasingly asked.

“Mmm. I can think of a few things I still need.” He rolled on top of me.

I always believed the holiday season was a time for hope, and this was the first Christmas that my dreams had come true. And for the first time, it didn’t feel too good to be true. It just felt right.

Who knew I’d run away from my wedding to the grumpy man who’d be my everything? It was worth every misstep and stumble on my way to him.

EPILOGUE



IRELAND

“*H*ow do you feel about decorating a single mom’s house as a surprise?”

I looked up from the snowman cookie I was carefully decorating with white icing to sell in the red barn. “Are you serious?”

“Knox said he’s been asked to decorate every house on this cul-de-sac except for one. A single mother lives there, and her little girl came up to him and asked if he would decorate her house too.”

My heart squeezed.

“Knox didn’t have the heart to tell her no.”

Who could? ”Of course I’ll help.”

“I knew I could count on you. It sounds like everyone’s pitching in: Heath, Talon, Sebastian, you, and me.”

“Does he have enough decorations?”

“He’s been stockpiling some for those who don’t want to bother with storing them.”

“That’s a great idea. I guess he’s serious about this new business venture.”

“I told him he’s undercharging and that’s why he’s getting so many requests. But he enjoys doing it.”

“When are we going?” I asked him, finishing the icing on the last gingerbread man.

“How soon can you be done with those cookies?” Emmett reached for one, and I slapped his hand. “Those aren’t for you.”

He pouted.

“I put some in a tin above the fridge for you.”

He gave me a smacking kiss. “You’re the best. I love you.”

My entire body softened at his words. “I love you too.”

He pulled down the tin and shoved one into his mouth.

“There’s no point in me decorating them if you’re just going to stuff them in your mouth without looking at them.”

He chewed and swallowed. “They’re so good, though.”

I shook my head. Since we’d made up, I’d been helping his mother with the shop in my spare time. In between customers, we discussed ways we could improve the shop and run the farm to generate more revenue. It had my blood pumping with excitement for the first time in a while.

I finished the last cookie and put it onto a cooling tray. “Don’t eat those, or I’ll have to stay up tonight baking more.”

He drew me into his side. “I’m going to need you in the bedroom tonight, naked.”

I rolled my eyes as I pushed away from him to remove my apron and brush the flour off my clothes.

We were insatiable and took advantage of any free time we had. I enjoyed the holiday season, but I was looking forward to

Emmett having more free time in January.

“Can we bring a few cookies for the owner? I think the little girl will love these.”

“What a great idea.” I didn’t mind wrapping up a few for the family Knox wanted to help. As I did, I asked, “Is there something going on between Knox and the mother?”

Emmett frowned. “I don’t think so. Knox was burned not long ago and doesn’t have an interest in a relationship. He wouldn’t mess with a single mom.”

“He only goes for the women not looking for commitment?”

Emmett nodded. “Something like that.”

“That’s too bad.” Now that I was happy, I wanted everyone around me to feel the same. And on some level, all of Emmett’s brothers were grumpy about women and relationships. They had either been burned in the past or weren’t looking for anything serious.

“My brothers are busy with their businesses. Talon’s trying to get his metal business to take off while juggling things on the farm. Heath just started working for Morrison Brothers, and they are renovating this old inn someone recently inherited.”

“The one down the street? It’s like a mansion.”

“No one has used it in years. Apparently, the granddaughter recently inherited it and wants to run an inn there.”

I clasped my hands together. “That could be amazing for the farm. She might want trees from your farm, and the guests might want to come here for an experience.”

“They wouldn’t be able to take the trees home unless they’re local.”

“What if you had some sort of light display here? You already have the paths lit, but what if you had something like Longwood Gardens?” I grabbed my phone to show him the pictures. “Then we could charge people to walk the property.”

“You know I don’t like a lot of visitors.”

“We could limit it to one area of the farm.”

“I’ll talk to Knox about it since he’s the one with the holiday lights business,” Emmett said.

“Oh, and I almost forgot, a woman named Holly stopped by, asking if she could consign her ornaments to the shop.”

“Holly Andrews?”

I looked up from my phone. “Yeah, do you know her? Her ornaments are so beautiful.”

“She was Talon’s girlfriend in high school.”

“Oh. Will it be a problem if she consigns her ornaments? She wouldn’t be working on the farm, just dropping her things off occasionally to keep us stocked.”

“That should be fine. I don’t know exactly what happened because he doesn’t like to talk about it.”

Emmett’s phone buzzed. “Knox just texted, asking when we were coming.”

I grabbed my coat and stuffed my feet into boots. “I’m ready to go.”

Before Emmett opened the door, he pulled me into his arms. “I’m so grateful you’re here. Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

“I want the farm to succeed just as much as you do. I feel so passionate about what you’re doing here, and I want to share it with the world.”

He dropped his forehead down to mine. “Me and my brothers don’t like marketing the farm or dealing one-on-one with the customers. We do it because we have to, but you and Mom are the face of the shop. You’re the ones who spread the holiday cheer.”

“I’m so excited about arranging a few field trips here. I can’t wait to see the kids’ faces when I tell them everything you do here.”

“I still can’t believe the kids would be interested.”

“The magic of the holidays gets to everyone, and they can learn some things about trees while they’re here. Maybe Holly would be willing to explain how she makes her ornaments.”

“I love you and your ideas.” Emmett kissed me and then said, “But we have to go.”

I was practically vibrating with excitement on the way to the house. I couldn’t wait to see the owners’ faces when they saw their house decorated. “Knox should make these surprise decorating events a thing,” I said as we pulled up to the house. Knox was already there with Talon and Heath.

Talon was tall and leaner than Heath, with ink on his arms. Heath was broader and bulkier. But both had the same dark hair and eyes.

“Is Sebastian coming?” I asked as I joined them on the porch.

“Ember had play practice tonight for the Christmas show.”

“I can’t wait to see her perform.” There was nothing more adorable than a kids’ play performance. I’d invited all my friends to support her.

Knox handed me a string of lights, showing me how they’d secured them to the post. “Can you wrap them around the columns?”

“On it, boss.”

“Ireland’s always so eager to help. I wish all my brothers were as enthusiastic,” Knox said with a wink.

“It’s not like you’re a bowl of laughter every day,” Emmett grumbled.

“Definitely not,” Knox said reasonably.

“Are the owners home?” I asked as I grabbed a step stool and got to work.

“The little girl, Addy, said she had play practice. Apparently, she’s the same age as Ember, and they go to the same school. Sebastian will text me when it’s over so we’ll know to finish up and make ourselves scarce.”

“You don’t want to see the looks on their faces when they see it?” I asked, looking up at Knox, where he was hanging lights on the overhang of the roof.

He frowned. “It’s supposed to be a surprise.”

My mouth dropped open slightly. “You don’t want them to know you’re the one who did it?”

“I’m sure the little girl will know.”

“But you don’t want the mom to?” I was a little confused, and then I wondered if he liked this woman. Had the little girl wormed her way into his heart, but he didn’t want to chance a

relationship with the mother? I understood that and respected him even more for keeping his distance. At the same time, my heart squeezed for him. He deserved love just like anyone else.

I hit play on my go-to holiday music playlist and got back to work.

When the lights were hung, Talon said, “I have one more thing to add.” From the back of his truck, he pulled out a large metal structure in the shape of a present.

“You made this?” I asked as I stepped down off the stool and made my way to where he stood on the lawn.

“I figured they’d want something a little extra. This neighborhood has a holiday decorating contest. I’m not sure they’d win with just this, but it’s cool. Let’s see if we can get it to light up.”

Knox plugged it in, and we stood on the lawn to see the full effect of our lights.

“I love the presents. They’re the perfect addition.” There were lights and garland wrapped around the railing, lights going up the columns, and then lights lining the roof of the porch.

“It needs one more thing.” Knox went to his truck to pull out a wreath, and Emmett helped him hang it.

Lights shone on us as a car pulled into the driveway. Startled, Knox said, “I didn’t see Sebastian’s message that they were on their way.”

A woman got out of the car, and a little girl hopped out of the back seat. “Mommy, did you see the lights?”

The woman took her hand. “I sure did.”

The little girl tugged her hand free and ran up to Knox. “You put up the lights like I asked.”

“You asked him to do this?” the woman asked, her eyes wide.

“The rest of the houses on the street are decorated. I asked Knox to make ours match.”

The woman patted her daughter’s hand. “Mr. Knox does this as a service. People pay him to decorate. You can’t ask people to do things for free.”

An awkward silence fell over the group.

Knox stepped forward. “I wanted to do this for you.”

Her face filled with regret. “I’m so sorry about this. I’ll talk to her.”

“Please accept the lights. It makes her happy, and I wanted to do this for you.” Knox gestured in our direction. “My family wanted to do this for you. It was fun.”

“See, Mommy. He had fun putting up our lights.”

The group laughed.

“I can’t thank you enough for doing this for us,” the woman finally managed, looking at all of us for the first time.

“These are my brothers, Talon, Heath, and Emmett, and this is Emmett’s girlfriend, Ireland.”

Talon squatted down to the little girl’s level, explaining how he’d made the wire decoration, but my attention was on Emmett as he approached me with a smile.

“That was fun. But are you ready to get out of here?”

“I enjoyed spreading the holiday cheer, but I have a present I’d like to give you at home.”

Emmett cupped my cheek. “Do I get to unwrap you?”

“You’ll have to wait and see,” I said cheekily.

He widened his stance. “I look forward to coming home to you every night.” We hadn’t officially moved in together, but I spent most of my time at the farm.

“Me too.” I couldn’t wait to explore what our future held.

I hope you loved Ireland and Emmett’s story! Read more about their happily ever after in their [bonus epilogue](#).

Sarah and Knox’s story is next in [Finding Sunshine](#)! Get 30% off the ebook if you buy it [on Lea’s shop](#). Just click on [this link](#), or use coupon code: FS30 at checkout. When you purchase the ebook on Lea’s shop, Bookfunnel will email a link to the book and you can download it on your preferred e-reader.

A single mom holiday romance. I wasn’t prepared for Knox, the way his shirts stretched over his pecs and biceps, or how good he was with his hands. As a single mom I’m focused on my daughter. I don’t have time for dating a mountain man whose family owns a Christmas Tree Farm. But Knox is always there, offering to be my friend. But what if I want more?

Do you want to read Gia’s story? [Everything About You](#) is available to read now. Silas Sharpe is enemy number one—my biggest competitor and my brothers’ best friend. When we give into our desires, it was supposed to be a onetime thing, but in true Silas Sharpe fashion, he refused to give up until he had the one thing that had eluded him for years—me.

BOOKS BY LEA COLL

The Monroe Brothers

Runaway Love

Finding Sunshine

Trusting Forever

Endless Hope

Ever After Series

Feel My Love

The Way You Are

Love Me Like You Do

Give Me a Reason

Somebody to Love

Everything About You

Mountain Haven Series

Infamous Love

Adventurous Love

Impulsive Love

Tempting Love

Inescapable Love

Forbidden Love

Second Chance Harbor Series

Fighting Chance

One More Chance

Lucky Chance

My Best Chance

Worth the Chance

A Chance at Forever

Annapolis Harbor Series

Only with You

Lost without You

Perfect for You

Crazy for You

Falling for You

Waiting for You

Hooked on You

All I Want Series

Choose Me

Be with Me

Burn for Me

Trust in Me

Stay with Me

Take a Chance on Me

Download a free novella, when you sign up for her [newsletter](#).

To learn more about her books, please visit her [website](#).

SPECIAL EDITION BUNDLES

If you prefer to read by trope:

[Brother's Best Friend](#)

[Childhood Crush](#)

[Contractors](#)

[Enemies to Lovers](#)

[Fake Relationship](#)

[First in Series](#)

[Forbidden Love](#)

[Friends to Lovers](#)

[Grumpy Meets Sunshine](#)

[Hot Heroes](#)

[Office Romance](#)

[Second Chance Romance](#)

[Single Dad](#)

[Single Mom](#)

[Single Parent](#)

[Sports Romance](#)

If you prefer to read series:

[All I Want](#)

[Annapolis Harbor](#)

[Ever After](#)

[Mountain Haven](#)

[Second Chance Harbor](#)

If you prefer to read paperbacks:

[All I Want Series](#)

[Annapolis Harbor](#)

[Brother's Best Friend](#)

[Childhood Crush](#)

[Enemies to Lovers](#)

[Grumpy Meets Sunshine](#)

[Hot Heroes](#)

Office Romance

Second Chance Harbor

Single Mom

Sports Romance

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lea Coll is a USA Today Bestselling Author of sweet and sexy happily ever afters. She worked as a trial attorney for over ten years. Now she stays home with her three children, plotting stories while fetching snacks and running them back and forth to activities. She enjoys the freedom of writing romance after years of legal writing.

She currently resides in Maryland with her family.

Check out Lea's books on her [shop](#).

Get a free novella when you sign up for Lea's [newsletter](#).