



Snowed in with the

GRUMP

MISTLETOE LOVE SERIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FERN FRASER

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Fern Fraser

Mistletoe Love Series

SNOWED IN WITH THE GRUMP

Ava

I've been in love with my best friend's older brother for years. Unrequited and very much a secret, I've been content only to share my feelings in the letters I wrote him. For five years, Carter served overseas, and I poured my affection and concern into unsent notes I foolishly hid in his family's mountain cabin. The very place where Carter plans to stay once he returns stateside. I need to find the letters before anyone else, especially before the man who holds my heart discovers my secret.

Carter

I never imagined that when I retired from the military, I'd have to do it like this. Scarred and broken and unfit for the beautiful things in this world. Which is exactly what I find in my family's old cabin, in the form of my sister's tempting best friend, Ava. Suddenly, we're snowed in together, and I'm struggling to remember why I'm supposed to keep my hands to myself. I'm too damaged to deserve Ava's sunshine, but she's got me hoping for a Christmas miracle.

Snowed In with the Grump by FERN FRASER

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EDITED BY: Violet Rae Editing

BOOK COVER DESIGN: Cormar Covers

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CHAPTER 1

AVA

The cracked leather steering wheel groans under my white-knuckled grip as my sedan bounces down the rutted forest road. I wince each time a rock or fallen branch scrapes the undercarriage with a sickening screech.

There's no cell reception this far up the remote mountain pass. If I get a flat out here, I'm stranded for who knows how long in the frigid December air.

I glance in the rearview mirror, half-hoping I'll spot another car in the distance, but there are only miles of empty road cutting through endless bare trees.

Dad reminded me at least ten times to replace the bald spare tire before he and Mom jetted off to the Caribbean for another "empty nester" getaway.

But it slipped my mind between moping over my perennial single status and picking up extra shifts at the bakery to earn some holiday cash.

Now I'm cursing myself for not making the time. Each bump in the road has me picturing the threadbare tire blowing and sending me into a snowy ditch.

I'd give anything to be able to roll down the window and fill my lungs with fresh pine and damp earth to ground myself, but the feeble heater is already struggling to combat the icy chill invading the car.

I sigh with relief when the familiar log cabin comes into view. As I pull up in the driveway, my pulse settles. I've arrived in one piece at the secluded family cabin where I've spent so many vacations.

I rub my hands together and blow on them, bracing myself to face the cold. I twist the key, and the engine wheezes off.

The frigid air blasts me as I step out. I try not to let my shoulders slump as I make my way to the trunk. I grab an

armful of festively wrapped packages and kick it closed. Here goes nothing. It's time to fake holiday cheer.

Don't get me wrong, I love Sarah to death. She's been my best friend since we were kids, but I've become the third wheel since she hooked up with Matt.

Spending Christmas with Sarah, Matt, and their friends, Ivy and Easton, means I'll be the lone single in a cabin full of happy couples. It's like getting a front-row seat to watch my failures in the dating department play out in surround sound.

At least there will be plenty of alcohol, and I plan to partake if it will help me survive. I shake off the self-pity party before knocking. The door creaks open, and my greeting dies on my lips.

Sarah's older brother Carter, my longtime crush and leading man in my private fantasies, fills the doorway. His tall frame is bundled against the cold, but he's filled out more since I saw him almost five years ago. Now, he's practically bursting the seams of his wool coat.

I drink him in, nerves simmering in my belly. Artfully tousled dark hair frames the stormy gray eyes pinning me in place. That jawline could cut glass. Damn, he looks good. In our time apart, Carter's gone from handsome to dangerously hot.

I stand frozen, my heartbeat thundering in my ears. I'm completely blindsided. Sarah didn't mention anything about Carter being here. My biggest temptation has ambushed me, and I'm completely unprepared.

Get it together, Ava. Stop being a weirdo.

I break his gaze and try to slow my pounding heart by tightening my grip around the gift bags to anchor myself. Carter is off-limits. Sarah would flip if she knew I had secretly crushed on her big brother all these years.

He steps out onto the snow-dusted porch, frosty air steaming from his full lips.

"Ava. Hey," he says, surprise flickering across his face.

His voice is a rumbling scrape, sending an involuntary shiver through me that has nothing to do with the temperature.

“Carter, wow. I had no idea you’d be joining us,” I say with what I hope is a passable smile.

“I’m not staying. I only stopped by to do some repairs,” he says, eyeing my sedan, arms crossed over his broad chest. “I’m surprised your rust bucket made it up the mountain in this weather.”

I never seem to save enough money to upgrade my old beater, and Carter’s criticism stings. “She may look like junk, but she’s sturdy.”

“If you say so.”

He keeps staring with one eyebrow cocked and an infuriating smirk on his lips, making me want to smack him and kiss him all at the same time. I awkwardly shuffle the packages in my grip, unable to hold his eyes for long.

“Let me help you with those,” he says, looping the bags over his thick wrist. The muscles in his forearm flex from the weight as he drops the bags inside.

I force myself to look away. “Thanks. There are more bags in the trunk.”

Get a grip, Ava. Making heart eyes at Carter all weekend is a bad idea. It’s a tempting but terrible idea.

The trunk pops open, and I haul out colorful gift bags. Carter raises an eyebrow as he watches me pull out one bag after another.

“Geez, Ava. Did you buy out the whole store?”

Carter may not understand it, but gift-giving is my love language. “You may think I went overboard, but some of us enjoy bringing joy to others, Mr. Grinch.”

Carter holds his free hand up in mock surrender. “Hey, don’t take it personally. I’m not big on holidays. You wouldn’t catch me dead wearing a stupid Christmas sweater.”

“It’d take a miracle,” I tease.

“Don’t hold your breath.”

I reach for another bag at the same time he grabs my suitcase. Our fingers brush accidentally, sending a spark up my arm. I pull back quickly, silently cursing myself for reacting.

Everything will be fine, I tell myself, as long as Carter doesn’t see me sweat.

I trudge behind him along the slushy path, focusing on each slippery step. Not on his long legs clad in faded jeans, hugging his lean hips.

We head inside, and my nerves kick into overdrive being alone with him. I take in the familiar rustic interior—the plaid sofa with handmade quilts, the stone fireplace with stockings hanging. But the halls are lined with plastic sheeting, sawhorses, and the musty scent of old timber.

“What’s with all the construction stuff?” I ask, desperate to break the tense silence.

Carter rubs the back of his neck, shifting his weight. “I’m doing some renovations on the original part of the cabin. It needs some minor upgrades.”

I run my hand along a plastic-draped wall. Under the crinkling plastic, there are uneven grooves in the aged timber.

“So what exactly are the renovations?” I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

“Just replacing some old flooring, knocking down a couple of walls.”

I lick my dry lips. “That sounds like you’re gutting the place, not minor upgrades. Are you working with a team?”

“I’m doing it myself so I can keep costs down. I know what I’m doing.”

I force an uneasy chuckle. “Got it. None of my business.”

His eyes narrow. “It’s not a big deal. You’re making it sound like I’m teaching myself construction from YouTube videos.”

Sweat prickles on the back of my neck. If Carter starts demolishing walls, there’s no telling what long-buried secrets

he might uncover. Secrets I've prayed would stay hidden forever.

"Should we take the gifts to the tree?" I ask, hating the timid tone of my voice.

Carter's expression softens slightly as he leads the way into the cozy living area. A tall noble fir is already set up in the corner, fragrant and blanketed in white lights. Carter places the bags down while I arrange my packages beneath the branches.

When I turn, he's standing closer than expected, those stormy eyes studying me, making my pulse skitter. Carter crosses his arms, and I glimpse the gruff, brooding guy Sarah described when I thirstily drank up any detail about her loner brother.

I'm reminded of a photo where he wore his Army uniform. It perfectly fit his broad shoulders and highlighted his trim waist, making him look handsome, sharp, and mature—a real soldier.

"Where is everyone else?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

"They went into town to get groceries and supplies. Didn't want to make two trips with the snow coming down harder now."

I glance at the window where fat, swirling flakes steadily fall—a knot forms in my stomach. We're alone out here, at least for a while longer. I'm not sure if that makes things better or worse.

"I guess I should bring my stuff to my room?"

Carter nods, leading the way down the hall to the cozy guestroom. While he places my bags on the braided rug, I look around at the wood-paneled walls, comfy bed, and plush bedding, anything to avoid his nearness. It's overwhelming in the small space.

The small space feels electrically charged with him so close. I can't think straight this near to his muscular frame and earthy scent. I stare intently at the bedspread, fixating on its red and green stitches.

I lean against the dresser in what I hope is a casual pose. "Do you mind if I look around when I finish unpacking? For

nostalgia's sake.”

He shoves his hands into his pockets. “Don’t go wandering too far. Mind the plastic sheeting and watch your footing—not everything is secure or stable right now.”

“Got it,” I reply, pulse quickening as I brush past him.

“I’ll let you get settled then,” Carter says after a too-long pause. He gives me a fleeting look I can’t quite decipher before closing the door with a soft click.

I let out a shaky breath.

The secret letters I wrote Carter when he was deployed are hidden in these walls. If Carter uncovers them during his renovation, it will humiliate me and destroy my friendship with Sarah. I have to find them first.

I wait until Carter’s footsteps fade, glancing down the hall to check if the coast is clear. My heart pounds against my ribs as I creep to the old part of the cabin and enter the room.

The layout is different, and I don’t remember where I hid the letters. I run my hands frantically along the walls, searching for any cracks or crevices, but find nothing.

Finally, I see the outline of a hidden nook, barely visible behind the heavy antique dresser.

Of course, the dresser blocks it because why would it be easy?

I press my shoulder against the solid oak and push with all my strength, but it refuses to budge even an inch. I look around wildly for anything to pry it loose.

Grabbing a nearby chair, I climb up to peer behind and underneath for possible handholds. No dice. The back is sealed tight.

With my pulse throbbing in my ears, I yank open drawers to lighten the load and try again.

“Come on,” I whisper through gritted teeth, but the dresser holds fast.

All I’ve achieved is to bang my head and elbows against the unyielding wood repeatedly. Nearly breathless and drenched in

sweat, I sink against the wall, close to tears. There must be a way to access those letters without ending up in the ER.

With a sudden burst of inspiration, I drag over a length of discarded pipe and try to lever the dresser away from the wall. If I can't get those letters, I'll lose everything.

The pipe groans under the strain as I put my full body weight into it and try again, muscles screaming. A gap opens that's wide enough to reach a hand inside.

I've almost touched the hidden nook when the door creaks open.

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CHAPTER 2

CARTER

Seeing Ava again hits me square in the chest—stirring up a bittersweet ache. I’ve known her since she was a tagalong kid, but she’s grown into a beautiful woman who walks with a bounce in her step and wisps of chestnut hair curling against the column of her neck.

I watched her pink lips move as she chattered away, asking question after question while I carried her bags. Memories of her lips wrapped around an ice cream cone, tongue flicking teasingly, brought back feelings I’d bottled up for years.

She’s oblivious to the effect she has on me. This is dangerous territory. She was so sweetly eager to reconnect, but all I could do was bark gruff replies, terrified of revealing too much.

How many bags did she haul in here? It’s like she packed up half a department store’s worth. The space under the tree is overflowing with her colorfully wrapped gifts.

She always loved playing Santa. She’s the same generous, warm-hearted girl I grew up with, only now, I’m dreaming of being on the receiving end of her affection.

Her presence stirs something deep inside, the irresistible pull like a siren’s song. I should keep my distance and shake off this impossible longing—she’s my little sister’s best friend.

I clench my jaw, irritated at this unwelcome rush of sensation. I came here to find peace, not get caught up in holiday fantasies.

Get a hold of yourself.

The clink of my tool belt grabs my attention. My mind should be on the job, not on Ava. I force myself to focus on the repairs Sarah asked me to complete before her holiday guests arrive. I’m running behind schedule. The ceiling support beam needs lifting.

I roll my bum shoulder, wincing as pain radiates down my arm. Can’t baby the damn thing if it’s ever going to heal, but

my shoulder won't cut it.

I won't be lifting the entire weight, but I can get creative. I'll anchor a pulley system on the exposed joist, loop a steel cable around, and cinch it tight.

The mechanical advantage of hauling from a lower point will save my shoulder. Ingenuity over brute force—first lesson they drill into you as an engineer. I may be out of the service, but the training sticks.

With quick, practiced movements, I reach for my tools. All the prep work was done before Ava arrived. The beam slots into place with a satisfying *thunk*. The repair is sound, but my shoulder needs more healing time.

A scraping sound snaps me alert, my honed instincts kicking in. Thankfully, it's coming from the old section of the cabin, not the newer wing where I left Ava unpacking.

How long ago was that? It couldn't have been more than an hour.

Come to think of it, it's been strangely quiet since I started repairs. It's too quiet for someone as lively as Ava. But in that time, she's abandoned unpacking to cause a stir.

It wouldn't be the first time her restless energy has led to mischief. That girl's been a magnet for mayhem since we were kids.

Her free spirit is charming but lands her in trouble. Like the time I caught her trying to wallpaper the neighbor's garage in toilet paper.

I creep along the hall, the thick carpet muffling my footsteps. I pause outside my bedroom, pressing my ear to the door. The scraping sounds are definitely coming from inside.

Strange though—the door is ajar, just as I left it this morning. What's she up to?

Ava's forehead creases as she strains to move the heavy oak dresser. It dwarfs her petite frame, but she's undeterred. Although her cheeks are flushed with exertion, she sets her jaw and tries again.

I bite back a chuckle. She's like a little kitten trying to move a boulder.

I'm torn between finding her struggle amusing and wanting to step in and help. Part of me wants to gently take her by the shoulders and guide her away before she strains something.

Ava would likely bristle at the implication she can't handle this herself. Tell me off for being overprotective and overstepping. But as she heaves against the weight, her foot slipping on the wooden floor, my amusement evaporates.

My protective instincts flare. She'll throw out her back if she keeps this up.

I fold my arms and clear my throat gruffly, my stern expression making my displeasure clear.

"Need a hand with that?"

Surprise flashes across her face, and a hand flies to her chest as she gapes at me, cheeks flaming.

I raise an eyebrow. "You okay? You look kinda freaked out."

"What? No, no, I'm good!" Her voice sounds too bright and fake.

I step closer, studying her face. "You're acting weird."

She lets out an awkward laugh. "Weird? Me? No way."

She waves a hand, pointing at the inch of space behind the dresser and stammers.

"Oh, I-I thought I heard a mouse!"

I press my lips together to keep from smiling. She's a terrible liar. Ava is hiding something. But what? And why? Instead of calling her out, I play along.

"A mouse. Right. So you rearranged the furniture in my room?"

Ava's bright blue eyes meet mine when she glances through her lashes.

"Your room? Oh, gosh, Carter, I'm so sorry! I didn't realize ___"

When she smiles, cracks form in the walls around my heart.

I shake my head, a hint of a smile tugging my lips. “That thing weighs a ton. Let me help.”

What the hell. I may as well say what’s on my mind. She makes me want to look out for her. I mean to tell her I’ll set a trap for the “mouse” later, but insistent knocking at the door interrupts me mid-thought.

We exchange glances.

I let her pass, catching a whiff of her shampoo—coconut and vanilla. If I were to kiss her, would she taste as sweet? Would her lips melt into mine, like in my dreams?

Kissing Ava makes me think of summer and possibilities, two things I’ve avoided for a long time.

As soon as I finish this repair for my sister, I’m packing up and driving until I outrun temptation. Putting miles between us until the fire in my chest cools to embers.

I’ll leave before I do something stupid, like pulling her into my arms and kissing her sweet lips.

Safer for her if I make a clean break. I’m no good for her. The darkness in me would swallow her up. She’ll forget about me soon enough. Find some whole, untarnished guy to give her the life she deserves.

The thought cuts deep, but I ignore the pang. I’ve got to keep it together a little longer, but damn, she’s testing my restraint.

A bearded stranger stands by the steps with a gloved hand raised in greeting. I don’t like unexpected visitors this deep in the mountains, especially with a storm blowing in.

I instinctively step in front of Ava, shielding her smaller frame.

“Apologies for intruding, folks. Name’s Dylan,” he calls over the wind. “Having some car trouble down the road. Any chance I could borrow some tools?”

I keep my tone brusque. “What seems to be the trouble with your car?”

“The engine’s sputtering something awful,” Dylan explains. “Hoping I can get it limping to the next town before this storm bottoms out.”

I hang back, shoulders tensed. His friendly tone does little to curb my wariness after years of vigilant threat assessment.

“You’re not from around here?” I ask.

Dylan shrugs. It’s a carefully neutral gesture.

“So what brings you out to these parts?” I ask.

His easy smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “Passing through on the way to visit my brother. He’s got a business around here.”

I notice the man’s spotless boots and pressed shirt. Crisp and well-groomed, he stands like he’s awaiting inspection.

“Ex-military?” I ask, although I already know the answer.

“Yeah. Just got out.” He looks me over. “You too?”

I hum noncommittally and an awkward silence settles. Dylan’s guarded expression mirrors mine. Two men sizing each other up, neither willing to reveal too much.

Ava touches my arm, her blue eyes sympathetic. “Carter, we should try to help.”

I give a terse nod and gesture for him to follow me toward the tool shed, resolute in keeping this stranger away from the cabin.

“That’s quite a front blowing in, isn’t it?” Ava remarks, eyeing the towering pines swaying violently.

“Best batten down anything loose out here before she hits,” Dylan says over the rising wind.

Ava rubs her arms against the chill, tendrils of hair whipping wildly across her worried face. All I want is to pull her close and reassure her, but I clench my jaw instead.

We’ve reached the shed, its door rattling in the mounting wind. Dylan’s eyes dart around with interest. He asks questions about the cabin’s history.

I fold my arms, jaw tightening as I give short, polite replies, hoping he'll take the hint to move along soon.

I find the tools Dylan needs and press them into his hand.

"This should get you rolling again. Get where you're going before the worst hits."

When Dylan asks about returning the tools, I tell him to keep them in case his truck needs more repairs.

"I appreciate your help," he continues. "If there's any way I can repay your kindness—"

"No need," I say.

The guy talks too much. He seems harmless, but his slippery answers raise my hackles. I'd prefer him to leave as soon as possible.

"Much obliged to you folks. Take care and stay safe in this storm."

I give a curt parting nod and firmly close the shed, latches squealing against the wind. Ava watches me with those luminous blue eyes, a concerned pinch to her delicate features. She reaches out and touches my shoulder.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I reply, even as my heart rate finally settles at her touch. "Just being cautious."

Ava nods, but how can she grasp the extent of my hypervigilance after years of threat assessment conditioning?

She's too open-hearted, too inclined to trust. It's one of the things I love about her, but it's also what makes her vulnerable. My gut twists with an unfamiliar protectiveness.

Ava jumps as a crack of thunder splits the darkening sky. Her eyes cloud with unease. I want so badly to pull her into my arms and promise we'll weather this storm together, safe and sound.

I hesitate. She deserves someone who won't recoil from closeness. Someone who understands how to provide comfort and connection.

I'm not the right person. I'm too damaged, too closed off after everything I've been through.

"Carter?" Ava's voice quavers slightly as she stares at me with those fathomless eyes.

I blink, realizing she asked me something while I was lost in my spiraling thoughts.

"Sorry, what?"

Worry creases her brow, but her tone remains gentle. "Do you think the others will return before the worst hits?"

I want to shield her from uncertainty and fear, but false hope could be dangerous. The roads could become impassable, preventing the others from returning.

I rake a hand through my hair, my gaze fixed on the dark thunderheads rolling in.

"Can't say for sure."

Ava takes a shaky breath but sets her delicate jaw resolutely. I guide us toward the front steps, the wind whipping our clothes as fat raindrops begin to splatter down.

We sprint the last few yards to the porch as the downpour unleashes its fury. I secure the door against the raging wind, shutting out the worst of the storm, at least for now.

A particularly violent crack of thunder makes Ava jump. She pauses in front of the living room window, watching the thrashing trees and pouring rain, worry etched on her face.

I only hesitate for a moment before crossing the room to stand beside her.

"We'll ride this out," I say gruffly. "I won't let anything bad happen."

Ava searches my face with those luminous eyes. The surge of protectiveness welling up inside me is startling.

"Do you promise?" she asks softly.

My voice rasps with emotion. "I promise. No matter how bad it gets out there, I'll keep you safe."

I came to the cabin to heal, far from people and their complications.

Ava, with her quick laughter and bright eyes, is a complication—one I can't resist.

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CHAPTER 3

AVA

Winter storms descend fast and fierce with little warning around here. If Sarah, Matt, and the others hadn't set out before the storm hit, they could be stranded, unable to make it back before the roads become impassable. I hope they found somewhere safe to hunker down.

I hurry inside, shaking raindrops from my windswept hair. "This storm came out of nowhere!"

Carter shuts the door behind me and gives me that brooding look, his forehead creased and his eyes stormy. Despite his dour disposition, my pulse quickens under his intent gaze.

"Think you scared Dylan off with that trademark scowl of yours?" I tease, trying to lighten the mood.

Carter's expression remains stern, unamused by my attempt at humor.

"Someone has to play bad cop. You seem willing to invite potential ax murderers in for tea," he deadpans.

I nudge him playfully. "Come on, Grumpy Gus. I'm an excellent judge of character. Just because I choose to see the best in people—"

Carter levels me with an incredulous look that wordlessly conveys his skepticism. "Not everyone is as 'delightful' as you think."

I stare at him pointedly. "I suppose I should take lessons from the Carter School of Surliness on scaring away friendly folk who need help."

He chuckles, a rare glimpse of lightness in his stormy eyes. "I'm not that bad, am I?"

"You can be a bit intense sometimes," I counter, unable to hide my smile.

Carter's expression softens. "Ever the optimist, eh, Sunshine?"

The nickname sends flutters through me. Suddenly, I'm aware of every tiny movement—tucking hair behind my ear, the slight tremble in my clasped hands.

The light mood shifts as Carter pulls out his phone, his brow furrowing.

“Looks like a big one's blowing in,” he mutters, anxiously scanning a weather radar app.

My stomach knots with unease. I twist a damp lock of hair around my finger.

“Do you think Sarah and the others are already on their way back?”

Carter shakes his head, already scrolling to Sarah's number. “Not sure. I better call and find out.”

I take a deep breath, trying to tamp down my anxiety for my friends out there somewhere in this worsening storm. Carter's muttered curse tells me Sarah didn't pick up.

He sets the phone down on the counter with more force than necessary.

“Voicemail. Damn it,” he grumbles.

I suspected as much but still feel a pang of worry. The signal can get sketchy up here in the remote mountains.

“Maybe we're stuck here alone for a while, but we can turn this into an adventure, right?” I suggest brightly, trying to hide my nerves.

Carter meets my gaze, and something charged passes between us, making my cheeks warm.

“Yeah, um, I should go check the generator,” he mumbles before brushing past me down the hall.

My nerves are jangling now, and the impending storm is only partly to blame. Being here alone with Carter while secretly harboring feelings for him has me anxious and on edge.

Carter caught me wrestling with the oak monstrosity and barely bought my flimsy excuse about a mouse. He's too perceptive not to be suspicious.

If he finds the stash of letters containing my deepest romantic confessions, it will bring embarrassment and chaos into our decade-long friendship.

Those letters contain my deepest hopes, dreams, and confessions about Carter, things I could never say aloud. Thinking about him reading the endless pages where I gush about him makes me cringe.

At best, those flowery words would bring nothing more than an eye roll. At worst, they could send him running for the hills.

While Carter is occupied, I rummage through my bags for my portable speaker, figuring some upbeat tunes will ease my nervousness.

Soon a peppy version of “Let It Snow” fills the cozy kitchen.

I’m bobbing my head and mouthing the lyrics when Carter enters, surveying the scene with amusement dancing in his eyes.

“We should cook up some dinner to pass the time,” I suggest brightly, hoping he doesn’t notice the slight tremor in my hands.

Carter leans against the counter, arms crossed over his broad chest as he regards me with a look I can’t quite decipher. “And what feast does Chef Ava propose?”

I tap my chin thoughtfully before suggesting, “Chili. Perfect comfort food for a stormy night.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Carter watching me sway to the music as I gather ingredients and utensils. Feeling playful, I ham it up, dramatically lip-syncing with a wooden spoon.

When Carter laughs, the sound makes my insides flutter. I boldly ask, “Care to dance, Mr. Grinch?”

Carter’s mouth quirks, but he shakes his head, eyes glinting with humor. I’m disappointed he didn’t accept my spontaneous offer.

In the cramped kitchen, Carter takes the knife and cutting board next to me and begins chopping vegetables with smooth, practiced motions.

I'm hyperaware of his muscular frame inches from mine. I sneak glances at his forearms, oddly mesmerized as the muscles flex with each efficient chop.

My cheeks grow hot when Carter reaches across me for the wooden spoon, his solid chest grazing my shoulder in the tight space.

I freeze, my pulse racing. Carter notices my reaction but says nothing, simply resumes work.

What am I doing? I need to stop this flirty behavior. Acting on these feelings could ruin my closest friendship.

I'm mentally scolding myself when Carter reaches for another carrot, and his elbow brushes mine, causing the knife to slip from my hand. I fumble to catch it in a panic before it hits the floor.

"Careful," Carter murmurs, his large hand closing over mine to steady it.

The sudden skin-on-skin contact makes my pulse flutter erratically.

"S-sorry," I stammer, heat flooding my cheeks. I focus on the cutting board, concentrating hard so I don't lose a finger.

Carter chuckles, clearly amused by my frazzled state.

"Don't worry, I won't let you burn down the place," he teases. "But maybe leave the knives to me, hazard."

I make a face at him, trying to match his lighthearted tone even as my traitorous body leans into his nearness.

We work side by side preparing the hearty chili, chopping vegetables, and browning meat while the music fills the pauses.

Once the chili is simmering on the stove, Carter sneaks a taste. "It's amazing. You're an incredible cook."

I flush at the compliment. “I learned from the best. Your mom was so patient, teaching Sarah and me as kids.”

Carter’s expression turns wistful at the mention of his late mother. Before I can second guess myself, I reach out and lightly touch his forearm in a gesture of comfort. The muscles flex beneath my fingertips.

Carter studies me for a long moment before giving a small, sad smile.

“You all right? You seem on edge,” he says, breaking the charged silence.

“Y-yeah, fine!” I plaster on a bright smile. “Just hoping Sarah gets back soon. It’s getting late.”

Carter’s gaze dips to my mouth. “No rush. I’m enjoying the company.”

My throat goes dry. “So, a Combat Engineer—that sounds intense. What was that like?”

Carter’s motions still for a beat before he resumes chopping onions with renewed vigor.

“It had its challenges.”

As Carter reaches across me for a wooden spoon, I notice his left hand trembling slightly. He’s struggling to grip the spoon. Frowning, he sets it down and flexes his fingers.

“Are you okay? Your hand—” I blurt before catching myself.

Carter’s jaw tightens. “Just a little banged up. Shrapnel in my shoulder.”

His tone makes it clear that he doesn’t wish to elaborate. Concern floods me. Sarah never mentioned Carter’s injury, so it catches me off guard. Now, things make sense.

“Does it cause you much pain?” I ask gently.

Carter shrugs, but his eyes darken. “Some days are worse than others.”

I sense he’s left so much unsaid, and I can’t imagine the trauma he’s carrying. My heart aches for the wounds

damaging more than just his body.

“I’m sorry it meant you had to retire early.”

“Could’ve been worse,” Carter says roughly, turning away. His broad shoulders are taut, his movements rigid.

I send up a silent prayer of thanks. I wish I could comfort him, but he dislikes showing vulnerability.

I quickly change the subject. He only touched on the renovations to the cabin, but I want to know more.

“About the renovations. You’re not selling the cabin, are you?”

Resting against the counter, Carter rubs his shoulder absently as he glances around the worn but cozy space.

“I’m getting the place ready to live permanently now I’ve left the army. It needs work—new floors, updated kitchen.”

The earnestness in his voice catches me off guard. I pause my chopping, intrigued.

I try to picture Carter in a modern apartment complex and fail. “I can see you living here. It suits you.”

A small smile plays on his lips. “I’m looking for a fresh start, and this place always felt like home.”

I understand the appeal, which I only felt with his family. I didn’t think he needed it as much as I did, but I guess I was wrong.

“I never took you for the settling type.”

Carter shrugs. “People change, Ava.”

He seems different now. After a life filled with combat missions and endless drills, I imagine living in a peaceful cabin deep in the mountains is a stark but welcome contrast.

Carter looks up from the carrots he’s chopping, his eyes meeting mine.

“What made you come here for the holidays? Don’t you usually spend them in the city?”

I give a slight shrug, shifting on my feet as I debate how much to reveal. “I wanted a change of scenery.”

Carter’s eyes narrow, sensing my evasiveness. “Come on. There’s more to it than that.”

“It sounded like fun,” I say weakly.

“Where are your folks?”

I sigh, slicing more carrots than necessary to avoid his gaze. “Traveling.”

He raises an eyebrow, seeing right through me. “They bailed on you again, huh?”

I force out a laugh. “I’m an adult. They’re living their life.”

Carter gives a derisive snort. “Should’ve known.”

“Aren’t you being a bit harsh?”

Carter gives me a knowing look that says he understands, and the scowl returns to his handsome face.

“Beautiful woman like you shouldn’t be stuck out here with a bunch of couples like a third wheel. It isn’t right.”

Beautiful woman?

We’ve drifted closer, our bodies nearly touching in the cramped kitchen. I sway toward him, wetting my dry lips nervously. Carter’s eyes flick to my mouth.

If I leaned in, I could easily close the gap between us. I’d be pressed against his solid chest. I could give in to the temptation to...

The stove timer shatters the moment.

Did I almost kiss my best friend’s brother? *Get it together, Ava!*

I fumble with the pot, hands trembling.

“I, uh, better go do the thing—” Carter mutters roughly before spinning on his heel.

I grip the counter, steadying myself. I need space to clear my reckless thoughts. It isn’t raining anymore, and stretching my

legs before dinner seems like a good idea.

The icy wind bites at my flushed cheeks. My breath clouds white. I gulp it down greedily, enjoying the shock to my system.

Coming here was a mistake, although I didn't know I'd be putting myself in this tempting situation. I kick angrily at a fallen branch, sending it skittering across the snow.

I've never been one to break the rules or act recklessly, but I can't stop thinking daring thoughts—like taking charge and being bold. I don't know what to do with these overwhelming emotions.

Lost in my chaotic thoughts, I realize how far down the path I've stomped. The cabin is out of sight. Icy wind pierces my light jacket, making me shiver.

Panic flutters in my chest. Which direction is the cabin? Everything looks the same—endless snow and skeletal trees.

My resentment cools to regret as I realize I shouldn't have taken off without telling Carter.

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CHAPTER 4

CARTER

Everything felt comfortably familiar yet new and thrilling working with Ava in the kitchen, like an electric charge flowed between us.

Typically pragmatic and reserved, I keep my emotions bottled up, but Ava's warmth and light draw me out of my hardened shell.

Her smile and the blush on her cheeks stir the primal feelings I buried when I enlisted.

I'm eight years older and knew that if she were mine, she'd be wed and bred before the ink dried on the certificate.

But she was too young to settle down and too innocent to be around me with the desires that heated my blood. Enlisting and leaving town was the right choice at the time, but damn, if it didn't hollow me out.

Ava's a fully grown woman now. Nothing is holding us back. The spark between us is growing stronger. Soon, it will be an inferno impossible to extinguish.

I know I should protect her by keeping my distance. If I could make wise choices when I was young, why do I feel so reckless now?

I've handled explosives, combat, and extreme danger without flinching. Yet I'm powerless against her charms.

Either I act and let the fire consume me, or I risk losing this passion like smoke slipping through my fingers. For better or worse, I have to trust my instincts before fate decides for me.

When I cool down enough to return to the kitchen, trusting I won't do anything reckless, I find a pot bubbling on the stove. But no Ava. I check the rooms, but she's vanished.

As I step outside, a gust of wind whips my skin. I curse Ava's recklessness as my breath clouds in icy wisps. Fear rises in my throat as I follow her tracks. What if she's hurt?

When I find her, a shivering silhouette gazing thoughtfully at some far-off point, her beauty strikes me breathless.

My gut reaction is to scold her for venturing alone, yet the stronger urge is to embrace and shield her from the unrelenting cold.

All I want is to keep her safe and warm. Everything in me screams to take her in my arms and crush her wind-chapped lips with mine. I tamp down the urge. I'm not worthy.

Ava turns, eyes widening in surprise, then relief. "Carter—"

My heart clenches at seeing her like this, so vulnerable. "What are you doing out here?"

"I had to go outside for a bit," she says defensively. "Didn't think I needed your permission."

I shrug off my jacket and drape it over her shoulders. "That's true, but a note would've been good."

"Sorry. I never intended to worry you. It's not that bad out here."

"The shed has extra supplies we should gather before the storm worsens," I say, my eyes drifting to the clouds rolling in. "Let's get you inside where it's cozy and dry."

As the wind picks up, keeping Ava comfortable and secure feels more important than anything else. Ava's shoulders tremble slightly as her eyes meet mine.

"I think I've gotten my fill of fresh air for now. If you don't start bossing me around, I'll come with you."

She adds a dramatic sigh to an exaggerated eye roll. Usually, her sassy attitude makes me want to bend her over my knee.

But now, with her nose pink from the cold and an impish grin spreading across her face, I want to get her warm and kiss every inch of her body.

"Wouldn't dream of it," I say.

"Do we have enough firewood?" she asks as we trudge toward the outbuilding, our breaths fogging the frigid air.

“Plenty at the cabin, but we’ll carry as much as we can manage.”

We reach the storage shed quickly, and I slide the door open. It won’t be as easy to open once the snow falls. Ava gathers supplies—cans of beans, potatoes, and other non-perishables, including smaller items like matches and batteries.

I take hold of the ax and begin chopping, each swing helping to funnel my frustration. The exertion quiets my racing thoughts as I split another log clean down the middle. But my bum shoulder and weak hand slow any progress.

I keep battling, ignoring the throbbing pain, wanting to wrap this up. Splinters fly everywhere, but the pile isn’t getting any bigger.

Frustrated, I tear off my gloves. A cleaner grip will help finish the job and get us out of the cold sooner.

“Are you certain that’s a good idea?” Ava asks, concern lacing her voice.

“I can handle it,” I say.

Ava arches an eyebrow but remains silent.

I don’t know if it’s true, but pride won’t let me admit defeat. I’m grateful I can be honest with Ava and not pretend to be okay.

I place a piece of firewood on the log and swing, but I hit it awkwardly. Pain lances through my injured shoulder, forcing me to drop the ax.

“Well, this is just great,” I grit through my teeth.

Ava’s voice rings out. “Carter! Are you all right?”

“Fine.”

“Show me,” Ava says, pointing at my hand.

“It’s nothing,” I mutter. I look up to see concern etched on her face.

“Look at your hand, Carter.”

A large splinter is stuck in the webbing between my fingers but fucked if I feel anything. “Doesn’t hurt.”

“We need to get it out,” she says with a determined look, rummaging through the first aid kit until she finds a pair of tweezers.

“It’s fine, Ava. Stop fussing.”

“What are you afraid of? That I’ll remove your masculinity along with the splinter?”

Disarmed by her sass, I relent. She removes her gloves and cradles my hand, scrutinizing it.

Her touch is so gentle, her fingers warm against my frozen skin, her hands steady as she works.

“Got it,” Ava announces triumphantly, holding up the splinter like a trophy.

“Good work,” I say, focusing on the pain in my finger rather than the ache in my chest.

“Good thing it wasn’t a rusty nail. You’re grouchy already; no need to add rabies to the mix.” Ava smiles, her eyes urging me to go on.

“Think I’d be frothing at the mouth, snapping at everyone?”

She winks playfully. “You mean more than usual?”

I laugh. “Thank you.”

She holds my gaze without flinching. “For?”

“Not treating me like I’m made of glass. For not walking on eggshells around me.” My voice is thick with emotion.

Her smile is warm and inviting, making my heart do strange things. “Someone has to keep you on your toes, Soldier Boy.”

My rough edges and thorny exterior don’t intimidate Ava—she doesn’t shy away. It’s equally thrilling and terrifying because she sees through me.

Although my shoulder aches, the pain in my chest eases. Maybe letting someone take care of me for once won’t kill me.

“Put your gloves on. Let’s get you back inside before you freeze.”

A light dusting of snow falls as we return to the cabin, our arms laden with supplies. I’m right behind her, stomping my boots before we stumble into the front hall.

“I’ll unload the wood and come back to help you,” I tell her.

Ava takes the supplies we brought back from the shed into the kitchen. I return to the hallway to remove my damp coat and find her waiting.

“Here, let me,” Ava says softly, brushing the snow coating my shoulders.

She’s so beautiful it makes my chest ache. The cold has painted a rosy blush onto her skin. Her bright eyes flicker with interest.

I lose myself momentarily as the undeniable heat simmering below the surface of my skin rises, igniting a primal urge, a need to get closer.

My heart hammers against my ribs.

“Listen, Ava,” I begin awkwardly, my voice gruff.

Words stick in my throat. I’ve never been good at expressing emotions, but I can’t hold back any longer.

“Can I?” I ask hoarsely, wanting to taste the sweet surrender on her lips.

Taking a deep breath, I brush my thumb over her wind-chapped lips. Her breath hitches as she nods consent, and her lips part in a silent invitation.

I brush my lips against hers. I’ll stop if she resists, but Ava leans into me with a moan that makes heat pool deep in my gut.

Her mouth is sweet relief against the bitter chill. Our kiss becomes passionate, our tongues exploring new territories.

I cup her face before trailing my hands down her sides, mapping her curves through the fabric of her clothing. They

slide down to rest securely on her hips, an anchor amid the storm of desire.

Ava winds her arms around my neck, pulling herself closer. Her body pressed against mine sends pleasure coursing through every nerve ending.

A soft whimper escapes Ava as I explore the sensitive nape of her neck with my teeth and tongue.

Desire crackles between us like a wildfire, threatening to consume everything in its path, leaving no room for thoughts, only sensations.

Ava's hand moves to my chest, and her fingers trace the outline of my muscles. Her touch is electric, making me grow harder.

My grip instinctively tightens on her hips. Her breathy moans drive my need higher, her every touch a delicious promise.

"Damn, Ava," I groan as she grinds against me.

Heat surges through my veins. The desire to take things to the next level is indescribable. It's like we're meant to be together—she completes me in a way I've never acknowledged.

Something in the back of my mind warns me we could get caught, but I ignore it, consumed by the growing need to make her mine.

I crave the thrill—the possibility someone could walk in and catch us heightens the intense moment. Let them find us. I don't care anymore.

I want to feel her, taste her, and share this perfect moment.

We break apart slowly, breathless and panting hard against each other's lips.

"Wow," Ava whispers against my lips as she looks up at me with those beautiful blue eyes that seem to hold all the secrets of the universe.

"Yeah," is all I can muster as a response before nuzzling the hair from her face. I'm afraid to break the fragile moment by moving too suddenly.

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CHAPTER 5

AVA

My pulse quickens as Carter tucks my hair back, his fingers trailing fire along my skin. I wet my lips, my throat dry. Slowly, drawn together like magnets, our faces drift closer until his breath whispers over my lips.

“Ava,” Carter murmurs before closing the gap.

Carter presses his lips to mine, sparking an electric current through my body. Years of suppressed longing fuel the kiss as it deepens, leaving me dizzy and breathless.

I’ve dreamed of this moment for so long, but the reality of Carter’s mouth slanting over mine is surreal. Like I’ll wake up any second, aching and alone. But the tingling heat of his palm now cupping my cheek is real. This is happening.

As we kiss harder, I clutch his broad shoulders to stay upright on my trembling legs. Carter grips my waist possessively, pulling me closer until I’m practically in his lap. My skin blazes everywhere we touch, hungry for more contact.

As his tongue brushes my lips, I melt against him. I’ve wanted this—needed him—for so long. His lips trace a searing path along my neck. Every nerve ending ignites. I arch into his touch, consumed with desire.

I tug at the hem of his shirt, craving the hard muscle underneath, when hesitation creeps in. Although unlikely this late, the others could still return and walk in on us at any moment.

And here I am, melting into Carter’s embrace—guilt wars with desire. How would I explain all this to Sarah?

I’ve never confessed my feelings for her brother, and if she found us together, would she feel betrayed? Hurt that I kept this from her? Although I was too shy and insecure to do it at the time, now I’m kicking myself.

As if sensing my sudden withdrawal, Carter stills. Foreheads touching, I keep my eyes closed, my heart hammering against

his chest. His ragged breath warms my tingling lips. We stay like that for a long time, breathing each other in.

“Are you okay with this?” he asks roughly. “We can stop—”

“I don’t want to,” I admit. “But they could come back at any moment and catch us.”

Carter sighs, caressing my hair until I meet his gaze again. “Why does it matter? We’re both adults. We can do what we want, Ava.”

He’s right. I laugh nervously. “I’m overthinking this, aren’t I?”

Carter must read the lingering doubt in my eyes because he says, “Nothing has to change between us. But I want you. I think you want me too. We don’t have to do anything you’re uncomfortable with.”

“I am comfortable, but let’s take it slow.”

Carter caresses my hair while his thumb traces delicate circles on my lower back. His touch is comforting. I nuzzle closer, inhaling the woody scent clinging to his soft flannel shirt.

“We’ll figure this out,” he murmurs. “Together.”

I cling to him, anchoring myself, letting his words sink in and reassure me. He wants me just as much but will go at my pace.

Hope blooms in my chest, drowning out the doubts. I nuzzle closer, and my doubts and guilt fade to background noise. All I can focus on is him. Us.

Carter captures my lips, longing etched into every urgent kiss, every feverish caress. With his arms around me, believing him is easy. I’m not alone in this terrifying, exhilarating wanting.

Lost in Carter’s passionate kisses, I float higher than ever, all my doubt erased. His arms envelop me as he whispers promises against my skin. I never want this moment to end.

But then Carter stills, brows knitting. He lifts his head, inhaling deeply and cursing under his breath.

“Do you smell that?”

“Dinner!” I exclaim.

In an instant, he’s on his feet, all soldierly focus. I cling to the doorframe, my legs weak and unsteady as he strides to the kitchen, taking charge.

Once the chaos subsides, Carter pulls me into his arms.

“I’m sorry, Sunshine. Got a bit carried away.”

I shake my head, my heart swelling. “It’s perfect. You’re perfect.”

I pour two generous glasses of wine with trembling hands.

“Cheers,” I say, raising my glass to Carter.

“Cheers,” he replies, clinking his glass against mine.

The alcohol burns my throat but does little to steady my nerves. If the crackling tension between Carter and I keeps building, I won’t have any restraint left.

I take another desperate gulp as my gaze drifts to the window. I press my palm to the cold glass. The wind howls, rattling the window like an angry spirit demanding entry.

“It’s getting worse out there,” I murmur.

Carter rakes a hand through his hair. When our eyes meet, he gives me a reassuring look.

“The cabin’s weathered storms before. We have enough supplies for a few days. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

His steadfast calm soothes me, as always, but doubt lingers. “I know you will. What about Sarah and the others?”

Carter checks his phone, his forehead creased in concern. “Still no word.”

The lights flicker, making me jump at the same time the door blows open, letting in a blast of icy air.

“It’s only the wind, but wait here while I check.” Carter wipes his hands before leaving the kitchen.

My chest tightens, the wine souring in my stomach. I switch on the TV in the kitchen and find a weather channel—a

graphic crawls on the lower screen with a blizzard warning flashing ominously in red.

Carter returns, and as if reading my thoughts, he squeezes my shoulder.

“Don’t worry about them. My sister married an ex-military specialist, remember? No way that ol’ boy isn’t prepared. They’re probably holed up somewhere cozy, drinking hot cocoa and playing board games.”

I laugh. “Of course.”

“It’s just you and me tonight,” he says, voice low, a crooked smile ghosting his lips.

Heat flames my cheeks. It’s probably histamines in the wine. “What will we do to pass the time?”

He leans in, his breath warm on my neck. “I can think of a few ways.”

I nod, a reckless thrill coursing through me as I take the bottle of wine to the fridge. Getting snowed in with the man I’ve been crushing on forever must be fate. If fate made her play, now it’s our move.

As I turn, Carter walks me backward until I’m pressed against the fridge door. I gasp and squirm, but he leans in, holding me in place with his hips. Any closer, and I won’t be able to breathe.

My heart pounds a fervent rhythm, echoing in the hollows of my chest. “What are you doing?”

“I want you, Ava,” Carter growls, his voice rough with need. “Tell me you want this too.”

I trace my fingers down his chest, feeling the feverish hammer of his heart matching mine. No more holding back from this all-consuming need.

“Yes. I want this. I want you.”

Carter searches my eyes, then smiles—a sexy, wolfish grin that tears away the final shred of resistance. Suddenly, his lips are on mine, hungrily seeking entrance.

As our lips crash together, I surrender completely to this night, come what may.

Our kiss deepens, his tongue tangling with mine. I taste the wine on him, rich and heady. Carter's hands are on my waist, pulling me closer.

My back arches as he licks my earlobe, trailing his kisses along the column of my neck.

My fingers tangle in his hair, drawing him closer as his hands roam my body greedily. He works his way lower, alternating hungry kisses with soft bites, branding my flesh and leaving tender marks.

My skin tingles and desire rushes through my body, exploding like fireworks.

Tracing every curve and dip from hip to shoulder, his hand slips under my shirt. His fingers caress my skin, sliding up until he's cupping my breast.

Carter's breathing becomes ragged as he rubs circles around my nipple, teasing it into a taut peak. The touch is new yet familiar.

He unbuttons my pants, and I lift my hips, allowing him to pull them off, then quickly discard my underwear. Without warning, he effortlessly hoists me up.

"Let me go!"

"Get used to my hands on you, Sunshine."

I squeal, and he places me on the cool kitchen counter. He chuckles, and the vibration slides down my spine before settling between my legs.

Giggling with exhilaration, I playfully protest, "It isn't very sanitary!"

A deep growl escapes his throat. "It's fitting."

I grab onto the edge of the counter. My breath is ragged.

Carter kneels in front of me, and his strong hands push my legs apart, nestling between my thighs.

“I’m going to make you feel so good,” he rasps, his lips trailing fiery kisses along my stomach.

I moan softly in response, wrapping my legs around his head. His mouth moves hungrily against me, and I gasp as he finds my core and begins working his magic.

Carter’s tongue traces circles over my clit before lapping at the sensitive nub, his warm breath fanning across my folds as he devours me.

His fingers tease and probe deeper, finding my G-spot and teasing it with precision, leaving me panting.

“Carter,” I whisper as heat builds, “don’t stop.”

He chuckles darkly against my wet core, his breath tickling my sensitive flesh.

“Yes,” I sigh, arching as my body quivers from the thrill he’s giving me.

My hips buck. His fingers dig into my thighs for leverage. I clutch his head, unable to hold off. All I can do is surrender to the sensations as waves of pleasure build to a crescendo.

“Come for me,” Carter whispers against my slick skin.

My body shudders with pleasure as my orgasm finally overtakes me.

I lie motionless, my breath coming in short rasps. It’s too soon when his touch lifts from me. I sit up slowly, my body still trembling.

“Carter,” I whisper, my voice still filled with desire. “That was incredible.”

A cocky grin spreads across his face.

“Good to know. I’ve got more tricks up my sleeve,” he rumbles, his voice laced with pride.

“I never knew it could feel this amazing,” I admit, my voice filled with wonder.

Carter caresses my cheek. “You deserve to feel this way, Ava.”

I lean into his touch, savoring the warmth of his hand against my skin.

My gaze locks with his, and I see something deep within him. I've always loved Carter, even from a distance, but now it's different.

A wave of clarity crashes over me, washing away my doubts and fears with pure, unyielding love. The stars are aligning, and I'm seeing him for the first time.

I'm ready to discover where this terrifying, exhilarating desire might lead.

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CHAPTER 6

CARTER

While the wind continues to howl outside, with snow piling higher by the minute, the temperature has shifted inside the cabin. I've crossed the line, acting on feelings I've kept hidden for years.

I stoke the fire to ward off the chill, marveling at how the dynamic has heated up with things going from frosty to cozy between us.

There's no telling how long we'll be cooped up before the blizzard passes. The news broadcast made the situation look grim.

But I'm not too beat up about it because I've wanted to spend time alone with Ava for a while now.

Ava is curled up on the couch, firelight dancing across her face and casting a warm glow over her skin. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear when she catches me staring.

I smile, enjoying the view. "Are you hungry?"

Ava gazes at me from under her lashes, a smile playing on her lips, her voice a husky tease. "Starving."

Heat floods me as I remember what we were doing in the kitchen earlier, our bodies pressed close, and her soft gasp as I explored every curve and contour, savoring the taste of her sweet nectar.

Holding her in my arms and tasting her sweetness only makes me want her more. I long to strip her bare, worship her completely, and make her mine the way I've dreamt of for so long.

There's no going back, but I'll respect her wishes if she wants me to stop. I need to play my cards right.

Get a grip. Breathe.

My hands curl into fists. Although we're alone in this cozy cabin, hidden away from the world, there's no need to rush.

It's taken years to get to this point. And a little luck. I want Ava to feel comfortable around me, and I need to earn her trust.

If we go further, it needs to be at her pace, and I won't ruin things now by losing control and making her believe I'm taking advantage of the situation. Because I'm not.

Ava deserves a better experience than having some grunt pawing at her like a beast. I want to show her I'm more than that.

I'll be a gentleman who treasures and protects her, not a brute overcome by passion.

"Come on," I say, searching for a distraction. "Let's eat."

I carry the food into the dining room, lit by the crackling fireplace. Ava has already set the table with candles, a bottle of wine, and cloth napkins. She sits opposite and watches me serve generous portions of steaming hot chili.

Her smile disarms me. "It smells delicious."

I rub my neck, avoiding her earnest gaze. "Thank you for cooking."

She uncorks the bottle, pouring two glasses. "Team effort."

"To us," I say, raising my glass.

She smiles. "To new beginnings."

My pulse kicks up a notch. She's something else—those eyes that dance when she laughs and a smile that could start a fire.

I shovel a hasty bite into my mouth, and focus my attention on appreciating the moment. Not on the way she looks in flickering candlelight. Or what I want to do when we're done eating.

I clear my throat, trying to think of a safe topic as she plays with the stem of her wine glass. But my mind keeps wandering. To the curve of her neck, the swell of her lips.

"Carter?"

Heat creeps up my neck. "Sorry, you were saying?"

“Where did you drift to?”

Her hand rests temptingly close to mine on the table. I drain my wine glass, needing something to occupy my hands. “Sorry, just distracted.”

“It looked like you were thinking about something interesting, and I want in on it.”

I meet her curious gaze, hoping my nonchalant tone will satisfy her prying. “Nothing worth sharing.”

Ava’s lips curve into a smile. “How long have we known each other? Talking with me shouldn’t be a chore. I bet if you tried harder, you could charm me.”

I lean back in my chair, placing the cutlery on the plate. “Poor Ava. Stuck in a cabin with me for entertainment.”

“I happen to love your company.”

“Why?” I laugh. “You’d get better conversation from a stone, I reckon. Sorry, Ava, but I’m no good at this.”

“Making conversation?”

I shrug but don’t say anything, further proving my point.

“Goodness knows I have a million questions to ask you. Ask me anything. I promise I won’t bite.”

She’s goddamn adorable. Once I stop laughing and catch my breath, I fiddle with my empty glass, searching for a casual way to ask the question on my mind.

“So, what do you have planned for the future when you return home?” I ask, keeping my tone light.

The conversation starter is hardly impressive, but I need to know if someone is waiting for her. My heart squeezes painfully.

Ava shrugs and traces delicate circles on the woodgrain. “You know, the usual routine—work, friends, same old, same old.”

“I understand routine, but I don’t know what yours looks like,” I say. “Tell me about your job. What are you doing for work these days? Sarah said you tried a few different things.”

Something shifts in her eyes. Her expression becomes flinty. “I bet she did. She’s always scolding me about it. Your sister thinks I can’t stick to one thing, that I’m restless, but it isn’t true.”

“You haven’t found the right thing yet,” I offer.

I study her bowed head, wishing I could read her thoughts. Does the idea of going back home excite her or make her feel trapped?

“That’s right.” She smiles, pointing her finger at me. “I found something I love doing, but it doesn’t pay the bills.”

I shake my head. “Yep. Little Miss Sunshine. You were always altruistic. It’s that soft heart of yours, but my sister is right. Love doesn’t pay the bills.”

“Unless you’re married to a sugar daddy,” she quips.

The beast inside me stirs. I don’t want to think about her with another man. “Is that likely?”

She glances up, surprise flitting across her face.

“A sugar daddy?” she asks incredulously. “Not my style. I’d rather eat glass than date a guy for his money.”

I refill both glasses, buying myself a few moments to decide how to continue.

I hold her gaze, willing her to confess if someone else has her heart. “No special someone to go home to then?”

Her voice takes on an edge. “What do you take me for? I’d have told you if there was.”

“Of course,” I mutter. Relief washes over me. Message received loud and clear.

A slow smile spreads across her face. “Besides, silly pants, no one makes me feel the way you do.”

My pulse quickens. I’m tempted to brush away the hair falling across her cheek but stop short.

I clear my throat and lean back. “Can you tell me more about this job you love?”

She drums her fingers on the table. “Well, how much time do you have?”

I smirk and glance out the window. “Take as long as you want,” I say dryly.

Ava’s eyes light up as she talks about teaching English classes at the local library.

“It’s so fulfilling to help adults gain skills that open up new opportunities for them,” she explains. “Some are immigrants, and others missed out on education when they were younger. It’s incredibly rewarding to see their confidence grow week after week.”

I nod, captivated by her passion. She’s always been so compassionate.

“I wish I could do it full time, but the pay isn’t enough to live on,” she continues. “So I piece together part-time jobs—tutoring, waiting tables, you name it. That’s why I’m always broke.”

She chuckles self-consciously.

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with that,” I reassure her. “Not everyone is motivated by money.”

She smiles gratefully. “Yeah, experiences are more important to me. Although I could do without the old, beat-up car,” she jokes.

I chuckle. “I’m surprised it’s still running.”

“Barely!” She laughs. “I need to give the duct tape holding it together a name.”

Her good humor is contagious. The moment lingers, our eyes locked. But the spell is broken as she looks away shyly.

“Anyway, enough about me,” she says, fiddling with her napkin. “I want to hear more about you. What will you do for work if you live in the mountains?”

“After a decade of working as a combat engineer, I want to try something new. I enjoy working with my hands.”

She giggles. “You’re certainly good with your hands.”

I give her a mischievous look. “Oh, you have no idea.”

Ava bites her lip. I love her playful tease. “So you build stuff now?”

I reach for my glass. “I’m a carpenter. I do everything from making bookshelves to remodeling homes.”

“No more dangerous work?”

“For sure.” I nod. “I’m out of the service for good.”

Her eyes flicker to my hand and back to my face. “It’s inspiring you found a new passion.”

I tense slightly, exposed by her perceptiveness.

Instinctively, my fingertips graze the scars through my shirt sleeve. I force a tight smile, debating how much to reveal. After a measured pause, I decide on a version of the truth.

Ava must’ve known I’d lost feeling in part of my hand when she had to dig out a splinter the size of baby Groot.

“Shrapnel wounds in my shoulder injured some of the nerves in my arm. Now, one hand isn’t as strong as it used to be.”

The lights flicker off and on again, interrupting our conversation. A look of unease flashes across Ava’s face as the room dims. Her brows knit and her shoulders tense. She turns her worried gaze to meet mine.

I’d do anything to take away her fears and bring a smile to her face. Keeping her spirits high is my priority.

I cast about for a distraction and remember her struggling with the heavy oak wardrobe in my room. “Did you finish unpacking?”

Color rises on her cheeks, and she looks away. “I did, but thanks for checking.”

“And if you need help moving furniture, just ask. I’d be happy to help.”

Ava toys with the edge of the tablecloth. “Do you think I was snooping?”

I smile, hoping to put her at ease. “I don’t mind if you were looking around. Treat the place like it’s yours. Mi casa es su casa.”

“And the mouse?”

“Remind me to set mousetraps when we finish dinner.” When I laugh, Ava does, too, and the tension eases from her expression.

“Yes, sir.”

Once we’re done eating, I gather up the empty plates and head to the kitchen. Ava trails after me, towel in hand, ready to dry the dishes. I steal glances at her as we stand side by side at the sink.

I could get used to having those expressive eyes focused on me every night. Sharing these little moments feels right.

Honestly, I want it all with her—marriage, family, the whole package because I’m greedy when it comes to her.

Lost in thought, I don’t notice Ava leaning across me to grab a wet glass until she playfully bumps her hip against mine. The contact sends a spark through me, and I hold back a groan.

“My bad,” she says with a cheeky grin.

“What? Not enough elbow room for you over there?” I joke.

“Not with your shoulders crowding me,” she shoots back before bumping me again.

“Careful, troublemaker. You don’t want to start something you’re not prepared to finish.”

She looks at me coyly through her lashes. “And what if I do?”

“In that case, I’d be happy to oblige,” I reply, matching her flirtatious tone.

She holds my gaze a heartbeat longer before grabbing another plate to dry. “Good to know.”

The power suddenly goes out, submerging us in darkness. Ava lets out a gasp. This time, it doesn’t come back on.

Instinct kicks in. “Okay,” I say, turning on the flashlight.

I'm not worried. I've been in worse situations than this, but I sense Ava's fear. Guilt twists my gut. I should have anticipated how frightened she might become.

I grasp her shoulders, rubbing warmth into her skin. "The generator will kick in soon. But I'll get the wood-burning stove going so we stay warm."

I can do this. I can take care of Ava and keep her safe. It's my time to shine. This is what I was made for.

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CHAPTER 7

AVA

Carter wraps an arm around me, holding me close against his sturdy frame.

“Hey, we’re safe but I need to check the back up power. Will you wait here?”

I try to ignore the nervous flutter in my stomach. “Okay.”

The candles from dinner provide light, but it’s eerie. The wood cabin creaks and groans under the strain of the howling wind.

I grip the counter to steady myself as the full weight of our isolation sinks in. My mind races with how long we could be stranded here—the two of us alone.

When Carter returns he doesn’t look happy. “I see the problem but I can’t fix it tonight.”

“Will we be okay?”

Carter squeezes my shoulder reassuringly. “We’re safe. Come with me. We’ll get the LED lanterns and check the cabin. Make sure everything’s locked down.”

The candles cast flickering shadows across Carter’s face as he checks the windows, fastening them tight. He clenches his jaw, his shoulders rigid with focus, his movements precise. He’s in his element, a man transformed, his voice laced with fierce urgency.

“Blankets. We need blankets.”

I nod, gathering whatever I can find as Carter surveys the cabin. I don’t remember when anyone took such care to protect me.

I feel utterly safe in his hands. He’s so capable, so strong—but at what cost?

I’m torn between admiration and sorrow. Carter’s skills were honed by living through danger. Beneath the capable exterior lies a heart that associates love with loss and strength with control. How much of his need for control is driven by fear?

With the final window checked, his shoulders drop a fraction as he exhales.

“Thank you for keeping me safe.” I squeeze his hand.

He squeezes back, but his brow furrows. “The generator didn’t kick in. The fire will keep us warm for now, but we need to bank it before turning in for the night. We’ll need to go to bed soon to preserve body heat.”

Heat creeps up my neck at the thought. Going to bed isn’t sexy, but it’s practical. I follow him down the shadowy hall to the bedroom.

When I begin to undress, I see a flicker of desire in his eyes. It’s instantly extinguished as he turns his back, finds a spare blanket and pillow, and settles on the armchair.

So stoic. Although Carter’s unlikely to admit it, he needs the closeness as much as I do tonight.

“We could share,” I say softly. “To stay warm.”

Relief flickers across his face. “Only if you’re sure.”

“I am.”

We prepare for bed in the dim light of the room, our movements slow and deliberate, our senses heightened to the other’s every shuffle and sigh.

I slip under the covers first, my pulse quickening as the soft rustle of clothing signals Carter’s undressing.

The mattress dips under his weight as his hand finds mine in the darkness. I lace my fingers through his, our palms kissing. His grip tightens as his breathing slows.

I hold my breath, lightly tracing my fingertips along his rugged jaw. He sighs with pleasure, head leaning heavily into my hand.

Our lips meet, sparking like tinder. Excitement thrums through my veins when his strong hands grip my waist, pulling me impossibly closer.

I slide my fingers through his thick hair, losing myself in the moment. He pulls away, our foreheads still touching, and his

taste lingers on my lips, as sweet as honey.

If there's one thing I've learned, it's that when your heart wants something, you need to be brave and grab it while you can. Nuzzling against his neck, I whisper his name.

He kisses the top of my head. "Anything you want, sweet Sunshine."

"Can I stop pretending I don't want you?"

"No more games. It's time we were honest with each other."

I'm relieved, but I need more. "I didn't think you liked me."

He blows out a breath. "Of course I did. You don't understand what it was like."

I need answers to questions that have been years in the making. "If you had feelings, why did you leave?"

His voice holds a desperate edge. "You were seventeen."

"Almost eighteen."

"Barely seventeen," he counters firmly.

There it is—proof confirming my suspicions. I was a teenager with a silly crush. I was too young for Carter to see me as anything other than his sister's friend.

"Okay. So you left because I was too—" I say before my voice cracks.

"Tempting," Carter finishes gently.

I nod. Being around me back then must have been agony for him, an impossibility.

"Like dangling a dripping steak in front of a hungry wolf," he adds with a playful, low growl.

I poke a finger into the center of his chest. "I'm not a piece of meat, and you're not a beast. You're a gentleman."

His thumb glides across my lower lip, leaving a trail of warmth in its wake. "Are you sure about that? Because if anyone found out what I was thinking about you when you were seventeen, I would've ended up in jail."

I bring my finger up to trace his jaw. “Oh, Carter.”

He swears under his breath. “You were so beautiful, so innocent, it hurt to look at you. Wanting you the way I did felt wrong somehow.”

He slides his hand around to cradle the back of my neck, his rough palm pressed against my skin. Slowly, he pulls my face toward his, his eyes searching mine, seeking permission.

“Do you get it now? I left because I wanted you, even though it killed me to stay away.”

His lips ghost my knuckles, begging for forgiveness or offering a benediction. He strokes my cheek so tenderly that it brings tears to my eyes. He respected me too much to give in. “I get it now.”

“But I’m back, and you’re here, and we’ll figure this thing out together, right?”

“Right. It’s a big step for people who are—you know.”

What are we? What is this exactly? Friends who become lovers? I know how I feel, but what does Carter want?

“New at this?” he suggests.

I laugh. “That’s it.”

“From now on, it’s just you and me,” he whispers, his breath warm on my cheek.

Enveloped in his strong embrace, I’ve never felt more at home. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He chuckles. “Good, because wild horses couldn’t drag me away from you. I’m afraid you’re stuck with me.”

I throw my arms around him, laughing breathlessly. “Of course, you big idiot. I’ve been yours since the day we met!”

He flips me onto my back and climbs on top of me. I feel a tingle between my thighs, and a whoosh of air leaves my lungs.

“I can’t resist you anymore,” he growls, his hot breath on my neck sending shivers down my spine.

“Then have me,” I gasp, ready to give myself over completely.

I look up at Carter and see the desire in his eyes, matching my own. He grins and claims my lips, pressing his body against mine. His tongue pushes into my mouth, hungrily seeking entrance. I moan into his mouth, fingers winding through his tousled hair.

With our lips locked, our kisses grow more heated. There’s no time to waste. Our kisses grow more heated as we tear at each other’s clothes.

“God, I love this,” he murmurs against my lips before moving down my neck.

He grazes his teeth over me, and I arch into him. His fingertips lightly caress up my side, brushing my breast before taking a firmer hold on my nipple.

The sensation sends a wave of heat through my body as his touch burns me from the inside out. Skin on skin, we move together with an urgency bordering on desperation.

“Carter,” I breathe, “please. I want you.”

He palms my heavy breasts, his lips trailing and grazing over my skin.

“So beautiful,” he murmurs before he’s devouring me.

He kisses and licks the tight buds of my nipples. One side receives a hard bite, then the other, leaving two distinct marks on my skin.

“Carter,” I plead, not knowing what I’m begging for. Only that I need more. And I need it now.

He lets out a low growl. “We should have talked about this before. I don’t have a condom.”

“It’s okay,” I whisper. We’re caught up in our desire, and I don’t want to stop. “I’m on the pill.”

He holds my gaze, searching for any sign of doubt. “Are you absolutely sure?”

I take a deep breath and meet his intense stare.

“I’m sure, Carter,” I reply with conviction. “I want this. I want you.”

A hint of relief flashes across his face before he leans in to kiss me. “I’m clean, baby. It’s been a long time since I’ve been intimate with anyone.”

My heart swells with love for him as I nod. He’s the only one I want, the only one I’ve ever wanted.

“You’re my first, Carter,” I say softly.

He growls and shifts position. His hard length notches at my entrance. I’m finally feeling him where I know he belongs.

“Ava,” he says hoarsely, “do you have any idea what you’re doing to me?”

He slowly eases into me. I gasp against his lips at being stretched for the first time. I wrap my arms and legs around him, never wanting to let go. He slides in the rest of the way in one smooth motion. I’m full, so deliciously full.

As he starts to move, pleasure rushes through my body.

I tilt my head back, letting out a soft moan. “Kiss me,” I whisper, lost in the moment with him.

His lips are on mine as I push into him, rocking my hips to get the friction my body is begging for—what it’s been craving for years.

We move together, our tempo increasing as the sensations build. His strokes become more urgent as he pushes deeper and deeper into me, his body trembling with need.

He puts his head next to mine, temple to temple, and keeps an even pace. His heavy breaths come out in short bursts against the heated skin of my neck.

Slow but steady, he thrusts his hips and fucks me like I’ve always dreamed he would.

“Harder. Deeper,” I whisper, my body trembling.

He grunts but doesn’t speed up or slow down. He grinds harder, hitting the absolute perfect spot.

“Feel good?” He swivels his hips, and my eyes roll back into my head.

I start to say, “Yes, it feels amazing,” when he quickly pulls out and slams back in. “God, you feel perfect.”

His hands roam freely over my body, one hand teasing my breast while the other travels lower, finding its way between us to rub at my clit.

“Fuck, baby. You ready?”

I’m close, and it’s so good, much better than I could have imagined. “Yes.”

“I’ve got you,” he says against my mouth. “Come for me.”

My eyes are screwed shut, and when he pinches my nipples, I explode. “Carter!”

“Good girl.” He encourages. “Come with me. I need you to come with me, baby.”

And I do.

Carter shudders as he follows me over the edge, his body trembling as he finds his release. Together, we slip into the liminal space where only the two of us exist. Only us, our souls connected, our bodies united as one beating heart.

I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, this man was made for me. The years of waiting, the nights I feared he’d never reciprocate my love, the agony of my heart falling apart—was worth it.

What am I supposed to do about the incriminating letters that teenage me wrote while fantasizing about an imaginary wedding?

“Hey, Carter. Funny story—I was your stalker and saved a creepy bundle of letters tied with a ribbon to prove it.”

I’m rocking a hazmat suit full of secrets. While I should be blissfully relaxed, I want to google how to fake my death and move to Mexico.

Why did past me make present me’s life so difficult?

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CHAPTER 8

CARTER

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I sit up and find Ava studying my face, a soft smile lighting up her eyes.

“Hi,” she whispers.

“Hi, yourself,” I reply, rolling over. “Have you been awake long?”

“Not long.” Her smile deepens.

I tuck a stray curl behind her ear, struck by her beauty. It’s as if we exist in a private world cocooned by snow, and I want to treasure every second.

“Are you hungry?” she asks. “The others could arrive soon if the roads clear.”

My stomach rumbles, but I cling to her underneath the covers. “I’d rather stay right here with you.”

She laughs, her eyes glinting. “Come on, lazybones. We can’t spend the day in bed.”

With a dramatic groan, I pull her closer. “How could you leave this warm nest?”

Her lips graze my cheek. “The day is waiting, Carter. Up and at ‘em, big guy.”

The thought of venturing into the storm is unappealing, but the generator needs attention, and we need breakfast.

Reluctantly, I peel back the blankets and climb out of our rumpled bed, immediately missing her warmth.

At the frosted window, I watch the snow swirl, blanketing the world in white, like a magical winter wonderland.

“We’re living inside a snow globe,” Ava says from behind me as she slides on one of my old sweaters.

It’s too large for her frame, but she makes it look perfect. Our eyes meet, and a spark of desire shoots through me.

“It doesn’t look like anyone will get through yet,” I say as I cup her face.

Ava frowns. “Am I being selfish for wishing they’d stay away longer? What kind of person does that make me?”

“You’re not selfish or bad,” I whisper. “Truth is, I feel the same. I just got you, and I’m not ready to share you.”

Reassured, she smiles and leans in to kiss me tenderly.

Eventually, we go downstairs. I flick a light switch, but nothing happens. The power is still out.

“Guess we’ll have to make do without electricity,” Ava says, smiling at me in the candlelight.

“There’s a gas cooker in the shed. I’ll grab it and see if I can figure out what went wrong with the backup power.”

I pull her in for one more lingering kiss, not yet ready to face the day. With great reluctance, I head out into the cold, already missing her and wondering how she got so deep under my skin so quickly.

After getting the generator working again, I head back inside, drawn by the promise of Ava’s company. We spend the morning cooking up a storm in the kitchen, laughing and joking as we prepare a feast.

Ava is a natural in the kitchen, whipping up perfect fluffy pancakes and frying the bacon just right.

“We can eat by the fire,” she suggests, carrying the food into the living room.

We settle onto the floor before the flames, their warmth seeping into our bones. The fire crackles as we eat in comfortable silence. It feels natural, as if we’ve been doing this cozy routine for years instead of a day.

Without thinking, I reach for her hand, lacing our fingers together. Our eyes meet, and we share a smile.

“I can’t imagine going through this blizzard with anyone but you, Ava.”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be,” she says.

I'm struck by a thought and chuckle under my breath.

"What's so funny?" Ava asks.

I study her lovely face, feeling like the luckiest man alive. "We could be on a beach in the Bahamas right now."

Ava grins and nudges me playfully. "Us on a tropical vacation? We'd either be sunburnt lobsters or hiding in the shade. I prefer being in this cozy cabin with you."

"I bet you won't say that in a few days if we're only eating canned beans," I tease.

She giggles. "As long as we're together, that's paradise enough for me."

I brush my lips softly against hers. She melts into the kiss, validating all my unspoken feelings with the caress of her mouth on mine.

I'm tempted to pull Ava back upstairs, eager to pick up where we left off, but we have the whole day ahead.

We clear the dishes, stealing glances and touches as we move around the kitchen. After breakfast, although I'd love to take Ava on a winter walk through the snow-covered woods or explore the cabin together, the weather rages on outside.

We lounge on the sofa, listening to the wind howl. I wrap my arm around Ava as she snuggles into my side, head resting perfectly in the crook of my shoulder. I breathe in the sweet scent of her hair and sigh contentedly.

"This is nice," she murmurs.

I smile and kiss the top of her head. "I wish we could stay like this all day."

Eventually, we reluctantly peel ourselves off the couch in search of entertainment. Since we're stuck inside, I suggest a game of cards to pass the time.

But my mind is already wandering, thinking of other ways Ava and I can keep each other warm.

Ava suddenly turns to me with a mischievous glint in her eye. "Have you ever played strip poker?"

“Strip poker, huh?” I chuckle. “I’m game if you are.”

As we play, I watch intently as Ava bites her lip in concentration, her eyes narrowing as she studies her cards.

“Who taught you how to play?”

Ava smirks, her eyes dancing. “Your sister and I used to play with some boys from—”

“Spare me the details!” I interject, mock outrage in my tone as I pretend to cover my ears. No way do I want to imagine Ava stripping down with other guys.

Ava winks mischievously. “Relax. They were nothing compared to you.”

Her words reassure me as she leans in for a lingering kiss.

“Is that so?” I ask playfully. “Did you keep your clothes on during those games?”

“I never lost a single round. The guys were always the ones stripping down, not me.” She stares at me like she’s issuing a challenge.

“Hmm, we’ll see about that,” I say as I shuffle the cards. “I’m an excellent poker player.”

“Bring it on,” Ava challenges with a smirk.

We play the first hand, and I have a decent starting pair. I bet confidently, but Ava doesn’t back down. At the showdown, she reveals a flush, and my jaw drops as I stare at her cards in disbelief.

“Read ‘em and weep!” Ava crows delightfully. “Time to pay up!”

With a dramatic sigh, I slowly peel off one sock.

“Not exactly stripping, but it’s a start,” she teases.

I wag my finger at her. “Just you wait. I’m going to wipe that grin off your face soon.”

We continue playing, the stakes rising with each hand. Ava has luck on her side as she wins another round.

I drum my fingers, pretending to look upset. “You know, I’m starting to think you may be cheating.”

A teasing smile tugs at her lips. “Me? Cheat? I would never!”

I lean in to kiss her cheek, nuzzling my nose against hers. She sighs happily, momentarily distracted.

Back and forth, the game continues. I completely forget about the outside world, caught up in the thrill of the moment.

On the next hand, the tables turn. I get a full house and nail it. Ava’s jaw drops.

“Yes!” I pump my fist, elated.

With an exaggerated eye roll, she slowly peels off her sweater, revealing a lacy camisole underneath. I let out a low whistle. This game is getting better by the minute.

“I don’t believe you. I demand a rematch!” Ava tackles me playfully, and we collapse in a laughing tangle of limbs on the rug.

I pin her down, holding her hands above her head. As she squirms beneath me, my fingers find a ticklish spot on her ribs.

Ava squeals, trying unsuccessfully to wriggle away. “No fair, stop!”

But I show no mercy, my fingers dancing mercilessly over her ribcage as she laughs uncontrollably.

“Give up?”

“Okay, okay, I concede!” Ava gasps between giggles.

I let her catch her breath, but I have a feeling I’ll enjoy this even more than winning. I throw off my shirt, unable to stand the heat. Ava does the same, baring her stomach and breasts to the cool air.

“You’re so beautiful,” I breathe, fingers ghosting over the curve of her breast.

Ava shivers, eyes clouding with desire. “Show me how much you want me.”

I kiss her, my lips leaving a trail of wet kisses down her neck and collarbone. She shivers when I skim my fingertips over her breasts. Her nipples are already stiff little peaks.

I swirl my tongue around her nipple before tracing the curve of her breast with my tongue. She moans, and I feel her heart pounding against her ribs.

I trail kisses down her stomach, silently marveling at how soft her bare skin feels against my lips. She tastes like heaven, and I can't get enough of her sweet body.

When Ava kisses my jaw and throat, any restraint I had shatters. I need Ava, all of her, and I need her now. I capture her mouth again, pinning her beneath me as I lose myself in her intoxicating taste and scent.

My fingers trail up her legs, lingering on her smooth thighs before slipping between her legs. She gasps, panting as my fingers tease her sensitive flesh. She's dripping and ready for me.

Gently, I press two fingers inside, relishing the sounds she makes. I increase my tempo, and she throws her head back, body quivering with anticipation.

Our bodies align, heat building between us, and she grinds against me with a throaty moan.

Ava's hand moves down to my chest, her fingers tracing the outline of my muscles. Her touch is electric, and I grow harder with every stroke. Without a word, she leads me down the hallway to her bedroom.

I follow willingly, the heat between us burning hotter with each step. Once inside, she pushes me onto the bed before straddling me. Her eyes are dark with desire, and I can feel her heat against my thighs.

"Let me be bad, soldier boy," she whispers before kissing me deeply.

Ava traces patterns on my chest and stomach before latching onto my neck, sucking and nipping lightly, sending jolts of pleasure straight to my cock.

I pull her closer, savoring the feel of her tongue against mine. I can't remember ever feeling this way before—unrestrained, unhinged, free. She reaches between us, fumbling with my pants before finally freeing my aching cock.

She takes charge, wrapping her fingers around me and tightening her grip around my length. I groan as she strokes me, her touch sending waves of pleasure through my body.

Her rhythm is slow and steady, her touch enough to drive me wild. It takes every ounce of restraint not to thrust into her fist. But then it will all be over, and I want to make it last.

I hitch her legs around my hips, positioning myself at her entrance.

“Fuck, Ava,” I moan, my fingers digging into her hips. One hand cups her breast while the other eases me into her warm depths.

“Shh,” she whispers.

She lets out a soft moan as I flip her over, my strong hands guiding her body beneath mine. She whimpers as I stretch her gently, her walls hugging me tightly in a vise-like grip.

Her soft gasp tightens something deep within me. I let out a satisfied groan when her body tenses around mine.

We move together, our bodies fitting perfectly.

The sensation of skin on skin is like coming home. But I force myself to move slowly, keeping my eyes locked on hers. Ava exhales, her breath a warm whisper on my neck.

“I feel like I'm flying when I'm with you,” she breathes, her hands running along the lines of my back.

Our eyes meet, and my chest tightens with emotion. Her arms wrap around me tighter as we move together.

“Christ, Ava, I—” Words fail me as I slide into her, and our breaths become one.

“I'm close,” she gasps, her body trembling with pleasure.

My orgasm is building. I'm not far behind.

Ava buries her face in my neck as wave after wave of pleasure washes over her. With a final cry, I follow her over the edge, and we come together, our bodies shaking with the force of our release.

“That was incredible,” she says quietly, tracing circles on my chest with her finger. I nod before pressing my lips against hers in a soft kiss.

We lie there for a long time, neither of us wanting to move. Finally, Ava props herself up on one elbow.

“Hey,” she says suddenly, breaking the silence.

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CHAPTER 9

CARTER

This thing between us started as a tender exploration, but it's become so much more. I can't pull away; it's already too late. Holding Ava, her body fitted to mine, we're like two puzzle pieces.

There's no turning back, and why would I want to? Ava is a blessing. My once-frozen heart belongs to her, and I never want to let her go.

Ava props herself up on one elbow.

"Hey," she says suddenly, breaking the silence. "Can I ask you something?"

I hold her hand tenderly. "Sure."

Ava's eyes search mine, open and vulnerable. "Have you ever wanted something so badly it scares you?"

She's put herself out there, taken a risk. How can I do any less? I take a deep breath.

"You're not the only one," I say quietly.

Ava's eyes came alive. "I have a confession to make."

Curiosity tingles through my veins. We haven't talked about what's happening between us. I don't want to spoil things with any more misunderstandings.

I lean in, urging her on. "What is it?"

A smile tugs at the corners of her lips. "I'm falling in love with you."

I hold her gaze, my eyes mirroring her vulnerability. Words are not enough. Actions are the truest testament of love. I gently cup her face, my touch reassuring her in a way my words never will.

I take her hand, intertwining our fingers together. "I'm falling for you, too."

She kisses the corner of my mouth, a feather-light brush of her lips. “I’ve wanted you since the day we met. I was waiting for you to see me as more than your sister’s friend.”

“I’m sorry it took me so long,” I say ruefully. “Turns out I can be pretty stubborn. And blind.”

“You’re here now.” Ava rests her head on my chest again with a contented sigh. “That’s all that matters.”

My heart swells with emotion. I gently cradle her face in my hands and kiss her deeply. Our kisses grow more passionate as we get caught up in each other.



THE DAY PASSES QUICKLY, AND LATER THAT NIGHT, I WATCH Ava’s chest rise and fall with each breath as she curls up against me. Marveling at how perfectly she fits in my arms, it’s easy to forget everything else when she’s like this—so trusting and vulnerable.

Ava is silent as I trace my fingers along her arm. Suddenly, her body tenses. Slowly, she lifts her head, brow furrowed—something is troubling her.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, gently tilting her chin up.

Ava bites her lip. “What happens to us when the storm ends and everyone returns?”

“You’re worried about telling Sarah, aren’t you?”

“She’s my best friend, like a sister. But what if she disapproves of this?” She gestures between us.

“Why wouldn’t she approve? You two tell each other everything.”

“This is different. I’ve never told her how I feel about you. I don’t want to ruin our friendship.” Ava’s voice wavers, and she blinks back tears.

My protective instincts surge. I pull Ava close, stroking her hair. “Sarah loves you and wants you to be happy. And if I make you happy—”

Ava bites her lip. “I’m happier than I’ve ever been.”

I kiss her forehead, wishing I could shield her from all harm and the doubt clouding her eyes.

“Let’s not worry about it,” I soothe. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

I’m baffled as to why she believes our relationship will drive a wedge between her and my sister. But I make a silent vow—whatever happens, when the others return, I’ll stand by Ava’s side. No one will take her from me, not even her best friend. I won’t allow it.

Her hair spills across the pillow, framing her delicate face. I brush a stray lock from her cheek, my knuckles grazing her skin.

She’s so peaceful, so beautiful, not only on the outside but inside as well. She’s warm, open, and giving—her soul shines as bright as the sun.

Her eyelids flutter, heavy with sleep. “Goodnight.”

I hold her close, savoring her warmth, and press my lips to Ava’s forehead.

“Night, Sunshine.”

She snuggles closer, curling into me and tangling our legs together. Even in the darkness, I feel her smile.

Ava’s worked her way into my heart and soul in a short time, becoming my entire world. Or maybe, on some level, it’s always been like this, and I was too stubborn to acknowledge it.

I’ve never experienced this depth of connection before, even believing myself incapable. Ava has proven me wrong, but the thought of losing her when the storm ends and everyday life resumes terrifies me.

The morning will bring its challenges. Life is messy, and hearts are fragile. I wanted solitude up here, but without Ava, the world is a cold and lonely place.

Going back to that bleak existence is not an option. She's essential, and I won't let her go. Not now, not ever.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a wicked voice whispers, *you don't deserve her, not with the terrible, violent things you've done. If she saw the monster, she wouldn't love you.*

She wouldn't love me because Ava is everything beautiful in this world, and I'm—not.

I sigh heavily.

Ava stirs in her sleep, her cheek resting against my chest. She snuggles closer, her arm draped over my waist, her breath fanning my chest.

She smells like vanilla and sugar cookies. Like Christmas. My heart swells. It's like she's branded herself onto me. I trace the outline of her cheek. She stirs but doesn't wake.

I pray to whatever deity is listening that I don't screw this up. That I can be good enough for her and protect her from the darkness that still lingers inside me.

The doubts in my head quiet down to whispers, eventually stopping altogether. They'll return, but I'm grateful for a few moments of bliss.

With Ava in my life, the dark memories don't seem as heavy. The past can't touch me here, and the future doesn't seem as bleak.

I'm done playing it safe. I'm done being the guy who walks away from the one thing he wants the most. I'm done reacting and hiding behind excuses.

I'm ready to take charge of my destiny. And that destiny, I realize, includes Ava.

A profound sense of peace settles over me. I wish I could freeze this moment and stay here forever, safe in our own little world.

Everything feels possible in this quiet space between midnight and dawn. There's only here and now and the beautiful, fragile woman sleeping in my arms.

With her trustingly nestled in my embrace, it isn't long before I drift to sleep.

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CHAPTER 10

AVA

I tap my chin thoughtfully as Carter and I finish breakfast, wondering how we'll pass the time. He's going stir-crazy trapped indoors, but we're making the best of things.

My eyes drift to the well-stocked pantry. "What should we do today?"

"Same as yesterday and the day before," Carter grumbles.

"Thanks to you, Mr. Grinch, at least we have electricity."

"True."

I give him my most persuasive smile. "Want to bake some cookies?"

He raises an eyebrow as if to say, *really, Ava?*

I bite my lip to keep from laughing out loud. Carter's grumpy facade might fool other people, but under the gruff exterior, his heart is as warm and gooey as a freshly baked cookie.

He finishes his coffee in one swig and rises from his seat. He's making a big show of annoyance, but I see the twinkle in his eye as he gathers ingredients—chocolate chips, butter, and eggs.

I grab the flour and sugar, nudging him playfully with my hip as we bump around the small kitchen. He's a big softie under that grumpy exterior.

"So, chief baker," Carter says, rolling up his sleeves, "how do we begin this operation?"

I measure the quantities we need before handing him a bowl and spoon. "First, we cream the butter and sugar. Make sure you mix it well, but not too much. We don't want tough cookies."

He gives an exaggerated salute. "Aye, aye, Captain Bossy."

"Hey! Baking is serious business."

Carter mixes vigorously, getting more batter on himself than he keeps in the bowl.

I stifle my laughter. “Yikes, Hulk, don’t smash it too hard!”

I take the spoon and teach him a smoother technique. We work side by side, measuring and mixing until it’s blended. Carter makes a big show of carefully placing extra chocolate chips on each cookie.

I roll my eyes at him, but he’s adorable.

Once the cookies are baking, we start on brownies. When Carter opens the bag too vigorously, a puff of flour hits me in the face.

“You did that on purpose!”

Carter smirks. “Prove it.”

I flick a spoonful at him, leaving a white splotch on his shirt. Soon, we’re in an all-out war, laughing and scooping up flour and sugar to launch at each other.

We’re both covered head to toe when we collapse against the counter, laughing like kids. Carter looks so carefree and happy. I fall for him a little more, as if that were possible.

“We’d better get the brownies in the oven and clean up,” I tell him.

Carter grabs a wooden spoon and holds it like a microphone. “Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to Carter’s Kitchen, the source of all things decadent and delicious!”

I lean against the counter and watch him work.

“Now observe as I sift this flour like so, using a controlled yet sexy wrist action,” he purrs.

I burst out laughing. “Too bad we don’t have a camera. That tease would go viral for sure!”

Carter winks, and I play along, nodding earnestly as he continues.

“We’ll need two cups of sugar for this recipe because it’s sweet, just like my lovely assistant Ava.”

I stifle a giggle, folding my arms across my chest and watching the rest of the show. When the brownies are in the oven, Carter pulls me close, and we sway to imaginary music as we dance through the flour-streaked kitchen.

“We make a pretty good team, Miss Ava,” he murmurs in my ear.

I lean into him, baking messes forgotten. “The very best. We’re like peanut butter and chocolate.”

Carter smiles. “Hot chocolate and marshmallows.”

“Sugar and spice?” I venture.

“Everything nice,” he finishes, making us both laugh again.

Spending time with Carter feels so easy, so right. As if reading my mind, he caresses my cheek.

“I’ve never laughed like this with anyone. How did I get so lucky to be snowed in with the perfect woman?”

My heart swells so it’s fit to burst. “Takes one to know one.”

The oven timer dings. The warm scent of chocolate fills the air, making my mouth water in anticipation.

Carter selects a warm, melty cookie for me to taste. “Open wide.”

When I bite, he smears chocolate on my nose.

“You’re gonna pay for that.”

Carter’s eyes linger on my lips, and his eyes darken. The atmosphere shifts, charged with a different energy as he pulls me against him and silences me with a chocolatey kiss.

I melt into Carter’s arms, and his lips are soft and warm against mine.

The kitchen fades away as he deepens the kiss, his tongue sliding against mine. His strong hands grip my hips, pulling me tighter to him.

I cling to his muscular shoulders, flour handprints staining his shirt. He tastes like chocolate chip cookies, sweet and addictive.

Carter lifts me onto the counter, and I wrap my legs around his waist. His hands slide under my shirt, caressing the bare skin of my back. I arch into his touch, my breath coming faster.

His kisses trail down my neck and along my collarbone, each one sending sparks through my body.

When he pulls my shirt over my head, his eyes blaze as they rove over my body. I feel beautiful and desired under his gaze as I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing myself against him.

He leans in for another kiss, this one slow as our tongues explore each other hungrily. His hands roam my body greedily, kneading and caressing every curve.

I moan softly into his mouth, and desire spreads tendrils of heat low in my belly.

I break the kiss to trail my lips down his stubbled jaw to his neck, nipping at the sensitive skin there.

I tug his shirt, needing to feel his skin on mine, and he helps me pull it over his head.

His eyes lock with mine, dark with desire but also full of tenderness.

“Ava,” he rasps.

I run my hands over the defined muscles of his chest and abs before bringing his mouth back to mine. He groans, gripping my hips harder, grinding me against the ridge in his jeans.

He breaks away from the kiss to slide off my shirt and bra before returning to capture my lips. I moan as he circles one nipple with his thumb, then takes it into his mouth, sending shock waves through my body as he sucks and teases it with soft licks of his tongue.

He moves to the other side and repeats the torture before making a slow trail down my stomach with kisses until he reaches my waistband.

I lift my hips so he can remove my pants and underwear in one swift motion, leaving me exposed to his heated gaze.

“Carter,” I breathe against his lips.

My need for him is overwhelming. My hands go to his belt, fumbling impatiently.

Sensing my urgency, he helps me, muttering in a husky voice, “Tell me you’re ready.”

“I’m always ready for you,” I whimper.

With a groan, he slides inside me, filling me up. My legs tighten around his waist, pulling him deeper as his heart thrums in sync with mine.

Carter’s possessive eyes stay locked on mine as his hips slip back and forth, building a slow but steady rhythm. I gasp as pleasure coils inside me, setting my skin alight with desire. His mouth finds mine again, devouring me in desperate kisses.

Strong hands grip my waist, holding me close as we climb higher and higher. We move together hungrily, every thrust sending electric sparks throughout my body.

Exquisite heat builds between us as his thrusts become harder, his rhythm choppy now. I cling to his shoulders as the intensity reaches a peak, and waves of pleasure swell to an inevitable crash.

With one final thrust, I cry out his name and shatter into a million beautiful pieces.

My head falls against his shoulder as he follows close behind me with a guttural groan. He slows the pace until finally, our bodies are still.

We stay like that—his arms creating a protective circle—until our breathing evens out and the lingering heat fades.

What we’ve started in this flour-dusted kitchen won’t be a fling. It’s something real. Something lasting.

But if he wants to keep fucking me on the kitchen counter, I’d better start buying industrial-grade cleaning products.



LATER THE SAME EVENING, CURLED BENEATH A BLANKET BY the fire, I try to focus on my book. But my eyes keep straying to Carter sprawled beside me, completely engrossed in a paperback. His brow is furrowed, and his lower lip is caught between his teeth.

I crane my neck to see the cover—a romance novel! After a few pages, Carter’s eyes suddenly blow wide. He lets out a strangled cough and snaps the book shut.

I giggle. “Steamy scene?”

“I think it might’ve permanently scarred my brain,” Carter mutters, scrubbing his face.

“Let me see,” I say playfully, grabbing the book.

Carter laughs and holds it out of reach. “No way, it’s too embarrassing!”

Laughing, we wrestle over the book. I manage to peek at a paragraph that mentions “throbbing manhood.” One of these days, I need to introduce him to good-quality smut.

“No judgment,” I tease, poking his side. “Maybe you should try a nice wholesome Amish romance next?”

He barks out a laugh at that suggestion. “I might need a palate cleanser after this steamy stuff.”

“Have you read the Jack Reacher series? It’s so slick and suspenseful.”

“I burned through those books while on deployment.”

His eyes take on a faraway look before he shakes it off and goes to the bookshelf.

He rummages around the shelf, eventually pulling out a worn copy of Stephen King’s “The Shining.”

He grins. "This should do it."

I shudder. "I don't know how you can read that stuff. It gives me nightmares."

Carter chuckles and puts it away, returning with a thick, leather-bound volume. "What about this?"

I squint at the title. "The Count of Monte Cristo?"

Carter nods, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "It's a classic. Revenge, adventure, romance. You'll like it."

I run my fingers over the cover. "I've never read it."

"I'll read it to you," he says, settling onto the couch and flipping it open.

His voice is deep and soothing. The way his eyes scan the pages, taking in each word before bringing the story to life, is mesmerizing.

I snuggle deeper into the blanket, content and safe. After a while, my eyelids grow heavy. But as I drift off, Carter touches my cheek, gently rousing me from my drowsiness.

"Hey," he says softly, his voice rough with emotion. "I can't remember the last time I smiled or laughed this much. Being here with you is so special."

The honest sentiment makes my heart flutter. "For me, too."

He takes a deep breath, his gaze never leaving mine.

"We've been friends for a long time, but I can't ignore how I feel anymore. I need to tell you something."

I prop myself up on my elbow, studying his face. His eyes are dark and intense, his lips pressed into a thin line.

"What is it?"

"I love you."

"I love you too," I whisper, hardly daring to believe he feels the same way I do.

And then his mouth is on mine, his kiss fierce and hungry. I lose myself in the heat of his embrace.

Outside, the storm rages on, but inside, we're consumed by a different tempest.

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CHAPTER 11

AVA

Later that night, I jerk awake to Carter's anguished cries. He thrashes in his sleep, trapped in the throes of a nightmare.

I grab his shoulders and shake him firmly.

"Carter, wake up!"

His eyes fly open, wild and unseeing, and his muscular chest heaves with each ragged breath. He looks so vulnerable—nothing like the stoic man I know.

"Hey, it's okay. You're safe," I murmur soothingly.

I wrap my arms around him and hug his body close. I stroke his sweat-dampened hair until his rapid breathing slows.

"Only a bad dream," he mumbles, avoiding my gaze.

His body is tense, poised for flight.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I ask gently as he trembles in my embrace.

Carter glances away, a muscle in his jaw ticking.

"Nothing to say. Try to get some rest," he mutters, his voice gruff. "Forget this ever happened."

I reluctantly settle under the covers, keeping a little distance to give Carter space. My mind spins with concern as I listen to his breathing eventually even out in sleep.

In the morning, Carter is already up and dressed when I wake. I find him sipping coffee in the kitchen, his handsome face unreadable.

"Hey, you," I say carefully. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," he replies automatically, avoiding my eyes. He's closed himself off, hiding behind the solitary facade again.

We go through our morning routine quietly. Carter responds if spoken to but makes no other attempt at conversation. Cold

distance replaces the easy intimacy we've shared over the past few days.

As we prepare a simple lunch, I can't hold back any longer. "Carter, about last night—"

"Nothing more to discuss," he says tersely, turning away. But I catch a brief flicker of pain cross his face.

I reach for his hand, relieved when he doesn't immediately pull away.

"Please don't shut me out," I plead. "Let me be here for you."

Carter's shoulders slump. He rubs a hand over his weary eyes and finally says, "I need time to process."

Although it pains me to see him hurting, I won't push.

"I understand. But whenever you're ready to talk more, I'm here."

He nods, giving my hand a gentle squeeze before dropping it.

I resolve to provide Carter with space today but make sure he knows I'm ready to listen and offer support when he needs me.

But as the day wears on, the gulf between us widens. Carter remains coolly distant, shrugging off my attempts to bridge the gap.

It's as though yesterday's sweetness, our fun in the kitchen, his confession of love, all of it, was a dream. Like none of it existed.

It isn't true, but what he's dealing with is significant. I can support him and find the right people to help, but I need him to trust me. To trust us.

As evening falls, I've had enough of the cold shoulder treatment. If Carter won't come to me, I'll go to him.

Without a word, I march up to him and wrap my arms around his muscular frame, pressing my body flush against his. Carter's eyes widen in surprise, but I don't give him a chance to retreat or speak.

I kiss him hard, pulling him against me with all the passion in my soul. At first, he struggles, trying to pull away, but I cling to him fiercely, and after a moment, his muscular arms wrap around me tightly in return.

When we finally break for air, I look him straight in the eyes, still clutching fistfuls of his shirt.

“Whatever you’re dealing with, you don’t have to face it alone. I’m here for you, Carter.”

His expression softens. “I’m sorry,” he says roughly. “It’s stuff from the past. I’m fine.”

I shake my head. I won’t let him do this to himself or us. “You don’t have to tell me anything, but please don’t shut me out.”

He hesitates, eyes flitting across my face as if searching for something. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

I reach up to cup his stubbled cheek. “I get it. But we’re in this together for all of it—the good and the bad.”

Carter takes a shaky breath, guilt and longing warring across his features. His jaw clenches, conflicted. He hesitates as if he’s about to decline and withdraw to his emotional fortress. But his shoulders slump in defeat.

“Okay,” he agrees hoarsely.

Relief washes over me because he’s agreed to open up and trust me with his demons.

We settle on the couch, and I tuck myself against his side, my head resting on his broad shoulder. His arms immediately wrap around me, warm and secure.

He lifts my hand and gently presses his lips to my palm. I’m certain we’re meant for each other in moments like these.

Carter speaks again; his voice is low.

“I’m sorry I’ve been distant, but it was never about you. My issues stem from dark places in my past that you didn’t cause and can’t fix.”

Didn’t I? It was his feelings for me that sent him away. Guilt twists my gut as I think about the letters. I never meant to

deceive him, but everything is different now.

What will he think? Will he understand why I hid them or feel betrayed? The fear of losing what we have is paralyzing me. I remain silent, gathering my courage before I speak.

“Carter, there’s something you should know.”

He looks puzzled.

I take a deep breath. “I wrote to you while you were on deployment.”

Carter’s brow furrows. “I don’t remember getting any letters.”

I look down, cheeks burning. “That’s because I never sent them. I only sent you an email. Why didn’t you write back?”

Carter nods before taking a shuddering breath.

“I wanted to, but every time I tried, the words got stuck. How could I tell you about my life when it was so dark? You’re so full of light, and I’m—not the same man.”

Slowly, I reach for his hand and intertwine our fingers.

“Do you think I couldn’t handle it?” I ask gently. “Sharing the load could have made it easier for you.”

Carter closes his eyes, pained. “Maybe,” he whispers. “Probably.”

When he opens them again, the anguish there nearly breaks me. “I was a coward. I’m so sorry, Ava.”

I touch his face, guiding his gaze back to me. “You are one of the bravest people I know. We all have darkness inside us. The brave part is letting someone else see it.”

A few seconds tick by, each one stretching like an hour. “Why didn’t you send the letters?”

The irony of admitting my weakness in the same breath as Carter’s courage isn’t lost on me.

“Too chicken. They were silly letters from a stupid girl.”

“You should’ve. There were nights, days, whatever. Time had no meaning over there. But everything around me was dust

and noise and the kind of tired you can't shake. If I'd had your letters, I would've read them."

I finally look at him, and his eyes are glistening. "There wasn't much to cling to. I talked about the seasons changing, my science projects, and funny things my friends would say."

"Reading your letters would have lessened the loneliness, but I understand," he reflects. "You didn't know what challenges I was facing."

My eyes burn. If I'd known, I would've been braver. "I've wondered how different things would have been if we'd stayed connected while you were gone."

Carter nods slowly. "Maybe so. But we're here now, together. That's what matters to me most."

The following silence is heavy but not suffocating, giving space for the words to sink in and settle into the crevices of our shared understanding.

"Nightmares. They always come back around the holidays. I can't shake them," he rasps.

My heart aches. I tighten my arms around him, offering what little comfort I can.

Carter lets out a shaky breath. "In my dream, I was back there the night our convoy hit an IED. I couldn't breathe from the smoke. Everything was chaos, fire, and blood—"

He breaks off, swallowing hard.

The nightmares and guilt must be so hard to bear alone. I wish I could take away the pain, but I listen and try to understand.

"Good men and women. I can still hear their voices." His voice cracks.

"Hey," I say gently, reaching for his hand and rubbing the calloused pads of his fingertips. "Thank you for trusting me. I love you, and I'm here for you."

Carter takes a steadying breath before continuing haltingly. "Surviving makes me feel weak because so many people will

never see their loved ones again. Yet I return to a nice house and pretend nothing ever happened.”

I brush the hair from his forehead. “It’s not your fault.”

Carter meets my gaze, his eyes pooling with pain. “Maybe, but nothing feels right. I don’t deserve to be happy.”

I lean closer, my eyes searching his. “You’ve been through so much, and it’s shaped you. We don’t have to pretend everything is perfect, but you deserve happiness like everyone else.”

He hugs me tightly. “Thank you for being patient when I pulled away.”

I lean in to kiss him tenderly. “Of course. We’ll get you the help you need so you can heal, I promise.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“Stop that,” I warn. “Your darkness makes you more precious.”

The barest hint of a smile tugs at his lips, and I know we’ve turned an important corner.

“Can we stay like this forever?” I ask playfully, nuzzling closer to him.

Carter gives me a small but genuine smile, the first I’ve seen all day. “I wouldn’t mind, but we’d be starving after a while.”

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CHAPTER 12

AVA

The morning sun filters into our room. Driven by hunger, Carter and I finally slip from bed. We dress leisurely, stealing glances, neither of us wanting to break the intimate moment.

I run my fingers through my tangled hair, watching Carter pull on his sweater. His eyes meet mine in the mirror, and my cheeks flush pink.

Before long, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and sugary waffles fills the kitchen as we make breakfast together. I hum cheerfully, pouring homemade batter onto a hot griddle.

Carter wraps his arms around me from behind while I flip the waffles, planting a kiss on my neck that makes me shiver. Making breakfast together feels so natural. We eat in comfortable silence like we've done this for years.

After breakfast, I start clearing the table, but Carter catches my hand, a pleading look in his eyes. With a gentle tug, he draws me into his strong embrace.

“Dance with me?”

I can't resist the warmth in his voice. He draws me close, one hand resting delicately on my lower back. A slow love song plays on the radio.

I drape my arms around him and breathe in his comforting scent, his stubble rough against my cheek.

Carter's steady heartbeat thrums under my palm as we sway together, lost in our world. I've never felt so safe, so cherished.

It's like we have all the time in the world. No past or future, only this perfect moment suspended in time. All too soon, the song ends, and we drift apart.

Carter tilts my chin, his heated gaze searching my face. I wet my lips, hyper-aware of his mouth hovering close to mine.

Finally he leans in, his lips brushing mine in a soft caress. My knees go weak, warmth flooding my body.

I cling to him like an anchor in a stormy sea. When the kiss ends, my feet slowly float until I am again on solid ground.

After years of loving him from afar, our time snowed in together allowed us to nurture a connection. This respite from real life opened my eyes to a future with him I've always secretly wanted but never dared hope was possible.

I see with vivid clarity how we could build a life together. Despite the challenges ahead, I'll fight for this fledgling romance. Only I hope I don't need to.

"I don't want to leave," I say softly, looking up at him.

He brushes his fingers through my hair, whispering, "Then don't. Stay here with me."

My eyes widen in surprise, hardly daring to believe it. "Really?"

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, seeming almost nervous.

"I don't want to let you go. Ever."

Overwhelmed, I surge up and kiss him fiercely, pouring all my jumbled emotions into the kiss.

Carter's smile is so full of love that it makes my heart ache. "I want you to move in and help me renovate the cabin."

The rumble of cars and the crunch of tires makes us freeze. My heart leaps into my throat. The others are back sooner than expected. Carter grasps my shoulders, his solemn eyes boring into mine.

"Whatever happens next, we'll face it together," he promises firmly.

I cling to those words as we steel ourselves to pretend, at least for now, that nothing has changed.

Sarah breezes in, her cheeks flushed from the cold. Snowflakes cling to her hair, melting instantly as she unwinds her scarf and tosses it haphazardly onto the counter.

“Wow, Ava! It smells amazing in here.”

Ivy and the guys follow Sarah, tumbling into the kitchen in a noisy frenzy.

“The roads finally cleared,” Ivy announces. “We came as soon as we could. Did the power go out here, too?”

“Welcome back,” I greet, giving Sarah a big hug. “I’m so glad you made it back safely. We were worried about you.”

“Thanks. It’s good to be back.” She smiles, rubbing her hands together to chase away the lingering chill. “So, how was it being cooped up with Carter? Did my grumpy brother drive you crazy or what?”

My cheeks flush as I busy myself pouring coffee to avoid her gaze.

“There was plenty to do. We managed.”

“Really?” Sarah quirks an eyebrow, a teasing smile playing on her lips as she studies me. Her eyes dart between Carter and me.

I ignore her and pour batter into the waffle iron. “Survival mode, remember? Chopping wood, keeping warm. We trimmed the tree by candlelight and even built a snowman. You should check it out later.”

I gesture toward the window, where our lopsided creation stands proudly amongst the pristine white landscape.

“Wow, Carter did something fun? I’m impressed!” Sarah laughs. “You must have worked your magic on him.”

I’m not sure what she means. Is it a lighthearted comment or evidence that she would support a relationship between us?

Butterflies swirl in my stomach when Carter returns to the kitchen. His hand brushes mine as he reaches for a taste, shooting sparks up my spine.

“Smells delicious,” he rumbles in his gravelly voice.

I bite my lip and take a deep breath as Carter lingers in the kitchen.

“Do you need any help?” he asks, rolling his sleeves.

“Don’t trouble yourself, big brother. We all know cooking isn’t your forte,” Sarah says with a dismissive laugh.

Carter’s jaw tightens.

Sighing, I shake my head at Sarah’s rudeness but bite my tongue. I make a mental note to check on Carter later, hoping he won’t retreat into his gruff shell after Sarah’s pointed comment.

Eyeing him carefully, Sarah senses the shift in mood.

“I hear you did lots of other good things, though,” she adds brightly.

Carter nods silently, lingering in the kitchen doorway momentarily before excusing himself to check on some random thing. I don’t blame him and wish I could get away, too.

The day passes without incident. I try to act normal, helping Sarah and Ivy unpack the groceries and supplies they picked up in town. But I sense Sarah’s eyes on me. Does she suspect anything?

An undercurrent of unease thrums within me every time we speak. I force myself to sound casual as I ask mundane questions and laugh too loudly at her replies. If she notices anything, she doesn’t let on.

By unspoken agreement, Carter and I are careful not to exchange telling glances or touch when we’re with the others.

But the intimacy between us feels like a third presence, a secret energy threatening to give us away if we stand too close.

“I’ll help you unload the cars,” Carter mutters, avoiding my eyes as he brushes past me and heads outside, with Sarah following on his heels.

When Sarah returns, I paste a smile on my face and help unpack groceries. The knot in my stomach loosens slightly when Sarah and I fall into a familiar evening routine.

When I confess the truth, I hope things return to normal and our friendship won't be irreparably damaged.

"So you stayed in town. That's a relief. We were worried," I say.

"It wasn't the same as being here, but we had fun," she chirps, oblivious to the tension twisting my insides.

Sarah grins. "It's nice to see my brother so relaxed."

My heart skips a beat. Does she know? Did Carter say something?

"Really?" I feign surprise, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear nervously.

"True story, but you seem off. Is everything okay?"

"For sure," I say, brushing off her concern with a wave.

When Sarah tells me about their adventures, I nod and laugh at her jokes, but my secret sits like a lead weight on my chest.

The crinkling of plastic bags and dull thuds of canned goods hitting the countertop grate on my nerves. My palms grow slick every minute we're alone, but how do I tell my best friend I've fallen for her brother?

If she rejects us, it could ruin our lifelong friendship. But if forced to choose, there's only one option—Carter.

Carter doesn't meet my gaze when others are around. He uses the hubbub of people arriving as an excuse to focus on his renovations, striding purposefully to the shed, his broad shoulders tense under his work shirt.

I miss his touch, his warm eyes, and his calloused hands caressing me with infinite tenderness. His distance feels cruel after the closeness we shared during the storm.

I'll bide my time until he's ready to tell his sister about our relationship, but until then, I'll keep my yearning hidden. It shouldn't be difficult. I've had years of practice.

By late afternoon, the holiday spirit invades everyone except me. Laughter and Christmas carols echo down the halls as they chat excitedly about tonight's gift exchange.

My nerves make me restless. Chopping potatoes and basting the roast gives me something to do, but my mind spins in worried circles.

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CHAPTER 13

CARTER

I genuinely admire Ava on a deeper level. The more she tells me about her life these past days, the more I fall for the caring, passionate woman she's become.

She's seeking fulfillment while staying true to herself. There's beauty in the modest yet meaningful life she's building.

Our connection has grown into something profound. Ava and I agreed to keep our new relationship under wraps for now. That's why I made myself scarce when the others arrived.

I didn't trust myself to put on an act and pretend Ava and I were friends. Not when every fiber of my being wanted to pull Ava aside and pick up where we left off during the storm.

My abrupt departure made Ava tense, her guard rising. It's my fault. By recoiling into myself, I've made her believe I'll never change.

I need to bridge the emotional distance and prove myself capable of giving her the love and support she needs. A peace offering.

Some heartfelt gesture to show I'm committed to our future, but what?

I rack my brain, pondering it as I work alone, sawing wooden planks.

Sarah appears in the doorway, her cheeks flushed from the cold. "Hey, big brother. We didn't get a chance to catch up."

I tense, and my pulse kicks up a notch. "We were worried about you in the storm."

"It was pretty hairy for a bit, but we managed," Sarah says, blowing on her gloves.

Her husband, Matt, is stamping snow from his boots behind her.

"Yeah, those roads were nasty," he says with an easy laugh that grates on my already frayed nerves.

I force a tight smile. “Good thing you played it safe. Wouldn’t want anyone braving it alone.”

Sarah searches my face. I hold her gaze for a loaded moment, wondering if she can sense the turbulent emotions churning within me.

“Exactly,” she says brightly. “It’ll be nice to relax and enjoy the holiday together now. You’ll stay for Christmas dinner, won’t you, Carter?”

“Sure,” I mutter before returning to work, stacking boxes more forcefully than necessary.

Matt claps me on the shoulder. “But hey, now the storm’s passed. I bet you’re itching to get out of here, huh, Carter?”

I grip the drill tightly to stop myself from snapping at him.

I have no intention of leaving. In fact, I want the opposite—for them to go so Ava and I can finally be alone.

Sarah lays a gentle but firm hand on my arm. “You don’t need to stick around if you’d rather go home to Mom and Dad’s place.”

I appreciate her thoughtfulness, knowing she’s trying to give me an out. But I clench my jaw, torn between loyalty to my sister and my longing for Ava.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say evenly.

Matt shakes his head. “We’d understand if you bailed. Being cooped up for days with one other person? I’d go crazy.”

I tense, hiding my true feelings. They think I’ve been biding my time, waiting to hightail it home.

“It was no trouble having Ava here,” I reply, my tone clipped.

An awkward beat passes.

“I should get back to work,” I mutter, turning away before I say something I regret.

When Matt asks if I need any help, I curtly assure him I’m fine.

He holds up his hands in surrender. “I can take a hint. See you inside.”

Taking a deep breath, I rein in my simmering emotions. Losing my temper won't help.

Following the draining conversation, I duck into the spare bedroom and start pulling down the old drywall, something I can do with my good arm.

I haul back and swing at the rotted wall panels, using the force of each blow to vent my frustration.

I work my way along the shared wall with my bedroom next door. The monotonous work is soothing, each slam and crack chipping away at my turmoil.

Pieces of splintered wood clatter to the floor as I batter the wall repeatedly until my muscles burn and I'm gulping air.

As I reach the far corner, a strange sound makes me pause. Frowning, I peel back a chunk of drywall, revealing a cubbyhole.

I set down the tools and wedge myself into the narrow gap, fishing out a dusty bundle of envelopes tied with ribbon.

My heart stutters—they're covered in Ava's loopy handwriting.

The heavy oak dresser in my room is on the other side of the wall. I never believed Ava's story about the mouse, but now I see why she struggled to shove it aside. She was trying to retrieve the letters.

My conscience pricks. I shouldn't look or invade her privacy, but they're addressed to me. I flip through the stack with trembling fingers before giving in to temptation.

I read one letter after another, my emotions swirling wildly.



Dear Carter,

It's been a few months since you left for basic training. Things aren't the same around here. I never imagined how quiet the place would be without you.

I hope training is going well and you're making new friends.

Sarah's counting down the days until you're home on leave. I'll stock up on popcorn and your favorite candy for movie night!

Stay safe, and hurry home.

Your friend always, Ava



Dear Carter,

I hope life is treating you well.

Things at home are painfully dull. Starting senior year without you around to tease me feels wrong.

I always imagined we'd be friends, staying up late laughing at inside jokes.

I'm happy you're finding your path, even if it means leaving me behind.

You'll probably get caught up in your new life and forget me, but I'll always be here if you need a friend.

I could visit you someday.

Miss you lots, Ava.



Dear Carter,

Time is slipping away too fast.

Remember the night before you left for basic training?

We stayed up until sunrise, talking in the treehouse, making promises to keep in touch. Now we're separated by oceans, and part of me wonders if this is the end of an era.

I know our friendship runs too deep to fade away completely.

I'll be thinking of you every day. I believe in you, Carter.

Stay safe out there. This isn't goodbye, just see you later.

Love always, Ava.



ONE LETTER HAS WRINKLED PAPER AND SPOTS BLURRED BY what looks like Ava's tears. She wrote it after learning I was hurt in action. Her anguish leaps off the page.

I've glimpsed the truth, Ava's innermost feelings, in her own hand. She poured her heart onto these pages. Longing, regret,

hope. Her words—honest and raw.

Clutching the letters, I lean against the wall, exhaling slowly.

I close my eyes, picturing Ava's face. Her bright smile, her sparkling eyes that see the good in me when I can't see it myself.

Ava is a beautiful soul who sees past my outer scars and inner demons.

She makes me feel human again, alive. Her warmth thawed my guarded heart, and destiny gifted me a chance to uncover what I'd been unable to see.

I finally understand.

I underestimated her. Ava hid her heart in a secret time capsule, waiting for the perfect moment. Even though I gave her every reason not to, she waited for me faithfully.

Ava's love never faltered—my doubts kept us apart. I've kept a distance, unsure if I deserve her love, but that ends today.

I carefully retie the ribbon around the letters before tucking them in my shirt pocket, patting it gently.

I'm teetering on the edge of a cliff. No turning back. I'm ready to take the leap because I've found my purpose.

My life's direction leads straight to her.

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CHAPTER 14

AVA

We're setting the serving dishes on the table when Carter strides into the dining room, freshly showered after a day of hard labor.

I nearly drop the bowl of mashed potatoes. He's wearing a festive Christmas sweater covered in reindeer and glittery snowflakes.

My jaw drops before I catch myself. "Nice sweater. The color suits you."

Carter meets my gaze, his eyes twinkling. "Flatterer. I look ridiculous, and we both know it."

"I never knew you had such a soft spot for holiday fashion," Sarah teases as we take our seats.

"It's about time I got into the spirit." Carter shrugs, playing along, but there's more to it—he's bridging the distance between us without drawing attention.

Carter joins in the lively banter and laughter. The ridiculous Christmas sweater put him in a festive mood—a far cry from the grumpy, brooding man he was a few days ago.

As we sit at the table, Carter's knee brushes against mine, silently reassuring me we're in this together. His boyish grin promises good things to come.

When Ivy serves dessert, Carter discreetly squeezes my knee under the table. He keeps his hand there, his thumb stroking back and forth, until we finish dessert.

His touch lights my nerve endings, but I resist the urge to kiss the smirk off his lips. We've seamlessly slipped back into our easy rapport.

"Are you okay, Ava?" Sarah asks.

"F-fine," I stammer, heat rising to my cheeks. I reach for my glass of water, taking a sip to cool myself down.

After dinner, we gather around the Christmas tree in the living room with mugs of cider and plates of cookies.

Everyone tears enthusiastically into their gifts, “oohing” and “ahhing” over each present. Sarah gives me a brightly wrapped package.

“I made it myself because you love handmade things,” she says.

I wrap the soft knitted scarf around my neck, the rich jewel tones complimenting my complexion.

“It’s beautiful.”

Sarah claps excitedly. “It looks perfect on you!”

I meet Carter’s gaze. A smile plays on his lips, but no one notices the loaded glances between us.

I smile as I pass out the gifts I selected for each person. When I get to Carter, I bite my lip.

“I’m so sorry, I have nothing for you.”

Carter shakes his head, his eyes soft. His warm gaze sends shivers down my spine.

“Don’t worry about it, Ava. Your company is the only present I need.”

My heart flutters, but the moment is interrupted by Sarah’s exaggerated gagging sounds. I blush deeply and awkwardly look away.

“Here you go, Sarah,” I say brightly, handing her a beautifully wrapped box.

Sarah tears off the paper, and her eyes widen as she opens the gift box. She pulls them out carefully, admiring them. “Oh, my god, these shoes are incredible!”

“They’re the ones you wanted, right?” We were browsing online when Sarah pointed them out.

But then her expression shifts to a frown. “They cost a fortune, Ava. You don’t exactly have money to burn.”

“I just wanted to get you something nice, Sarah,” I say, trying not to sound hurt over spending four hundred dollars on shoes.

Sarah rolls her eyes. “And put yourself into debt again? You know, for someone so ‘generous,’ you sure don’t manage your money well.”

I bite my tongue as the joy of giving her gift sours. Although Sarah’s my friend, her sharp words cut deeply because they hold a grain of truth.

Maybe my beat-up car and empty bank account make me pathetic in her eyes, but at least I know how to give freely and from the heart.

“How dare you speak to Ava like that,” Carter snaps at his sister.

“Well, well. Look who’s getting cozy,” Sarah snipes.

My cheeks burn as all eyes turn to me.

Carter’s jaw clenches, his eyes flashing angrily. “The shoes were a thoughtful gift to make you feel special and cared for.”

Sarah’s eyes narrow, darting between Carter and me. “I appreciate the gesture.”

“Funny way of showing appreciation for your best friend.”

Sarah scoffs, “Oh, please. I’m protecting her.”

“From what?”

“From herself! Her financial irresponsibility.”

Sarah’s barbed comment is a slap across the face.

Carter snaps. “There are more important things than money. You don’t deserve her friendship if you can’t see Ava’s good heart.”

Carter moves to my side and wraps his arm firmly around my shoulders, pulling me close. It’s as if he’s staking his claim in front of the others—choosing me and not backing down.

Sarah’s face flushes with fury as understanding dawns on her—Carter and I are lovers. She sees how he protectively wraps his

arm around me.

“I can’t believe this!” Sarah exclaims, pointing an accusing finger at us. “My brother and my best friend! You two are together behind my back?”

I wilt under her glare, even as Carter tightens his hold on me possessively.

Sarah looks at me like I’m a stranger, pain and betrayal etched on her face.

“How long has this been going on?”

When I open my mouth, the words stick in my throat.

“It’s new,” Carter says evenly. “But it’s real, Sarah. I’m in love with Ava.”

Sarah inhales sharply. A battle unfolds behind her eyes—protectiveness of Carter versus concern for me.

I never meant to go behind her back. I wish I could explain everything—how I’ve secretly harbored feelings for her brother for years.

All those times we giggled over boy talk at sleepovers, and I never breathed a word about the flutter in my heart whenever Carter was around.

I buried my feelings out of loyalty to my best friend, only letting my mind wander in private. I valued our friendship and sisterhood above everything, but I never believed my dreams about Carter would come true. Or that they’d cost me everything I hold dear.

“Save it! I won’t let you take advantage of Carter when you can’t manage your money or life responsibly.”

Her words burrow deep, cracking my heart open as lifelong friendship unravels. Despair wells up inside, but I stay silent, mourning the loss of my oldest, dearest friend.

Carter removes his arm. Distraught, I turn to him, fearing he’ll pull away emotionally, but instead, he takes my hand.

“You’ve gone too far, Sarah,” Carter snaps at his sister.

Matt steps between them, interrupting the argument. “Come on. Let’s all calm down.”

Carter’s eyes flash with anger. He storms out, the door slamming behind him. An awkward silence replaces the lighthearted mood from earlier until the others fall into small talk. Each word is like sandpaper on my frayed nerves.

My heart twists. I’m worried about Carter. I should give him space, but I can’t help myself.

I offer the others a tight smile and excuse myself, hurrying to check his bedroom but finding it empty.

A loud thud echoes down the hall, followed by a muffled groan. I rush toward the sound and find Carter in the spare room, slumped on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands.

“Carter?” I ask tentatively.

He looks up, and I see something vulnerable in his eyes for a moment before a familiar, steely resolve quickly replaces it.

“I’m sorry,” he says heavily, his voice rough with emotion. “It’s not you, It’s Sarah. I lost it. The way she treats you, the things she says—you deserve so much better than her cruelty. Better than me.”

Seeing the anguish on his face, I realize Sarah’s rejection has reopened an old wound inside him, making him question if he truly deserves love.

“It doesn’t matter what Sarah thinks,” I say gently. “All that matters is how we feel about each other.”

Carter sighs heavily, his face etched with pain. “Every time I look at myself, it’s like—”

Carter’s unspoken words hang in the air, and my heart aches for the pain he carries within him.

He glances away, shielding me from the demons he’s battling.

I step closer and take his hand. “You are worthy, Carter,” I tell him fiercely.

“I started renovating this place to try and leave the past behind,” he says roughly. “But then Sarah had to stick her nose in, and all my old anger came rushing back.”

I squeeze his hand gently, offering silent support. “We can’t change the past, but we can create a better future.”

Carter nods slowly, and some of the defeat leaves his eyes. He reaches out and caresses my cheek tenderly.

“I lost my temper, but I won’t lose you. The only way to move forward is to stop running and accept who I am before becoming who I want to be.”

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CHAPTER 15

CARTER

The bundle of letters sits heavy in my jacket pocket, pressed close to my heart. My heart races as I work up the nerve for what I'm about to do. Taking a deep breath, I reach into my pocket and retrieve them.

Ava's eyes widen. "You weren't supposed to read those. They're so embarrassing."

Shame burns my neck. I hang my head. "I read every beautiful word. I'm sorry, but I needed to."

She blinks rapidly. I brace myself for her anger. "You're not laughing. I guess that's a good sign."

I take her delicate hands in mine. "Finding those letters and seeing your heart laid bare gave me the courage to confront my feelings."

Reaching into my pocket again, I retrieve a folded piece of paper and hand it to Ava.

"What's this?" she asks.

I rub the back of my neck. "Read it."

Unfolding the letter, Ava begins to read, emotions flitting across her face. Looking at her, this remarkable woman I nearly let slip away, my heart swells.

Not happening again. I'll brave any storm, bare my soul, and do whatever it takes to earn Ava's love.

I watch anxiously, heart in my throat, as her eyes scan the page.



My Dearest Ava,

When I'm with you, the missing piece of me falls into place. You make me feel whole.

We agreed to take things slow and figure out this fragile thing between us. But life is short, and I'm done waiting. I want to share every day with you, Ava. Talk, laugh, hold you close through the darkness, and dance with you in the light. Grow old by your side.

My heart is yours. I'm sorry it took me so long to realize you are my soulmate, my home.

I love you, Ava. I think deep down, I always have.

Forever yours,

Carter



AVA FINISHES READING, TEARS STREAKING HER CHEEKS. SHE looks up at me with such love and wonder that it steals my breath away.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“I’ve been a fool,” I rasp. “Running from the past, from you. I don’t want to lose you.”

Ava’s gaze softens with understanding.

“I feel the same way. It doesn’t have to end. I don’t want to leave.”

I meet her earnest gaze, no longer bothering to hide the vulnerability I usually mask.

“After so many years alone, I didn’t believe I’d ever find someone who could truly see and accept me, flaws and all,” I confess, emotion etching my words.

“I see you and want all of you.”

Her words hit me right in the heart. After so many lonely years doubting I’d find real acceptance, Ava sees and wants all of me.

I fix my gaze on Ava. “Do you mean it?”

She meets my eyes unwaveringly. “Every word. With all my heart.”

When tears fill her eyes, the depth of meaning behind this moment washes over me. She wants me wholly and completely. And I want her just the same.

I take a steadying breath before asking, “Once the cabin renovations finish in a few months, would you move in with me and make this our home?”

Ava’s breath catches at the enormity of what I’m asking. She squeezes my hand, a single tear slipping down her cheek.

“I’d love that,” she whispers.

I gather her close, emotion clogging my throat. This remarkable woman saw beyond my scars to the man I long to be—and made me believe I could be that man.

She rests her head on my shoulder and I feel the rise and fall with each breath. I imagine her falling asleep and waking beside me—lazy mornings with her wrapped in my arms.

“Have you ever considered pursuing teaching as a full-time career?” I ask.

“I love it but thought it would be a side gig.”

I look at her with eyes full of sincerity and encourage her to consider this alternative path. I can see her mind racing and squeeze her hand.

“With some planning, you could turn your passion into a career. There’s a college nearby where you can apply for your credentials.”

“I’ll look into the program,” she says after a thoughtful pause. “And I’ll search for a part-time job in the area.”

I tighten my grip around her hand, a gentle smile forming on my lips. My eyes crinkle at the corners, radiating warmth and pride.

“Living with me means you’ll save money on rent while obtaining your credentials,” I offer sincerely.

“Thank you,” she replies.

It’s time to address my own issues. I pause, emotions swelling within.

“I’ve been putting off dealing with my wartime trauma. I’ll find a therapist after the holidays and get the treatment I need.”

Ava’s eyes glisten but never break contact with mine. She wraps her arms around me in a tight embrace. Her warmth strengthens my resolve.

“Carter, that’s amazing,” she gushes, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. “I am so proud of you for prioritizing your mental health.”

I press my forehead to hers, noses bumping. “Wherever you decide to go, my place is by your side. If you’ll still have me.”

Ava pulls back to meet my gaze. “I’m not going anywhere. I’d love to help with the renovations. I’m handy with a hammer.”

I chuckle at her feisty determination. “Nice try. You’re banned from anything involving heavy machinery or heights over two

feet.”

“Spoilsport,” she says, unable to keep the smile off her face.

“I’m not about to risk losing you to a tragic carpentry accident,” I reply.

“Ever the protector,” she sasses. “Lucky for you, I happen to find that very attractive.”

“I’m a lucky man.”

She nestles into my embrace. For the first time, I understand what it means to feel complete. Like I’m exactly where I’m meant to be.

“I never knew it could be like this. Being with you,” she murmurs.

“It’s the same for me, Ava. I never knew how much I needed this—needed *you*—until now.”

Ava’s eyes glisten. “The cabin, the snow—this is all temporary. But you and me?”

Her hand comes to rest over my hammering heart. “We’re forever,” she whispers.

I crush Ava to me in a fierce embrace, blinking back tears. She clings to me just as tightly, face buried against my chest.

“Forever,” I echo hoarsely, the single word both a solemn oath.

We stand wrapped in each other for long moments until slowly I notice Ava’s shoulders are shaking.

Alarmed, I tilt her chin up, thinking she’s crying. Her radiant smile takes my breath away.

“What’s so funny?” I ask, unable to keep from smiling too.

Ava’s laugh is crystalline and bright. “I never imagined you’d be a romantic sap.”

“Don’t tell anyone. I have to maintain my manly reputation.”

She answers with an impish smile. “Your secret’s safe with me, Mr. Not-So-Grumpy-Pants.”

Ava's love wraps around me like a healing balm. She doesn't try to fix me. She simply accepts me, flaws and all. And I know at that moment, without a doubt—my heart is safe in her hands.

Ava rises on tiptoe to press a sweet kiss to my lips. "I love you," she murmurs.

I cup her face with exquisite tenderness. My lips find hers in a kiss as raw and honest as our conversation.

When we finally break apart, I rest my forehead against hers, our racing hearts aligned. "I love you too," I whisper. "Forever and always."

This moment will go down in history as my favorite moment because this is when I stop running and start living.

Ava

I have never felt as connected to anyone as I do to Carter. He has generously opened his heart and home, inviting me to stay. It's what I want too—like a dream come true.

He takes my hand, his calloused fingers intertwining with mine. His thumb caresses my skin, sending tingles down my arm.

"So soft. So delicate." He gives a wry smile while looking at his hands. "Unlike mine."

Carter's quiet acceptance of his injury reveals a strength that draws me in. Without thinking, I lift his hand to my lips, pressing a feather-light kiss to his warm, rough knuckles.

"I love your hands," I murmur. "I love their strength and their gentleness."

I love this incredible man who bravely confronts his demons. It's time to face mine.

"What about Sarah? I need to make peace with her," I say, the joyful reunion with Carter now tempered by the rift with my best friend.

Carter's expression darkens. "You're a brave woman, Ava. I'm still furious at the way my sister treated you."

I shake my head, playing absently with a loose thread on his shirt. "She's your family. And I love your family. I always have."

Carter looks down at me curiously. "Yeah?"

I peek up at him through my lashes. "I was an only child with older parents who were set in their ways. I was pretty lonely a lot of the time."

Carter's arms tighten around me protectively. "They can be your family, too. I'm happy to share."

Hope blooms in my chest. "Really? You don't mind?"

He pulls me tighter against him, enveloping me in his strong embrace, and presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"Of course not. But you're in charge of handling Sarah from now on."

I laugh and smack his chest playfully, then sober. "I'm sorry about earlier, with the shoes and money stuff. I know Sarah thinks I'm irresponsible."

Carter shakes his head. His voice is kind but matter-of-fact. "You're not irresponsible, Ava. You're extremely generous, but we can work on it together if you want to learn how to manage your money better."

I snuggle into the sanctuary of his embrace. "I'd like that."

"You need a new car," Carter says without a hint of irony.

I laugh. His timing is spectacular.

"Why don't we talk to Sarah now?" he asks.

I take a deep, bracing breath and nod. "Might as well rip off the Band-Aid."

As much as I want to stay wrapped up in Carter forever, I need to face Sarah and clear the air.

With an encouraging kiss from Carter, we walk to the living room. Laughter floats from within, but I hover in the doorway,

heart pounding.

Sarah looks up from the board game she's playing with Ivy and Matt, surprise flashing across her face.

"Can we talk?" I ask gently.

After a tense beat, Sarah nods.

The others quickly make excuses about getting more snacks, giving us privacy. Carter squeezes my hand supportively before quietly excusing himself.

I perch on the edge of the couch beside Sarah, hands clasped to hide their trembling. Where do I even begin?

"I'm sorry," I blurt.

Sarah's eyes widen. She wasn't expecting an apology. Her expression softens.

She opens her mouth, but I hold up a hand.

"Please, let me finish." I take a deep breath. "I can be impulsive sometimes. But your brother...he makes me want to be better. To plan and make smart choices. Because I want a future with him."

I watch Sarah closely for her reaction now my cards are on the table.

Her eyes shimmer. "You love him, don't you?"

"With all my heart," I vow.

"I'm so sorry for being harsh. Carter's been through so much. I was scared because I didn't want him getting hurt."

"Believe me, that's the last thing I want to do."

Sarah searches my face. "I think part of me always knew you had a crush on Carter, but I didn't realize how deep your feelings went."

"I didn't believe he'd ever have feelings for me. I was afraid of losing you, so I kept quiet."

"I'm sorry I doubted you. I was scared, but it's no excuse for how I acted."

Impulsively, I squeeze her hand. “You want what’s best for Carter. For both of us.”

Sarah pulls me into a hug. “I don’t want to lose you either.”

I cling to her, blinking back tears. “You could never lose me. Now we can be real sisters.”

Sarah lets out a watery laugh and hugs me tighter. “You’re already family.”

Over her shoulder, Carter is hovering in the doorway. “My two favorite girls. It’s like a dream come true.”

When I wave him over, he comes immediately, looking between us, his smile impossibly tender, before wrapping us in his embrace.

When we break the group hug, Carter says, “I think it’s time we tell the others.”

Sarah smiles knowingly. “You have my blessing.”

I let out a nervous laugh, my cheeks growing hot. “It means so much to hear you say that.”

Sarah offers a warm smile. “If you’ll excuse me. I’ll give you lovebirds some privacy.”

Carter captures my lips, drawing me into a fierce, loving kiss. I’m vaguely aware when Sarah leaves the room, the rustle of fabric the only sign.

I melt into him, my worries vanishing like snowflakes on a warm day. He hugs me tightly, his chest rising and falling beneath my cheek.

We break apart, but our smiles remain, widening as we walk hand-in-hand to the living room. Carter clears his throat and pulls me close.

“Guys,” Carter announces, his grip on my hand reassuring. “Ava and I have exciting news.”

Carter gives everyone a brief rundown of events. When he finishes, Sarah jumps from her seat and wraps us in a bear hug. “Congratulations!”

The rest of the group joins in, offering their well-wishes with warm embraces. Ivy brings out a bottle of champagne and sets it on the table with glasses.

“Here’s to new beginnings!” Matt exclaims, raising his glass high. We all follow suit, clinking our glasses together in a celebratory toast.

With a mischievous grin, I tug Carter’s hand.

“Look up,” I say, my voice bubbly with anticipation.

His eyes follow mine, and he chuckles when he spots the sprig of mistletoe hanging from a red ribbon above us.

“Well, would you look at that,” he murmurs, a playful smile tugging at his lips.

“Come on,” I urge playfully, pulling him along as I crane my neck to keep the mistletoe, with its tiny white berries sparkling in my sight. “It’s tradition.”

Carter shakes his head with a laugh. “Would be a shame to break it.”

He snakes an arm around my waist, his warm palm pressing against my lower back.

We inch closer, drawn like magnets. I loop my arms around his neck, lifting myself onto my toes.

Carter and I share a soft, lingering kiss—marking our new beginning as the snow falls silently outside.

Snowed in with the
GRUMP
MISTLETOE LOVE SERIES
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
FERN FRASER

CHAPTER 16

EPILOGUE - AVA

Five years have passed since Carter and I first reunited here. Now husband and wife, with an energetic three-year-old daughter, this cabin is our forever home.

We host the extended family every Christmas for noisy, chaotic holiday celebrations. It's raucous and fun but tiring. The strain of hosting so many people is building as the days wear on, but I wouldn't trade our traditions for anything.

The aroma of gingerbread fills the kitchen as I pull a tray of cookies from the oven. Taking a deep breath, I try to relax my tense shoulders.

The spicy scent soothes my frazzled nerves. I slide the hot and gooey treats onto the cooling rack, resisting the urge to sneak one.

Sarah breezes in, ponytail swinging. Since Carter and I reunited, she and I have only grown closer. She's the sister I never had. Now, we share this wonderful extended family.

Sarah's easy smile is comforting. "Need any help, Ava?"

"Thanks for asking, but it's under control."

"Can't believe the holiday madness isn't getting to you."

Laughter floats in from the living room, and warmth blooms in my chest. "It might be, but I wouldn't change it," I say.

Sarah squeezes my shoulder. "I'm happy to help, so holler if you change your mind!"

I've almost finished when strong arms wrap around me from behind. Carter kisses my temple, his scruff tickling my cheek.

I melt into my husband's broad chest with a contented sigh. As I listen to his steady heartbeat, I'm filled with gratitude.

Our family is chaotic, messy, and bursting at the seams during the holidays. But it's ours, and I wouldn't trade the noisy, magical moments for anything.

The laughter, the joy, the love—this is what life is all about.

“You did all this, Sunshine,” he rumbles. “Gathered everyone in one place.”

“We did this,” I correct him.

Carter shakes his head, pride shining as he looks at me.

Our rambunctious Labrador Retriever, Maple, comes barreling into the kitchen, interrupting our tender moment, her tongue lolling. She makes a beeline for the fresh cookies, but I grab her collar just in time.

“Causing trouble again?” Carter teases Maple, who yips and wags her tail furiously at the sight of her other favorite human.

I laugh, giving her a good scratch around her ears. Maple’s big, brown eyes are pleading, but I stand firm.

“None for you, silly pup.”

The pitter-patter of little feet comes next as our daughter, Lily, comes bounding in.

“Daddy!” she squeals.

As Carter sweeps Lily into his embrace, his face lights up with pure joy. He tosses her up playfully, her squeals of delight filling the room as he nuzzles tender kisses into her flushed, happy cheeks.

My heart swells watching Carter dote on Lily. With our daughter, his usual gruffness melts away, replaced by gentle playfulness. The shadows that once clung to him seem far away now.

Maple saunters over, wagging her tail, and showers Lily’s face with slobbery kisses, eliciting more giggles from Lily.

Carter grabs a dog bone from the pantry and throws it into the living room. Eager for a new distraction, Maple happily bounds after her prize.

“Daddy, look!” Lily cries, waving a piece of paper excitedly. “A note from Santa!”

“What does it say, princess?” Carter asks.

“It says I’m the best girl in the world!” Lily exclaims, jumping up and down.

Carter takes the note, scanning it with a smile. “Santa’s right because you are the very best girl I know.”

She thrusts the note into Carter’s face. “Santa wrote that I was very, very good all year!”

He hugs Lily, planting a soft kiss on her forehead. “My sweet girl. This calls for an extra special Christmas cookie.”

“Yay, cookies!” Lily shouts.

She takes Carter’s hand and drags him toward the treats. Chuckling, Carter scoops her up and carries her to the counter.

He glances at me, and I nod, confirming they should be cool enough to eat.

I’m grateful for everything we have – my fulfilling teaching job, our cozy home, Carter’s steady recovery from his emotional wounds, and our wonderful child who brightens even the darkest days.



NOW THAT THE HOLIDAYS ARE OVER AND EVERYONE HAS GONE home, leaving Carter and me content but exhausted, it’s late, and he’s putting Lily to bed.

Carter sneaks into the den. I look up from my book and smile. “Is she asleep?”

He grins, collapsing beside me on the sofa. “Out like a light. Who knew one tiny toddler could be such a whirlwind?”

I curl into his side. “She takes after her daredevil daddy, that’s for sure.”

“Don’t I know it.” He spots the mugs on the coffee table. “Is that for me? You take such good care of me.”

I nod, smiling as he takes a long sip and sighs contentedly. “You look pretty worn out,” I say, brushing a hand through his hair.

Carter’s eyes snap open. He sits up straight, slapping his thighs. “Nonsense, I’m ready for our annual tradition whenever you are!”

I laugh at his sudden enthusiasm. “We can skip the game of strip poker tonight if you’d rather sleep.”

“No way! We can’t break tradition or our promise. This is our ritual on the day everyone leaves; we play a game of strip poker to mark the first night we were alone in this place without fear of being caught.”

“I’m not too keen on people finding out what we’re up to when we’re naughty.”

A mischievous smirk creeps onto his face. “I’m not surprised. You’re very noisy.”

My cheeks flush as I playfully smack his arm.

He winces dramatically. “Ouch!”

I roll my eyes and poke his chest. “Come on, you know it didn’t hurt a big, burly man like you. It’s like a fly landing on you, so don’t give me attitude.”

He bursts into laughter and pulls me closer for a kiss. I love this man as if my life depended on it. Even now, I shudder at the thought of what might have happened without Carter being at the cabin and whether I would have been okay on my own in the storm.

I brush off the thought because it didn’t happen. I try to avoid inviting negativity into my mind.

“I’ll get the cards,” Carter jumps from the couch and hurries to the sideboard.

The drawers rattle as he opens them one by one. He fumbles through the contents, muttering and cursing under his breath.

“What’s got you grumbling?”

“Kids! I can’t find anything in this house after they’ve moved our things.”

His eyes meet mine, and he slides the drawer shut. “On second thought, I’ve got everything I need for strip poker right here.”

He stalks over to me like a predator. Carter pulls me onto his lap with a wicked grin.

“All I need is my beautiful wife and clothes to strip off her.”

“Really?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

A thrill rushes through me at the endless naughty possibilities. I make a show of looking him up and down. Carter flexes, and I stifle a giggle.

“You’re so skilled at adapting to any situation. Impressive talent you’ve got there.”

He leans in with a wicked grin. “Oh, I’ve got skills, baby. Lie back, and I’ll show you.”

I tap my finger on my chin. “Hmm, let me think about it.”

I let him get comfortable before wriggling free and jumping off the couch.

“Where are you going?”

I dash out of the living room, throwing a sly grin over my shoulder at Carter. I know he loves the thrill of the chase, and I never make it easy for him.

The exhilaration of trying to catch me is half the fun for my stubborn husband, and I enjoy keeping him on his toes.

I hear Carter’s heavy footsteps pounding after me as I sprint up the stairs. He’s fast, but I know every nook and cranny in this old cabin. I slip into the upstairs bathroom, stifling a giggle.

Carter calls out. “Where’d you go, baby? Don’t hide from me!”

After a moment, I creep out and try to scurry past the top of the stairs, but brawny arms suddenly wrap around me.

“Gotcha!” Carter exclaims, spinning me to face him.

Before I can react, he plants a firm kiss on my lips. I squeal against his mouth and twist from his grasp.

“Not so fast,” I tease with a wink before racing down the stairs.

Carter is hot on my heels. We chase each other around the place until I let Carter catch me in the bedroom, where he playfully tackles me onto the bed.

I’m breathless and giddy, my heart pounding with exhilaration.

It’s time for the real fun to start.



THANK YOU FOR READING

Dear Reader,

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading “Snowed In with the Grump.” My goal with writing is to lift your spirits and make you smile.

HERE IS A FREE BONUS EPILOGUE SHOWCASING A SLICE OF LIFE in the future for Carter and Ava.

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ARE YOU WONDERING WHAT TO READ NEXT? CURIOUS ABOUT Dylan, the stranger who had car trouble? Keep reading for a preview from [GUARDING GEMMA](#).

Dylan-Six months later

“Road trip!” Gemma announces as she hops into the truck.
“Where are we headed?”

“It’s a surprise,” I say, backing out of the parking lot.

“Ooh, mysterious. I’m sure you planned an amazing adventure.”

I smile as we hit the highway.

Gemma chatters away, unfazed by my evasiveness about our destination.

I glance over at her delicate features, illuminated by the glow of the dashboard lights. She looks so fragile, like a stiff wind could blow her around.

It’s hard to believe anyone would want to hurt someone as gentle as her. But I know evil exists—I’ve seen it firsthand. And right now, it’s targeting the woman I swore to protect.

She has no idea where we’re going or why. I haven’t told her anything since I showed up an hour ago and said we needed to leave immediately.

Part of me hates keeping her in the dark. But until I figure out who we can trust, the less she knows, the safer she is.

After an hour, the city fades into forest. The tires crunch on the gravel road as I guide the truck up the mountain pass.

Gemma regards the increasingly remote scenery. Her singing trails off as she peers out the window.

“Are we almost there yet?”

“We’ve got a while to go.”

Gemma sits quietly beside me, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“Are you taking me out to the woods to murder me?” she asks lightly, but there’s an edge in her voice.

“Yep, you found me out. I’m an ax murderer.”

She swats my arm. “Hilarious. Seriously though, where are we going?”

I sigh, hands tightening on the wheel. “I know this is weird, but I need you to trust me.”

She holds my gaze for a long moment before nodding. “I do, but I don’t understand any of this.”

“I promise I’ll explain everything soon.”

We share a tense smile, but I need to keep her mind engaged. I put on my best pretend tour guide voice.

“Here we have scenic trees, more trees, and if you look closely, even more trees.”

Gemma pretends to take photos. “Stunning! Such majestic pines!”

I gesture expansively to the surroundings. Gemma places a hand tentatively on my arm. I flex my muscles.

She fans herself, eyes sparkling with delight. “Do that again, and I might faint!”

“I know CPR,” I warn with a wink.

We’re both laughing now, the tension of the long drive momentarily forgotten.

Eventually, we round a bend, and the cabin comes into view. I pull up next to the shed and cut the engine. It looks deserted, with no vehicles in sight.

I do a quick walk around, verifying there’s no immediate threat. Testing the front door, I find it unlocked. I exhale slowly. At least luck is on our side.

“Well, this is cozy,” Gemma remarks, but her tone is doubtful. “Let me guess. We’re on a survivalist retreat, and tomorrow’s trust-building exercise is eating worms?”

I chuckle. “Close. Tomorrow, we forage for berries and braid each other’s hair.”

She gasps dramatically. “Do you think they have a sweat lodge? I love a good detox.”

“I’m sure we can build one. But the safety words are ‘platypus’ and ‘rutabaga’ in case things get too intense.”

Gemma pretends to swoon. “Take me now, you rugged mountain man!”

I flex my muscles. “Can’t resist all this raw masculinity, can you?”

When Gemma stops laughing, I retrieve our bags from the truck bed.

She takes in the rustic building. “Where are we? What is this place?”

I gentle my voice. “A safe house.”

Alarm bells sound in my head, but we’re out of options. I’ll deal with Carter if and when he returns.

Gemma lingers near the door, arms wrapped around herself. I set the bags down.

“It’s a lot to take in. Let’s get you settled, and I’ll explain what I can.”

“Will you at least tell me who owns this cabin?” Gemma asks. “Do they know we’re here?”

She looks so tiny and lost that it makes my chest ache. I hesitate before deciding a partial truth is best for now.

“It belongs to an army buddy. But no, they don’t know we’re here.”

She absorbs this with a slow nod, operating primarily on shock and exhaustion.

Tomorrow, I’ll need to tell Gemma the truth—the threat is someone close to us. Someone we trusted.

Although I won’t destroy her world yet, I silently vow that whoever is responsible will pay.

For her sake, I will never let my guard down.

GUARDING GEMMA.



SEAL
TEAM ALPHA

GUARDING
Gemma

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
FERN FRASER

FERN FRASER



USA Today Bestselling Author Fern Fraser writes light-hearted, high-heat contemporary short romances.

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READERS SAY

Mrs. Fraser is one of my favorite instalove authors, her stories are always well written with amazing characters and great story lines. (AN)

I really like getting lost in a short story that brings all the feels and heat like a full length one. Fern's little nuggets make for a great lunchtime read. (SH)

Fern always gives you the greatest characters and original stories. (LD)

I love Fern's style, the way she introduces and build her characters to the way her plot develops. This book is hot, steamy and easy to read. (CA)



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