

Snowy Serendipity



*Two
Christmas
Stories*

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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TWO CHRISTMAS STORIES

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THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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Dashing Through the Snow

Dedication

To Ben, the one who puts on the green tights and Elf hat to please me in all my Christmas-loving schemes. I pick you for every train adventure.

Chapter 1

Please Come Home for Christmas

There is something about frantically shielding yourself from a linebacker of a man throwing his body and belongings straight toward the quickest route of exit—which, in this case, is through you—that really puts a kick in your step at 5:00 a.m.

While newly arrived trains screech to a halt and yawn, tossing open their doors and throwing out their sleepy travelers, I cling to the handles of the two colossal, waist-high suitcases on either side of me and lug them another step forward. Meanwhile Linebacker Man with the desperate eyes and swinging suitcases is still coming at me, and with the bells of my elf slippers jingling in mockery at my situation, I jump backward as swiftly as I can.

The nearly empty coffee cup, which had hitherto been dangling between two spare fingers not devoted to suitcase handling, dances precariously, and I regrip it just in time.

He passes me with an inch to spare, then begins taking the stairs three at a time.

What could possibly be that important?

While my mind draws up a few imaginary scenarios, I turn back toward the Moynihan Train Hall station platform. My attention shifts, however, to an unmistakable tapping on my slippers. A *drip-drip* of what's left of the weak, tawny coffee leaving spots on my new shoes.

“*Shoot.*” I let out an exasperated sigh.

“Willow? What's happened now?” Elodie says, and I nearly jump remembering the Bluetooth in my ear.

“I spilled coffee on my slippers.”

“Oh, honey, *no*.”

Elodie is the best roommate anyone could ask for. Immigrated with her professor parents to Erwin, Tennessee, from Southern France at eleven, she is the perfect combination of quiet intellect and lemme-catch-that-chicken-for-dinner hillbilly. Throw in the fact that she moved to New York at eighteen for university, and she’s one great big concoction of refinement, empathy, and hard-hitting street smarts.

She bakes to self-soothe.

She clog dances at parties upon request.

She will crack her umbrella on the hood of a cab in stilettos in the rain while screaming, “Get off my back!” and in the next sentence slip her arm through your elbow when you’re feeling low and coo, “Oh, sweetie. How about I make you some of that shepherd’s pie you like so much?”

She glides through both life and work at the French patisserie with unwitting Audrey Hepburn-level ease, spunk, and charm. Throws terms of endearment at total strangers like confetti. And best of all, loves me at my best, and my worst.

And the past three days, I’ve been at my worst.

“Did you pack your tissues?” Elodie says in such a motherly tone I can’t help pursing my lips. “I told you to put those on the list.”

“I’m looking now.” I drop my purse onto the top of one suitcase and begin digging. It’s ridiculous to care so much about shoes, but just . . . well, since the Jonas conversation, anything can flip me like a coin these days.

Which is why Elodie’s concern for my shoes is comforting. She knows the Arrival Day shoes. She knows how much time and energy I’d spent finding the Arrival Day shoes. She knows just how much I’ve saved up from my less-than-affluent home health job to get the shoes. And she knows that no matter how ridiculous the emerald-green leather slippers and their near-constant jingling coming from the tips of the curlicue toes are,

how also terrifyingly little it takes to make me lapse into tears right now.

It's pathetic, really.

I already wept on the way here spotting a rat beside an old Chinese takeout box, recalling the way I'd clung to Jonas the first time I'd seen one in the city.

Me. Just standing there on the curb at four thirty in the morning. My blinking Christmas tree sweater glowing in the dark as I stared longingly at a rat. Weeping.

I find an old receipt in my purse and commence wiping. The liquid-resistant thermal paper proves worthless from the start, and while Elodie continues to mother me, I switch to using my palm. "Okay," she says, "it says here that if it starts to stain, you need to mix one part white vinegar with two parts water. Do you have any vinegar with you?"

I drop my head. "Sure, Elodie. There's a vinegar kiosk right by the bathrooms."

"Honey, I've got forty more baguettes to make before opening, and I'm juggling the miracle of internet research while up to my neck in dough. Productive words only, please. Did you at least find some tissues?"

I look down at my dripping palm. "More or less."

And while Elodie carries on, traipsing down a long path of vinegar substitutes I may be able to wrangle from the dining car once aboard, I become aware of the travelers bustling by, all hugging their black purses and briefcases against their black winter coats, no doubt heading for a cup of coffee before driving themselves straight into the madness of New York City during Christmas. I am aware of how their gait slows as they pass me and my ensemble, and how their gazes drag. At least two follow with a sweep of the concrete floor around me, looking no doubt for some sort of hat or box detailing where to leave tips for the entertainer should she jump into performance.

Well. This is what I get for being early.

I must've sighed again, because the next moment Elodie is talking in my ear.

“You really should try to get some sleep when you're on the train, Willow. You're not doing yourself any favors *going, going, going* the past three days. I'm afraid if I let you off the phone, you'll nod off and fall onto the tracks.”

“I'm fine.”

“You've arrived two hours early for a train you don't even want to be on.”

“I took a nap yesterday.” I ignore the urge to yawn. “And anyway, I just couldn't stand another minute staring at my ceiling. I needed to do something. I needed to *go*.”

Which is true. Whereas I've always been jittery before flying out to Mom's, now I felt it more than ever. The day Jonas broke up with me, I just sort of stood there in a daze—wherever *there* happened to be. Well, and crying. Pretty much dehydrating myself as a constant leaky faucet. But yesterday morning, day two of my new life single, I woke up with a start, and my legs itched to jump up and go. As though my body was trying to compensate for the fact that my mind had become stuck in quicksand, and it had decided overnight it was going to handle all the movement from now on.

So, I got busy.

Shampooed every piece of fabric in the apartment.

Washed every towel and sheet we had.

Went on a grocery shopping spree and bought fifty-six lemons, then proceeded to make lemon meringue pie for every resident in our building.

Ate half a lemon meringue pie.

Spent way too long in front of a pet store, considering buying a cat.

Decided the cat was a bad idea before traveling, and instead decided it'd be brilliant to learn how to crochet for the train ride.

Watched a dozen videos on how to crochet for the train ride, went to the yarn store and bought supplies, realized it didn't really make much sense to give up two hundred dollars for the privilege of spending one hundred hours learning to crochet a subpar sweater when I could just pop down to Reminiscence consignment with a twenty-dollar bill, and hauled everything back to the store.

Packed.

Ate the other half of the lemon meringue pie.

Dressed to the nines in an explosion of Christmas cheer.

And now, here I am.

Ready for my two-week-long train ride across the country on The Christmas Express. And the only thing truly different about the reality of this moment versus what I'd dreamed it would look like all year is that, instead of holding one golden ticket to hand to some cheery conductor at precisely 7:12 a.m., I'm holding two. One for me. One for my boyfriend of seven years who met a waitress on the corner of 55th and 10th precisely three-and-a-half days ago and decided he was instantly in love. I don't know how, given the depth of their conversation couldn't have gone much further than, "Do you want your eggs sunny side up or scrambled?" but there it is.

So now, instead of traveling on the yuletide getaway I'd been dreaming about since I first clipped out the magazine ad about it four years ago, Jonas is driving down to the mountains of West Virginia, where his new love, *Be-cky*, and her family will share a holiday meal. While those in my family who haven't heard the news continue to run bets on where Jonas was going to propose (would it be under the tree Christmas morning? Or something terribly romantic on the train beforehand?), I get the joy of preparing how to convincingly converse with a flippant smile. "Actually, *and this is no big deal whatsoever*, we broke up after all. Yes, even though he bought the train tickets. No, Aunt Elda, I don't know what we should do with all the extra artichoke dip for the engagement party. I suppose, eat it."

As for me, I'm spending two weeks on a trip marketed by *Time* and *Leisure* as, "The Most Romantic Getaway of the Season." What *Parade* calls, "The Most Nostalgic Christmas Vacation You'll Ever Experience." Two weeks on a train full of doe-eyed couples—alone.

Because that's what you get when you have a nonrefundable ticket, a need to get home for Christmas, and a life on a tight budget. You get to be surrounded by couples mooning over heart-shaped marshmallows in their cocoa and ardently kissing under mistletoe. You get to be in purgatory.

"Well, at least you looked very nice this morning," Elodie says. "Frankly, I'm a bit surprised you decided to dress up."

"I'm trying to make up for the death I feel on the inside," I reply, raising my voice to be heard as another train slides up to the platform.

Elodie's right though. Aside from the dried tear streaks down both cheeks, I'm a far cry more pulled together today. Instead of the bird's nest held together by grease and desperation that has accompanied me the past three days, my chestnut curls bounced buoyantly as I walked through town—as if they have tired of my emotional turmoil and have chosen to persist despite me. And I took extra pains with my mascara and liner this morning, which, at least before the great rat sighting, made my typically pale-green eyes sing in chorus with the blinking green bulbs of my Christmas sweater. And then, of course, there is the outfit: the cheery tree sweater, followed by a black corduroy skirt, black tights, and elf slippers.

"And I decided," I continue, "if I have to break the rules by going alone, I might as well follow the recommended dress code on the welcome packet."

"You didn't break the rules," Elodie counters. "Nobody is going to think that."

There's a long pause. I'm not going to argue with her. I know she's right. Still, I can't help feeling a bit guilty for being the train's unintentional third wheel.

“Can I be honest with you, Willow?”

My brows rise. In our five years together as roommates, I can't recall a moment where Elodie has been anything *aside* from honest.

“I find Jonas repulsive.”

“Well, of course we find him repulsive,” I shoot back. “That's been the group cheer the past three days. Your job is to keep me supplied with macarons while telling me he's a horrible person.”

“And if you recall I did pat your head and stuff your sobby little ungrateful face with meticulously baked macarons, and I did ask where he was so I could hound him down. *But* what I mean is not just despising him now after everything. I'm saying he's repulsive. He's always been repulsive. And your taste in men is an appalling enigma.”

A full minute passes in silence between us while a train whirs by, and all I can think to say when I speak again is, “How long have you thought this?”

“Five years.”

I laugh in disbelief. “There's no way. You've hung out with him thousands of times over the past five years. *Thousands*. You threw us a surprise anniversary party last year. He asked you to be the godmother for our children one day, *and you hugged him and cried*. You can't be that good of a liar.”

“It's chilling what I can achieve for the sake of my friends.”

My eyes widen. Yes. Yes, it was.

“Annnyway,” she says, her tone unnervingly brighter, “the point is, Jonas was selfish and weird about his stuff. You give to a fault. Jonas was boring. *You*, when you're not drowning in despair at least, are a delight.”

I frown. “Thank you.”

“And Jonas, quite frankly, was a jerk who always knew he wouldn't end up with you and strung you along far too long.”

I shake my head. “No. He loved me.”

“Yes, but he didn’t love you *enough*. And he knew that. And he waited until he had somebody else in the wings to let you go.”

“And lastly,” Elodie rushes on before I can reply, “and most importantly, I don’t think you really loved him enough either.”

I feel slapped. “Elodie, you know that’s not true. I would’ve married him.”

“I absolutely agree. You’d have stuck through it with him just like you’ve stuck with everything else in your life. For better or for worse.”

Hey now. “Not true.”

“Tell me, how long exactly have you stood in front of every pet store in town, mulling over whether or not to get a cat but never do?”

“Jonas was allergic, you know that.”

“He just didn’t *like* them, and *you* know that. What do you eat every Friday night?”

I know where she’s going. “Taste of Thai. But that’s only because it’s downstairs and they have the best egg rolls in the Village. That’s a well-known fact.”

“And where do you shop almost exclusively?”

We answer simultaneously, “Reminiscence consignment.”

“And who is your best friend?”

“I’m not sure.” I narrow my eyes. “I may be about to be in the market for a new one.”

“There’s a *but* here.” Elodie ignores me. “*But* thankfully, you *are* my little *ma belle petite étoile*. You are my beautiful little star. You may not welcome new adventures without being thrust out by the boot, but now that this is where you’ve landed, you’re only going to be the better for it. I believe it. I’m *certain*.”

There are several more “buck ups” and “once you take off those Jonas blinders, you’ll see how wonderful the world is” statements, followed by a fair share of demands like, “Now if

you see this difficult-to-find cheese or that rare-and-authentic ingredient somewhere, make sure to buy three . . .” that all ends with a string of French expletives and a *click* when her baguettes start to burn.

As I pull the Bluetooth out of my ear, I take in my surroundings. The small platform between the trains is empty now, but for a single trash can beneath blue signs. Two empty trains wait silently on either side, making the space look suddenly quite lonely and forsaken. I hadn't intended to stay down here so long. Only enough to take a quick peek to be certain I had the train right and then move back upstairs to wait it out in the main hall.

I drop the old receipt in the trash can, and when I turn back toward my suitcases, stop.

A man is standing halfway down the stairs.

One hand resting on the silver railing, his back leg lingers on a step behind him as though having been busily on his way down when stopped abruptly. The look in his eyes confirms it. The thing that had stopped him was me. *Me*.

There's a light in his eyes, almost as bright as the shiny bronze bell at the end of his emerald-green hat. In fact, from his head to his toes he's in emerald green, save for the black leather slippers curling at the ends. Sandy-blond hair curlicues beneath his hat, and his cheeks, well, they look as ruddy and innocent as if he were a live-in-the-flesh elf himself.

While he stands there, smiling at me through his gingerbread-brown eyes, I can't help but feel a tingle run through my spine.

Although, to be fair, at the moment the reason is cut down the middle on whether this is because I may have run into a psychopath, or because . . . well, something much cozier.

“Excuse me,” he says, and his voice is rich and deep as though he isn't in fact wearing an elf costume but instead is a dignified businessman in a trench coat who just had to stop and talk to the beautiful woman. He holds out a hand. “I just

have to commend you. That is one of the most striking Arrival Day ensembles I've ever seen."

Then he beams at me. Actually beams, as though I fulfilled and exceeded every task.

For the first time in a long time, I feel a funny feeling on my cheeks as two warm, no doubt bright, spots form. "Why . . . thank you," I say, then wave at him, "And you . . . you have a lovely Arrival Day ensemble on too."

We smile at each other for one infinite moment.

He glances at the watch hidden beneath his gold-threaded cuff. "Say, we have a little while before the train comes. Want to grab a cup of coffee?"

And just like that, the Jonas blinders have flown off.

Chapter 2

All Aboard!

“Ian’s *amazing*,” I whisper, ripping off a paper towel beneath the fluorescent lights of the station’s restroom. Hastily, I drench it under cold water.

“Sweetie—”

“And so *sweet*.” I lean in until I’m two inches away from the mirror for a full examination of my makeup.

“Now just hang on—”

“And we have *so much in common*. It’s unbelievable, Elodie! He loves traveling. Talked for nearly twenty minutes about his absolute passion for all things planes, trains, or automobiles. And yes,” I add, before she can protest, “I know I haven’t exactly *traveled* a lot, but I’ve always *wanted to*. Oh! And his heart for animals”—I clutch the soggy paper towel to my chest in memory of the sweet conversation of his dog (or was it cat?), Chaucer, with whom he is so inseparable they not only share the bed but breakfast—“and *reading*.” I swoon internally at one of my favorite reminders. “Ian says he doesn’t even *own* a television. Says he’s always preferred literature as the ‘paramount form of entertainment for his mind.’ Tell me, Elodie, when’s the last time you’ve ever heard *any* man prefer a book to television?”

“*Willow*,” Elodie cuts in sharply. “When I gave you that little pep talk an hour and a half ago about finding other fish in the sea, I didn’t mean to find the *literal* first human being you spot and reel him in.”

“I know that.” I blot at a mascara spot beneath my eye. “I know. It’s just . . . he’s perfect.”

“Noooo.” Elodie’s voice slides on the word until it hits a note a full octave higher. “See, what you actually have is a grown man in an elf costume who bought you a crappy cup of coffee in a train station. And what I have on my hands right now is a sleep-deprived, emotionally unhinged roommate who’s been so dispossessed of proper treatment in the relationship department that she’s ready to hitch her wagon to the first guy she meets. Do *not* get yourself too entangled with this guy. Remember, you are rebounding, sweetie. *Rebounding*. You can’t trust your instincts right now.”

I frown at myself in the mirror as I begin swiping beneath the other eye. “This isn’t rebounding.”

“Honey, this is the *definition* of rebounding. If I were leading a class on the art of rebounding, you would be my example.”

A janitor walks her yellow bucket and sopping mop into the bathroom, and I lower my voice even further. “It is only rebounding if the man doesn’t turn out to be *the one*.”

A string of French curses ensues, followed by, “Willow Renee Fairbanks. Do I need to come down there *and get you?*”

This follows with one long lecture, along with whole sections of untranslated paragraphs I can only assume were repetitions she felt were so important they needed to be included in two languages. I’m fairly used to these ramblings at this point in my life, and while she carries on, I finish reapplying some mascara, do what I can to retwist some curls that are already coming undone, and give my cheeks a couple life-lifting slaps.

“Elodie, I love your concern for me, but I gotta go,” I interject at last, slipping my purse over one shoulder and giving a parting smile to the janitor as I leave.

“Do *not* elope with this guy!” Elodie replies, as though sliding in that last-second warning just might save me from imminent disaster. “Or make any last-minute decisions of any

kind. You hear me? *Do not make any big decisions of any kind.*”

I finish the call and cross through the open exit, where Ian’s face immediately comes into view. He’s standing at a polite distance from the restroom, not so close that it’s creepy, but just close enough that it’s clear he’s waiting for someone. *Me.* Guarding my suitcases, he holds both of our second cups of coffee.

As I move in, he grins widely and hands me mine.

“Just about time for the *big arrival*,” he says, and his eyes positively dance. “Shall we?”

He takes the handle of one of the suitcases, which allows me to hold the second in one hand and my coffee in the other. And so, together, we move.

Like an adorable couple.

Bing Crosby’s “Silver Bells” is playing over the speakers, and as we walk along, just two elves in a sea of black coats, I can’t help glancing at him out of the corner of my eye. We’ve shared about our hobbies and habits, but I still am a bit afraid to bring up exactly how he ended up on this train like me. Alone. Or if there’s not some elf girlfriend straggling behind.

After all, this is a *romantic* holiday getaway for two. And I can’t help noticing, he isn’t carrying any luggage.

And while he’s been chummy and nothing short of delightful, at the same time, it’d be terribly embarrassing to assume what he’s thinking. He did buy me coffee, yes. But that could just have been a friendly gesture with a fellow passenger. I *think* he pulled a chair out for me at the little coffee shop, but then there’s a halfway decent chance he actually tripped on the leg of the chair and recovered with a little dance step after. He attentively listened and nodded almost nonstop with his ruddy cheeks and twinkling eyes, but it *could* be that he’s just the friendliest elf alive.

Dash it. I’m going for it.

“So,” I say, as we move underneath the sign directing us toward our train and follow its arrow toward the opening with

its descending stairs, “I can’t help but notice you’re going stag on this little excursion for two.”

“You know? I can’t help but notice the same for you.” He adjusts his grip on the suitcase, lifts it, and, together, we take our first step down.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach at his tone.

“Actually,” he continues, slower now, “I was . . . wondering . . . as we’re both going alone . . . maybe we could partner up on this trip. Traveling is always so much nicer when you have someone to enjoy it with.”

“Yes,” I say immediately. Elodie’s fists are pounding somewhere in the back of my cranium.

But this isn’t a big decision. I’m just saying yes to partnering up for the next two weeks. Just two weeks. What’s the alternative anyway? Doing everything alone? I smile up at Ian. “Yes. That’d be really nice. I’ve never been to . . .”

But as the platform comes into sight below, my words fade. Because standing there, smoke curling around its chimney, is our train.

I don’t know what I had expected it to look like before; something akin to all the other mud-dusted silver bullets that have come in and out of the station. But *this*. This is something entirely different. Gleaming candy-apple red paint across the body, trimmed throughout in gold and green. A colossal wreath hangs on the front of the engine, the scent of pine needles already waging and winning the fight against the typical greasy air. And through the cab window sits a conductor in a dark-green coat and wide-crowned pershing hat, pulling a golden rope that leads to a large brass bell. The walls echo with its chime.

If there was still any question, letters fall across the body of the train in gold script.

The Christmas Express.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Ian breathes with a sigh of near reverence. He looks practically giddy as his pace quickens

down the stairs. “C’mon”—he turns behind him and, with my own heart momentarily faltering, winks—“partner.”

Chapter 3

Polar Express

A short, stout man in a red nutcracker suit stands at the opening to the train, taking tickets with one black-gloved hand while tipping his tall black hat in welcome with the other. Elves scurry this way and that at the nutcracker's command, relieving patrons of luggage and laptop bags and, in the case of one passenger, at least twenty gift bags overflowing with red and green tissue paper.

Ian ushers me forward with a gentle press on my lower back, I notice with flushing cheeks, and before I know it, I'm handing Mr. Nutcracker my ticket.

He slides it onto the top of the stack in his hand, and while he does so both he, and I, seem to notice mine is different than the others. Thicker. Whereas the others are coal black with a dignified red script, mine looks more like Willy Wonka's golden ticket.

Huh.

It clearly means something, because the man raises his bushy brows to give me a proper look, and next thing I know he's nodding over his shoulder—where an older man, dressed in what I'm fairly certain could only have come from a vintage shop full of old English butler's suits, materializes out of thin air.

“Welcome aboard The Christmas Express, Miss Fairbanks.” The ticket taker takes my hand in his gloved one and glides me over the small opening between platform and train. He inclines his head toward the man. “Jenkins here will guide you to your

suite and see to any needs. Would you like Miss Lacey, one of our lovely elves, to partake in your complimentary unpacking service while we bring you a beverage?”

“I—” I’m momentarily stumped for a response and cling tighter to the paper coffee cup in my hand. I don’t know how much Jonas paid for our tickets, but it’s *quite* clear he upgraded.

But of course he did. An old East Egg money boy, Jonas always upgraded whenever there was an option. Made amends for offenses the way his parents and grandparents and great-grandparents did—through gift giving. The greater the offense, the greater the reparation. And if I recall correctly, the particular evening he’d bought our tickets was after the funeral of a dear woman I took care of exclusively for two years.

When Jonas, hands on the steering wheel as we drove slowly in the procession line through the rain, mistook my grieving tears for tears of anxiety over my job loss, he said, “This is exactly why I said you shouldn’t have taken this job, Willow. You put all your eggs in one basket and now, look. The basket’s dead. *Diversification*. If you are going to try and eke out a living at this, please start listening to me and *at least* practice diversification.”

Yes. That explains the Golden Ticket.

Mr. Nutcracker looks at me expectantly.

“Oh no,” I say. I can just imagine the horror on the elf’s face upon seeing all the thrift store cardigans and holey jeans stuffed inside my suitcase. I’m certainly not the steam-my-pashminas-and-be-sure-to-color-coordinate-my-cashmere-neutrals material. “I can unpack myself. Thank you though.”

To prove my point further, I reach for my suitcases, but when I turn around, Ian is no longer Charming Mystery Train Man turned Getaway Partner. No, now he’s Helpful Elf, standing at attention with both of my suitcases, no coffee in sight.

“Ian?” I begin, and then the pieces begin to click together. “Ohhh . . . Ian. You’re—”

“Assistant Head Elf Perkins, at your service.” The heels of his elf shoes click together as he says so and my brow furrows, ever so slightly, as I hear the new pitch in his voice. Gone is the rich baritone, and in its place is a squeaky, childish tone a full octave higher.

“Right . . .” I say slowly, taking this in. “But we were just —”

“Taking a short break between stations.” There’s that familiar twinkle in his eye as his voice lowers. “Even elves have to have their coffee.”

A group is gathering behind us in the aisle. I realize I’m starting to clog it up. “Oh of course. Right. That makes . . . sense.” I turn back toward my guide and muster up my voice to a cheery note, all the while trying to process the sudden shift in situation. “Terrific. I’ll follow you then.”

As I walk through the aisles in our little entourage, I take in the train. The aisle is lined with carpet in an intricately detailed weave of forest green. Rich red velvet chairs face one another in groups of four, each seat back embellished with a bell in golden thread. The air is thick with the smell of mulled cider and hot chocolate, which isn’t surprising as nearly every one of the thirty or so couples I pass seems to be grinning childishly at one another while clutching a porcelain mug. An orchestra plays a resounding rendition of “Do You Hear What I Hear?” through the speakers. The hum of excitement and anticipation is impossible to ignore.

We pass aisle after aisle, and car after car, until just before walking through yet another velvet curtain, Jenkins stops.

He turns toward a door. Gives the knob such a subtle yet refined twist I realize I’ve been doing it all wrong before. The door glides open, and Jenkins puts out a hand. “Your suite, Miss Fairbanks.”

I step inside. And gape.

Suite is an understatement; it’s more like an empire. Whereas everyone else on the train is coupled in groups of

four facing one another with just enough legroom to recline, this—*this*—is something entirely different.

To the right is a fire—an actual fire—with flames licking the glass of the small woodstove, whose black pipe drifts upward and through the ceiling. Two mason green-striped wingback chairs face it, a small, needlepoint ottoman of Santa on his sleigh on each side. The walls are of deep-maroon damask wallpaper, and as I turn, my knees nearly buckle at the sight of a Christmas tree standing beside a mahogany four-poster bed. Wall-to-wall windows spread across the length of the bed, with a red-and-green plaid couch laden with throw pillows and a stack of sheets, quilts, and soft wool blankets on the other side. Two butter-soft-looking robes hang from a closet door, with another door cracked open to what appears to be a bathroom beyond. At the foot of the door sits a basket overflowing with peppermint bath bombs, candles, and a card.

I walk to the tree, and both Jenkins and Ian, I'm vaguely aware, follow in identical formation.

“Are you quite sure this is mine?” I take in the scent of pine as I touch the string of cranberries. Sure enough they compress slightly at my squeeze. The real thing. All of this.

It's too good to be true.

“Quite, Miss Fairbanks,” Jenkins says. “We arranged everything according to Mr. Yates's wishes. Even”—he nods to the couch—“with regard to the surplus bedding.”

And blinking in the words, I realize. This wasn't the standard Jonas upgrade. This wasn't just the typical “Let's upgrade to first class” situation.

Here, this is when Jonas would've proposed. He'd love the pictures. He'd love the background of the wingback chairs and the crackling of the woodstove fire. Perhaps he had already enlisted Jenkins to videotape it.

I'm as certain I'm standing in the exact spot where I would've gone from girlfriend to fiancée as I know my own life.

Ah.

Well.

I purse my lips and pluck a pine needle from the Christmas tree. All the better.

All.

The.

Better.

Now I have a gorgeous suite to enjoy all to myself, and—I glance over to Ian, who at the moment is grinning a little too brightly—*and* a nice guy to sit next to beside that cozy fire. When he's off duty. And a human again.

Is he currently overworking his smile to force dimples in his cheeks like a true elf?

I turn back to Jenkins and clasp my hands together in front of me. “This is absolutely *beautiful*. Thank you. I guess I'll just . . . start unpacking then.”

“As you wish.” And to my surprise Jenkins seems relieved—as though passengers in the past have actually given him trouble about all *this*. “And how about your beverage?” Discreetly he's already slipped a paper out of his suit jacket and begins to read. “We have a number of options, Miss Fairbanks, all available with spirits upon request. Mulled cider. Mulled cider with a touch of cinnamon. Mulled cider with a sliver of orange peel. Hot cocoa. Hot cocoa with marshmallows. Hot cocoa with cinnamon marshmallows. Hot cocoa with—”

“A cocoa would be nice.”

“Very good.” Jenkins nods and slips the paper back in his breast pocket as though used to being interrupted around this point. “And for Mr. Yates?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ian's dimples twitch.

For a long moment there's silence but for the quiet crackling of the fire.

“Mr. Yates has found himself otherwise occupied,” I say, forcing an air of ease and a flicker Ian's way. “Permanently. It

seems.”

“Ah. I am . . . sorry.” Jenkins’s eyes drift down to my fingers, which I realize are betraying me by shredding the pine needle into a hundred tiny pieces in my hands. Then to the tree behind me. Then to the basket by the door. No doubt he’s thinking of previous conversations with Jonas. When his gaze returns to me, they are full of compassion. “You know, I—I do believe our baker, Mrs. Byrd, has some fresh cookies coming out of the oven momentarily. Perhaps it’d be a nice complement to your cocoa.” His eyes crinkle lightly as he attempts a smile, like a father trying to do his best to sew up an awkward situation he’d much prefer not to be in.

I nod. “That’d be perfect.”

As they depart, Ian lingers just long enough to break the elf-act and give me a wink. “I’ll see you soon,” he whispers, and then he’s gone.

Five minutes later, Jenkins shows up with a gold tray covered to the brim in gingerbread men and icing-laden sugar cookies in the shapes of snowflakes and Christmas trees and bells.

Poor Jenkins, I think, thanking him repeatedly as I take the tray from him. I overwhelmed the old fellow.

I send an update text to Elodie—who by now I know is knee-deep in the busyness of the bakery—unpack, toss the card while keeping the basket full of bath bombs, and settle into one wingback chair with my mug of hot chocolate just as the train begins to shudder and move.

And here we go. I watch the platform of the train station disappear from view. The cocoa smells deeply of nutmeg and cinnamon, and with the tray of cookies on the ottoman at my side, I watch the scenery change from concrete blocks and tunnel lights to gray skies and graffiti walls to, eventually, the snow-covered forests of Connecticut woodlands.

Two bundles of wood in the stove later, I’m just polishing off my fifth cookie when a knock sounds on the door. More specifically, to the tune of “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.”

As I slide open the door, I'm greeted by an immediate new level of action. Staff are hastening through the aisle carrying clattering trays of this and that. "Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!" is playing over the speakers, and a hum of chatter resonates as the passengers have seemed to all awaken from the whispered revelry of that first golden hour. Before me stands a rather petite, rather cheerful, female elf.

"Your schedule, Miss Fairbanks." She hands me a thick card. "You'll find several elective activities down at the Mistletoe Room; lunch, unfortunately, is running a little behind but should be here soon; and of particular note is that we should be arriving at our evening destination tomorrow by four. We've included a suggested list for attire for your first activity . . ."

As my eyes scan the list, I can't help becoming distracted by one particularly surprising sound rising above the others. It's a baby. Or possibly a tortured coyote. It's hard at the moment to tell.

A baby? A baby on this train?

I look toward the source of the noise, and sure enough, two rows up stands one stressed-looking couple holding one very upset infant, and one stressed-looking Jenkins apparently trying to sort the situation out.

His face is as red as the velvet seats, perspiration glistening from his bald head. "But if, perhaps, you could possibly help to quiet the baby down from your quarters," he says, so gently you practically see his words trying to tiptoe over eggshells.

Clearly this wasn't the right thing to say, because the woman bouncing the baby in her arms looks at the point of explosion. "I've spent the past *two hours* hiding away in that closet. Surely nobody would expect me to jump back in there the second she cries."

"It's just . . . we have to be mindful of the other passengers . . ."

The infant arches backward and lets out an almighty cry.

Maybe “feral cat” is a better term to describe the baby. Or “derailing train with wheels screeching desperately.” You know, there are a surprising number of metaphors.

The man checks over his shoulder at all the strained faces and looks on the point of caving, but the woman clutching the baby lifts her chin. “Look,” she says, cheeks flaring, “I really am trying to be sensitive to everyone else here. It’s just maybe if I try a new location, she’ll calm down—”

“I understand. But . . . if we could discuss this in another location . . .”

And while she continues to stand her ground, it becomes a little clearer what is going on. The couple had purchased their tickets over a year ago, like nearly everyone on the train, but with the emergent placement of the infant as a kinship situation in their hands just five days ago, they found themselves suddenly in a tight corner.

The company had offered an exception to the rule in what sounds like a moment of sympathy, but the reality of the screaming infant—who apparently is both reacting to recent trauma and *severely* resistant to the overexposure of sights and sounds—is throwing a damp rag on the festive cheer of the passengers around them, and apparently the couple themselves.

Eventually, as Jenkins’s soothing words and unyielding logic begin to tip the scales, the woman’s defiance peters out. It’s clear she is closer to tears than anyone.

Poor woman. Missing out on the trip they’d worked so hard for because of their own willingness to take their kin in. Clearly I wasn’t the only one thrown by surprises on this grand getaway.

My phone rings on the wingback chair, no doubt Elodie too worked up by my texts to simply text back, and as I look inside my suite with its snapping fire and cozy bed, I see the room with fresh eyes.

Fresh, stinging eyes.

It must be done though.

It must.

With an almighty mental push, I clear my throat as I step quickly toward the group. “Mr. Jenkins . . . sir . . .”

Chapter 4

Here We Come A-Wassailing

It takes a full fifteen minutes of standing awkwardly in the aisle, convincing first a very hesitant Jenkins, then the very hesitant interim guardian parents, but after repeating myself at least thirty times, they all finally take my offer. Plus, a few timely infant screams help move things along.

All during this time passengers openly looked on, which now that I was in the spotlight, helped me understand why exactly Jenkins had more than one bead of sweat trembling on his temples.

There was one passenger in particular whom Jenkins seemed particularly aware of through the exchange, to the point that I wanted to ask why. Why does Jenkins keep an eye on the older gentleman in the seat opposite the couples? Why does he care what the single passenger who keeps his own gaze out the window, hands resting on his cane, thinks? Of all the passengers who were irritated by the noise or looked like they were stringing up complaint emails in their minds, the older man looked the least concerned or offended by the situation—not to mention this suggested arrangement would benefit him most. So why does Jenkins dart his eyes continuously his way?

“And are you really sure, Miss Fairbanks?” Jenkins says one last time as the couple gathers up their belongings.

“*Really.*” Hoping to truly and finally convince him, I reach out and give his arm a light squeeze. “Really. The place was much too big for me anyway. Besides, the ambiance out here looks like a lot more fun.”

And to some extent, I'm not just saying it to get him to stop saying, "But, Miss Fairbanks . . . the company truly will be unable to refund you . . ."

It really does look cheerier out here, among the hustle and bustle and mingling of a hundred jovial smells and words and songs. The suite was lovely, but to be perfectly honest, it already had started to feel a little isolating.

Perfect, I hope, for a baby and a celebrating couple. Not quite so perfect for the girl who gets a little too inside her own head when left alone for long periods.

"But, Miss Fairbanks—" Jenkins begins again.

"Henry," interjects the older gentleman in the corner, looking away from the window at last. He levels his gaze on Jenkins, his voice gentle but with quiet authority. "The young lady has graciously offered to give up her suite to the couple and the baby. Let the young lady partake in such seasonal goodwill."

This, at last, shuts Jenkins up.

And after several handshakes, and one surprising hug from the grateful couple, they are whisked off and all my belongings aside from luggage—which evidently will head to a new sleeping quarter somewhere else on the train—are brought to me.

"So, I guess I'll take one of these." I shuffle into my new little compartment where the older man sits. Of the two pairs of seats facing each other, it's just the two of us, and as I settle into a seat opposite him, I take him in.

He looks to be in his seventies, with puffs of cloud-white hair curling over his ears and down a trailing beard. Though the seats are roomy enough for me to sit crisscross should I choose, I notice he's filled his in, the buttons on his crimson sweater vest straining as they fight to stay closed. His eyes are baby blue. The only thing keeping me from calling him Santa right now is the fact that there is no rosy hue to his cheeks.

In fact, he looks downright pale.

From habit I glance down to his right hip and, sure enough, spot the bulge of the small black box tucked away.

“Hi.” I lean forward in my seat with my hand extended. “I’m Willow. And . . . I couldn’t help noticing how Mr. Jenkins wanted your approval back there.”

The Almost Santa releases his cane to take my hand, and despite the paleness of his face, he gives a whisper of a smile. “Yes, Henry has always been a bit on the nervous side. You get the company into one lawsuit over chestnuts over an open fire ten years ago . . .” His words trail off, but in his face and eyes is a twinkle. “I’m Clarence.”

I laugh, while at the same time noting the way his hand shakes ever so slightly as it leaves mine and returns to grip his cane. I want to ask more of this man who so obviously has a history here, but first things first.

“Would you like some almonds?” I say, all the while plopping my purse on the seat next to me and beginning to dig. It only takes a moment to find the Ziploc bag of snacks. I spot the containers of apple juice and reach for them. “Oh! I have an apple juice too,” I say brightly, then hold it up for him to see.

As I do so, he regards me.

“Both would be greatly appreciated. Thank you.”

“No problem.” I hand them off.

I open a bag of trail mix of my own, not so much out of hunger after the last half-dozen cookies but to keep him company. For a few minutes we eat in silence, watching the icicle drips move nearer and nearer the coast out the window.

It’s a snap decision, but already I sense I’m going to like him.

I tend to have two types of clients—ones who feel the need to discuss every little decision ten times over, and the ones, typically men, who would talk about the weather in the middle of a heart attack. I’ve always had a special spot in my heart for the latter.

“I am a little surprised.” I note the time on my watch: 1:37. “I know they said they were running late, but it’s getting up there and there aren’t any trays in sight. We can’t be the only hungry ones.”

“They haven’t brought you anything?” comes a man’s voice over my shoulder, and I nearly toss my almonds in my startle.

He is far underdressed in comparison to the richly tasseled uniforms of nutcrackers and slippered elves, and yet there is an unmistakable sense of authority about him. Somewhere, I’d guess, on the southern end of his thirties. He wears a nutmeg cardigan, beneath which is a plaid button-up and matching tie. As he grips the back of my seat, I see the matching pair of snowflake-blue eyes as my Santa companion.

Ah. And here is his son.

“I’m fine,” Clarence says, a couple almond crumbs lingering on his beard to prove the point. He gestures to me. “I know how busy you all are—”

“I told Ian to bring your meal an hour ago,” the man protests, his frown between his brows deep. “He should have brought it to you *well* before the others.” He stands and puts a hand on his hip. “I *knew* I should’ve done it myself—”

“Never mind, Oliver,” Clarence breaks in. “I know my way to the kitchen. And even so, I didn’t need to”—he nods to me—“thanks to my new companion here, who is admirably resourceful.”

And sure enough, I do glow a little inside at the accolade, both because I’ve been a little starved for compliments these days and because it really is satisfying to see the pink returning to his cheeks.

Oliver shifts his gaze my way for the first time, as though he’d been so engulfed in concern for his father that he hadn’t even seen anybody else in our section. He blinks and in that millisecond seems to register what is going on.

“Miss *Fairbanks*.” He reaches quickly forward to shake my hand.

I take it, a little stunned at how quickly I've gone from the invisible person to one of importance.

"On behalf of The Christmas Express, I want to express our gratitude. Jenkins says the Patel family is settling in very nicely. Truly, I cannot thank you enough. For that," his eyes shift to his father, "and evidently, for this."

"It was nothing," I say, cheeks warming by all the fanfare of the last hour.

"It *was*." He levels his gaze, his eyes so deep blue they hold a wellful of sincerity. "In a day when a hundred things have gone wrong, you have saved me not just from one disaster, but two."

His gaze is so sincere and unyielding and his hand so warm in its grip of mine that I feel the temptation to giggle nervously like a schoolgirl. Almost.

"Now I wouldn't go so far as all that," grumbles Clarence from his perch, frowning as he looks out the window. "Now the derailment of '69, that was a disaster . . ."

I bite my lip to button a smile as I look back to his son and let go of his grip. "A derauling train? Yes. Well. That certainly would better fit the description of disaster."

"He exaggerates." Oliver rolls his eyes. "A two-hundred-pound deer on the track does *not* equal derailment, or even the threat of it."

"It was a *big* deer."

I laugh, which seems to please Oliver, and he shakes his head as if just realizing something. "I'm so sorry, I haven't introduced myself. Oliver Lodge, conductor in chief." He holds out his hand again, before he retracts it suddenly. "Ah. Sorry. Force of habit."

"We can shake again," I say, grinning broadly as I put out my own for a second time. "I'd hate to be responsible for breaking your routine. Nice to meet you, Oliver." I give his hand a hearty second shake. "I'm guessing you're following in your father's footsteps."

“Trying to. If we don’t break down first.” A distant clatter of a tray falling, from the sound of it, flows down the aisle, and Oliver sighs and checks over his shoulder. His shaking hand stalls but doesn’t let go. “Listen.” He looks back to me. “I would like to repay you for your kindness today—”

“Truly.” I pull my hand away. It was time to put my foot down about this. To stop the commotion. “No need—”

“Have you ever driven a train?”

Oh. The surprising shift in question succeeds in derailing me momentarily from my stop-praising-me agenda. “Well . . . no.”

“Would you like to?” A rather charming grin slips up one cheek. “Makes quite the story at dinner parties. You’ll be a hit.”

I pause, eyeing him suspiciously. “Well . . . I *would* like to be a hit.”

His grin widens. “It’s settled then.” He claps his hands together. “Tomorrow after your excursion, I’ll swing by and pick you up.”

“That’d be . . . lovely.” All of a sudden I feel acutely aware of his father sitting a foot away from the exchange, the elbow-jammed-in-the-rib sense that his choice of words sounded a whole lot like . . . well . . . a romantic gesture (although one could never be sure), and that the heat radiating off my cheeks could, at that very moment, fry an egg.

But one thing is sure.

I quite like the sound of it all, I admit to myself after Oliver strides back down the aisle and vanishes through the emerald curtain. I’ve never driven a train before. In fact, having lived in the city so long, I’m not even sure my driver’s license is in good standing. But there it is. Me. Driving a train. With Oliver.

My stomach seizes up a little at the thought of it all, especially the last part. Which is absolutely ridiculous, because Jonas and I broke up a total of three days ago and I have jumped into a train relationship with Ian.

Ian.

I try not to grimace. Elodie really could write a lecture titled “How to Fail at Rebounding” from me.

“One cold glass of milk and cookies for Miss Fairbanks.” I jump at the voice that manifested out of my thoughts, and my temples pulse as I turn to see Ian’s bright, shiny face leaning over with a platter.

I need to move farther away to the window seat, where people can’t keep startling me.

“Oh,” I say, looking at the rather unappetizing platter of cookies before me.

“The one you—” Ian gives me a significant look before darting his eyes toward Clarence. “*Ordered.*”

Oh, dear. And here he is, trying to sneak in a sweet gesture.

“How . . . lovely.” Begrudgingly, I take the platter in my lap.

I stare at the cookies. The beady eyes of the sugar-cookie snowmen are leering at me. Taunting me.

Ian waits expectantly, long enough that I am forced to pick up one of the angry little snowmen. I bite off a small piece of his head. “*Mmmmm.*” Honestly, if I have one more gram of sugar this morning, I’m going to throw up. “*Delicious.*”

“Mrs. Byrd makes the best sugar cookies in all the land,” Ian says.

I begin to put the cookie back on the plate, but his smile starts to fall. I put the cookie back to my lips, and his grin yo-yos up. Painfully, I force another small bite.

It’s at this point I notice two rosy spots on his cheeks. They’re actually rather inescapable to spot, shimmering slightly beneath the cabin lights. My eyes shift to two other elves standing nearby.

Does he . . . wear . . . blush? What . . . for his job?

For that matter I think, looking at the particularly light, cool pink with a touch of silvery shine, is he using the same blush I

use? Am I potentially dating a man I could share blush with?

He notices me staring at his face and stiffens. I dart my eyes away, but it's too late.

I offer up a little laugh to emphasize the point that this is fine. It's all fine. "You know, I worked off set one summer in high school. I saw my fair share of guys putting on makeup for the job."

But to my surprise, Ian's shoulders hitch up even farther. In his octave-higher-than-normal voice, he says, "We elves get our glowing cheeks from our sugary diet."

He was offended. Not that I had questioned whether he was or wasn't wearing makeup, but because I was questioning his authenticity as an elf. An *elf*.

"Oh." For a moment, I'm at a loss for words. "Sure." I nod vigorously. "Of course."

A long pause sits between us.

"Anyway," he continues, more cautiously and at a near whisper, "today's swamped but I'll be off tomorrow sometime in the afternoon. I could borrow you for a minute. Give you a little tour of my collection," he adds a bit mischievously, as though it really is something to be quite proud of.

Collection? What kind of collection? Oh, yes, the books. His passion for literature. Ian's very handsome and charming passion for literature.

I smile widely. "I'd love that."

"Wonderful," Ian whispers, and gives me a heartfelt squeeze on the shoulder. A squeeze that feels a little like, *And I forgive you for what you said about my blush earlier*.

As Ian leaves, I turn back in my seat to find Clarence gazing out the window, hands folded on his lap, and I get the sense I'm not the only one in our compartment who can see through a situation.

But he doesn't say anything.

Instead, a minute later, Clarence reaches into his own bag. He flips a small tray table up from the armrest beside him, and sets a checkered board on it. As he places a wooden knight on a horse on the board, sword raised toward the sky, he says, “So. You’re a shrewd girl. How do you feel about chess?”

Chapter 5

Last Christmas

“Oh y-yes, he’s *woooonderful!*” I stutter, my hands struggling to decide between staying frozen at my side and reaching for my throat. Now it’s my turn for my voice to be an octave higher. “Chaucer is so . . . so . . . *friendly!*”

My fingers climb again toward my neck, where the five-foot ball python slithers slowly toward one arm. But every time I move my hands, the snake’s head follows, intrigued by the movement.

“And you say you he sleeps *with you?*” I say, my voice jumping up to near screeching level as two beady black eyes suddenly turn to look me straight in the eye, inches from mine.

“Every night.” Ian pats the cage at the head of his twin bunk bed. Right beside the train-themed pillowcase. And the rows and rows of model trains, planes, and automobiles lining the shelves—which, I discovered within ten minutes of my arrival, was what he’d actually meant when he said he loved all things, “trains, planes, and automobiles.”

“Right here where he’s safe and sound, though, of course,” Ian adds, then lowers his voice. “After the news came out about the strangled man with his pet snake in Ohio, I felt I had to.” His voice is boisterous as he stands again. “Not that that would ever happen with my Chaucer though.” He practically coos at the snake as he gives it a rub beneath the head. “Chaucer’s much too civilized for that. Aren’t you, Chaucer?”

“*Okay*, I think he wants to get down,” I say shrilly, as the snake slowly crosses my neck a second time. “Come and get

him. Please. *Please.*”

The second I'm relieved of the snake, I move to the other side of the room. I'd press myself against the wall, except with all the cages hidden among the posters and books, there's half a chance I'd bump against some other “pet” I'd rather not meet.

When Ian said he loved animals, I didn't expect him to mean insects. And lizards. And snakes.

I hug my body tightly as Ian wraps the snake around his own neck. He takes a step toward me, and I swivel toward the wall as quickly as I can.

“So these are . . . your books,” I say. “You really love . . .” I scan the wall consisting of, and only of, comics. “Books.”

“How can anyone not?” He picks up a colorful comic book with a dozen flying, firing, bomb-throwing, fire-coming-out-of-their-eyes figures on the cover. “Television is so insufficient. It just can't *capture* the author's intention. It just can't *capture* the depths of their imagination.”

There they were. So many pretty words. So insane in reality.

“You know,” he says, picking up another one from among the stacks cluttering the floor. His lips upturn slightly as he looks back at me. “I was just thinking of you when I was reading this one. It kind of reminds me of . . . us.”

He sees my half-in-shock, half-repulsed expression at the chesty, shield-wielding superhero on the cover and somehow, *somehow*, takes it the wrong way. “You know.” He inches closer to me, snake wagging its black tongue. “I don't do this a lot, but . . . I could let you *borrow* it—”

Oh, good heavens! I eye the exit door behind him and his beady-eyed snake. I'm going to die here.

Suddenly, the door bursts open.

“There you are!” Oliver exclaims. “I've been looking all over for you, Miss Fairbanks. I was just about to give up on you.”

And to my surprise, he actually does look as though he'd run the length of the train. His tie is as crooked as the short swoop of his disheveled brown hair above his left brow and cardigan. And the plaid button-up underneath is now rolled up to elbows.

It's quite a handsome look on him, I can't help noticing. And there's something about being wanted enough that someone would run across the train in earnest that awakens my already-overworked senses. But then, everything about the last hour has overworked my senses.

I open my mouth to ask what he's referring to—surely I hadn't missed something?—when he answers for me. “You're about to miss the ringing.”

“The ringing?” I say slowly.

Oliver's eyes tick from me to Ian meaningfully. “Yes. The ringing.”

Ian, looking thoroughly confused himself, turns toward Oliver, snake swinging. “I—I thought elective activities ended an hour ago.” He presses a hand to his plaid-green chest. “I was told we had a break. Believe me, Conductor. I would never, *never*, have encouraged Miss Fairbanks to retreat from an elective opportunity.” He points a finger at me, loyalty flying out the window. “In fact, I tried persuading her to attend them multiple times yesterday. But she—”

“It's not an elective.” Oliver raises a hand. “This is for the contest. Surely you remember the Christmas costume contest from our staff meeting.”

Silence.

“And how the winner will be elected to ring the bell as we enter Rockhaven this evening.”

“*Ring the bell*,” Ian whispers, his eyes widening. He shifts his gaze back to me, holding the same reverence as when he explained the treasure of his 1956 *The Amazing Spider-Man* CGC 2.5 vintage classic comic find. “Willow, I'll—I'll save this for you.” He pats the cover of the comic. Then looking at Oliver, he bites his lip. “You don't suppose I can—”

“Just a private ringing this time, I’m afraid.” Oliver shrugs as though in apology. “Those were the rules.”

Ian nods like this makes perfect sense, that no one—not even the creator of the rules himself—can break them once they’re put in place.

Ian steps aside, and in the sudden opening, I make my escape.

Once the door to Ian’s room is shut behind us, Oliver and I move down the hall. I keep as close to him as possible as we walk through the employees’ quarters and make our way past the Chestnut and Mistletoe cars, shouldering through the clusters gathered for game room and elective activities. I only realize how close I am when I nearly trip him up as he slows.

“Sorry,” I say, giving one last look over my shoulder. Already my cheeks are starting to burn as anxiety over Ian’s return lessens, and embarrassment over the whole situation I landed myself in, including this welcomed—but still humiliating—rescue mission I have no doubt Clarence initiated, settles in. I feel like a child.

A ridiculous child who got herself into a mess she was too much of a coward to get out of.

“So. I take it Ian’s room tour wasn’t your cup of tea.”

“No. Not really.” I put my hands to my cheeks to try and cool them. “Oh, this is so embarrassing.”

“Don’t let it be.” He smiles. “Don’t worry about it at all.”

I shift the conversation as best I can away from Ian and his terrifying room. “I’m guessing you found me because . . .”

“Dad. He said he was, and I quote, ‘on the cusp’ of taking your queen and would very much like me to haul you back from Ian’s room so you could stop evading defeat.”

“*What?* My queen is thoroughly protected.” I press my hand to my chest. “He doesn’t have a chance and he *knows* it.”

A bemused expression falls across Oliver’s face, as though the whole competitive spirit between Clarence and me is quite adorable. But he hasn’t been there for the past six games—

three of which Clarence won, three which I claimed. And he hasn't seen how this seventh one is the *battle* to claim it all.

"Anyway," I brush an invisible speck of pride from my skirt, "I wasn't aware of any Christmas contest . . ."

Oliver holds open one of the curtains between the cars. "Yes. Congratulations. It's a great honor."

"And I'm the first to win such an honor, I'm guessing," I say, both pleased and embarrassed by the illustrative lie he's pulling off on my behalf.

I search for any clues in his face of frustration. After all, I don't know, maybe that's why Oliver came running, ignoring his obviously enormous duties on this busy day. Maybe Ian is notorious for luring unsuspecting girls to his room under the guise of wit and charm, only to throw man-eating pythons on them. And here I am, this season's dupe.

But my scan turns up with nothing—nothing but an easy expression like Oliver has all the time in the world.

"The very first," Oliver says, nodding solemnly. "No pressure, but if you don't get it right when you ring the bell, that'll be it for future generations."

My lips twitch a little. Every moment that passes eases the knot in my stomach. "It's not very kosher to admit as the inaugural champion, but I would've bet my money on that candy-cane couple over in 12E. They even passed out candy canes from bedazzled fanny packs. You can't get better than that."

"The judges did consider them," Oliver says, quite seriously. "But, unfortunately, full range of motion in costume was a requirement they just couldn't meet. And with the pool noodle-canes situation out their backsides . . . Well. We hated to disqualify them."

"We," I say, grinning at the image of Oliver standing in some back cabin around half a dozen elves, arguing over our costumes with score sheets. "Sure."

"But seriously now, if we're going to get to the ringing, we'd better hurry." He leads the way as we pass several more

cars—including my own, where I pause long enough to shock Clarence with a fabulous surprise attack with my pawn—and as I glance out the windows, I see we are indeed slowing.

Frosted trees line one side of the train, and on the right stands the rocky shore of the Atlantic Ocean, frothy waves crashing against beaten sand. The landscape is dotted with cedar-shingled saltbox houses and Victorians perched on rocky cliffs, their steep gabled roofs standing watch over the watery horizon. Lobster shacks with sailboats lie beached alongside them, in no hurry to get back, and in the distance stands a panoramic sunset of such watercolor oranges and yellows, it looks like we've slipped off the page of a book.

Before I know it, I'm standing in the driver's cab. Walls, gadgets, and ceilings are all painted in the same antique green, the paint appearing as vintage as the dials themselves. Whereas I wasn't sure before, now I'm certain. This train isn't some new replica straining to appear like ancient steam engines of old. It's the real deal, recovered in maroon velvet and golden tassels but never able to shed its true roots. Full of history. Full of life.

"How old is this train?" I take a step forward.

Oliver seems to appreciate the respect in my voice. "It's from 1953. Dad bought it when I was a kid. I spent my childhood running through these cabs. It got a complete remodel just two years ago—well, except for this. Wanted to keep this area just like the original." Oliver puts his hands on his hips as he admires his surroundings.

Geez, what is it with boys and trains?

"Wait. *Your family* owns this train?" I shake my head. "I can't even afford a studio in Queens."

"To be fair, I do hear the city is quite expensive. I've known my fair share of people who got out and are much the better for it."

I laugh. "Right. That's my problem. I'd have three trains and a plane if I could just get out of that darn city."

The train is inching along the tracks now, nothing but a few pedestrians hugging their coats on a platform outside and a few light poles with blinking electric snowflakes to welcome us into the tiny station. Oliver turns to me, then points toward the golden rope above his head. “You ready?”

I step tentatively into the already-crowded space and take a small breath to steady myself. A salty sea breeze sweeps in through the open window by the driver’s seat, mingled with ashy coal from the billowing smoke rising from the steam engine ahead. I reach for the cord and see the flecks of a darker ultramarine circling his pupils as he grins down at me. Somewhere in the distance “All I Want for Christmas Is You” plays.

“Anytime now will do,” the driver says, and I realize I’ve accidentally been pressing my hip against his shoulder.

“Oh. Sorry.” I grab the cord and give the rope a pull. As the bell begins to ring, so do my thoughts. What is *wrong* with me? Jonas broke up with me four days ago and I’m ready to jump on board with anyone with a hint of testosterone. Am I really that desperate? Am I really that pathetic that I can’t stand to be single for more than five minutes?

“Is that enough?” I ask, after the fourth bell ring.

“Enough to get everybody grabbing their coats. You ready?” Oliver’s eyes are trained on mine, and in them I see it. An unmistakable twinkle.

No.

He couldn’t possibly be attracted to me, too, after I’d made such a fool of myself like that.

He must just be excited to show off the first excursion. It’s his life dream after all. And Elodie is absolutely right. I am just coming off an emotional shock and *cannot* trust myself right now. I can’t trust my instincts. I can’t trust those gut feelings that have steered me right before. I can’t trust my thoughts. For the foreseeable future—a month? two?—I cannot make any decisions relationally. (I’ll have to be sure to ask Elodie how long she thinks I’ll be suspended from

decision-making). I can just enjoy the ride, get home for Christmas, and *exist*.

And whenever I'm tempted to trust myself, I'll just remember the feeling of that python staring me in the eyes.

Faintly I hear the man in the nutcracker suit wishing passengers a nice evening through the window, and as people in my periphery begin spilling onto the platform, Oliver's gaze shifts over to the stream of passengers. A moment later the atmosphere has altered. It's time to get outside.

"Yes. I just need my coat." As an afterthought, in case Oliver was feeling torn between checking on his dad and getting himself out on the platform to lead the way for the group, I add, "I'll come with Clarence—that is, if he'll still talk to me after abandoning him halfway through the game."

"That'd be *great*." And as he walks after me out of the cab, Oliver looks genuinely relieved. Just as I begin to step against the current of passengers trying to head outside into the biting cold, someone touches my elbow and I turn. "Really, Willow," Oliver says, his eyes sincere. "Thank you. For everything."

Chapter 6

Baby, It's Cold Outside

The evening out on the little cliffside town was lovely. With Oliver leading the crowd through the cobbled streets, the group landed at a small inn so ancient, the roof with its moss-covered shingles slanted to one end and the heavy wooden door the tavernkeeper swung open like a piece of paper looked more like it belonged to a medieval castle. Rocks stacked upon one another to form deep wells of fireplaces dug into walls on either end, crackling away and lighting the old tavern with dozens of dripping wax candles. The smell of butter and mead and fish was thick upon each table laid out with oyster knives and cocktail forks and seafood crackers.

Clarence and I paired together without a word, and sure enough, the evening was one of harmony and laughter. With a life of travel he's gained more than his share of fascinating stories. Many of them included Oliver, naturally—the little boy whose life was spent on the tracks with his dear old mom and dad. Some of the stories made me laugh; others were so sweet my eyes wandered toward Oliver as he spoke. Overall, though, had I had any concerns about looking like a fish out of water before dinner, by the end, even the couples around us were leaning in to listen.

It was funny.

I was booked on the train with Jonas as my partner, then Ian in a madcap plan, but the reality was that I was going to be paired with a seventy-eight-year-old World War II veteran turned world adventurer with a bad hip and a bowl-full-of-jelly laugh that filled the room. And that was just fine with me.

Oliver, for his part, looked only more handsome as he took charge of the group, at ease in his position of authority as though he truly enjoyed mingling with each of the passengers. He stopped by our table a few times, but as couples finished their meals and trickled out to stroll the streets arm in arm, each guided to a particular spot or store by his advice, he was always left standing at the door. The whole evening, I'm not sure he sat once, let alone ate any of the lobster surrounding him.

I retired to my quarters when we returned, and the room, though smaller with a pair of bunk beds lining the wall instead of Christmas trees and wingback chairs, suited me well. The soft *Charlie Brown Christmas* sheets, thick red down comforter, and feather pillow were like slipping into a cloud, and for the second night, sleep on the softly rocking train came quickly and soundly, even with the soft whistle that came every few hours through the night.

As for the breakfast they carried out in the morning? Well, there were no words.

"Ready to switch?" I say, holding my section of the newspaper for Clarence with one hand while my other rests over the silver platter sitting on the pop-up table over my lap.

His frown deepens as he hands me the funnies and takes the world news, his eyes fixated on my gleaming platter.

I lift it, and immediately steam rises to tickle my cheeks. Three thick slabs of French toast fill up the plate, coated in confectioner's sugar and bathed with butter. A healthy serving of lush red strawberries, grapes, and mandarin oranges fill a small porcelain cup beside it, and three crispy pieces of bacon topped with crystal granules sparkle at me. I pick up one piece of bacon and take a bite, feeling the almost immediate need to close my eyes and sigh. "Brown sugar," I say, more to myself than to Clarence. "That's so clever."

"Hazel's recipe," Clarence replies. "Bake at four hundred and top with just a bit of brown sugar."

I open my eyes and see he's looking at his own bowl now. He prods the oatmeal with his spoon, and it wobbles in

gelatin-like vibration in reply. He's told me about his late wife in conversation, passed ten years now, but I sense what is causing him to frown so deeply right now is most certainly food related more than memories of old.

From the looks of it, they didn't even add anything to the steel oats.

Just plain old oatmeal. Like his lunch yesterday that turned out to be a pitiful amount of cottage cheese and canned tuna.

I purse my lips.

"Clarence." I set my napkin on my lap. "Hold on a moment before eating that. I'm going to see if I can whip something up."

His eyebrows shoot to his receding hairline. "No, no, Willow. It's not that easy—"

I wave him off. "This is your train, isn't it? I'm just going to swing by *your* kitchen, do a little tinkering without getting in anyone's way, and come back with something you'll actually eat—that yes, is also good for you. Trust me. This is, quite literally, what I do. And frankly, I can't eat one more meal with you sitting across from me with those sad puppy eyes. It's killing my holiday spirit."

He hesitates, looking very seriously at his mash as if wondering if he could manage to choke it down after all. "Okay," he says at last. "But if Mrs. Byrd seems to have a fit, you get out of there. I mean it. Don't get yourself in trouble on my account."

I laugh. He practically sounds like a schoolboy. "Deal." I dig through my overhead suitcase for a few stowaway ingredients I'd wager my ticket they don't have on hand, slip them into a purse over my shoulder, and dash away, moving quickly through the cars before Clarence changes his mind. I have no doubt he'd rather have just about anything than that sludge, but at the same time, he's got that same giving spirit I saw in Oliver the night before, willing to put himself out for the sake of not inconveniencing others.

Thankfully, however, I'm not them. Not when it comes to others I care about at least. I once entirely stopped traffic just to save Miss Clark's gift-from-her-long-distance-daughter flyaway umbrella. I can certainly fix up a little breakfast for the train's owner.

The car dedicated to food isn't hard to find; I just follow the string of elves coming and going with breakfast platters. The kitchen is surprisingly as far as possible from the passenger area, and the closer I get, the more I understand why.

The closer I get, the clearer it becomes why Clarence was so hesitant as well.

He may own the train, but it's obvious Mrs. Byrd owns the kitchen.

"I don't *care* if you sprained your ankle tripping on your own feet. Quillet, get this coffee out to 3G *now*. Margaret, *I'm still waiting on that bacon!*"

The looks on the elves' faces as they push open the curtain and exit, laden with pushcarts and heavy trays, make it clear they are scrambling under her direction. I edge out of the aisle as much as I can to let them pass, and after a moment's hesitation, step inside.

The train kitchen is chaotic. Stainless-steel pans swing gently from their hanging posts on the ceiling, and an inordinate number of people are pushing against one another, reaching over and under one another's bodies in their quests for refill sugar packets and bundles of silverware for their particular guests. In the center of it all is an industrial-size oven where one of the tiniest women I've ever seen stands beside it. With both hands elbow-deep in oven mitts, she bellows at one of the elves while she yanks a pan full of steaming bacon out of the oven and tosses in a fresh one.

"Willow?" I turn as Oliver steps beside me, clipboard in hand. He's clearly surprised.

"Oliver, hi." I feel a little relief to see his face in the chaos. "I came for Clarence. Is there any space around here, by chance, for me to fix up something for him really quickly?"

Oliver's forehead crinkles. "Did something happen to his meal?" He raises a hand, getting the attention of an elf. "We can send off another one."

"No, no. It's just that . . . eggs are such a great way to slow down the glucose absorption, too, and given that he's partial to them over oatmeal—"

Despite how I've lowered my voice, the room halts.

At least a dozen heads turn.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mrs. Byrd snap the oven shut. She puts both oven-mitted fists on her hips, her pastry puff chef's hat tilting to one side. "What's this about my cooking?"

"Oh, nothing," I say quickly. "Nothing at all. Your cooking is phenomenal. It's the best thing here—"

Oliver raises a brow and I add quickly, "Except those excursions. And, wow." I scan the elves. "The service is just *great*." Time to move on. "But I was just telling Oliver"—I tread carefully—"since Clarence is on a dietary plan—"

"I'm aware of Mr. Lodge's dietary plan," Mrs. Byrd cuts in.

"Oh. Yes. Of course you are. Well, it's just . . . it seems like . . . as you are so busy here with everyone else, perhaps I could make something that is an alternative meal plan for him but still has the essence of what you are making for the others. So it's similar to the wonderful meals you provide, just . . ."

"Different?" Her pupils are the size of pinpricks. I notice at least one elf moves out of the line of fire between us.

Oh, dear. This isn't what I intended at all. I had imagined I'd sneak in, ask if I could whip Clarence up something, watch the employees stumble over themselves telling me to take absolutely anything for *the* Mr. Lodge Senior. Just as everyone has acted around Clarence so far. But as it turns out, Mrs. Byrd *isn't* everyone. No. She's quite the opposite.

"I have a kitchen in my cabin that'll be perfect for the job," Oliver says, breaking the silence. "What supplies did you have in mind, Willow?"

And while I shoot off ingredients from the top of my head and avoid Mrs. Byrd's gaze, Oliver looks purposefully oblivious to her shooting looks and fills his arms with the items from the fridge.

"C'mon," he says, and to my surprise, starts walking toward a swinging back door I hadn't noticed before.

My relief must've been visible, because the second we step through the swinging door, he says, "Sorry about that. Mrs. Byrd can be a little . . . touchy."

"Oh no." I wave it off quickly. "I came into her kitchen. The right is entirely hers."

We go through a narrow passageway lined on either side with food stock and through another door where we come to another little hall. A red door stands at the far end, with a brass lock and knob, and we pass it.

Oliver's phone rings, and he ignores it. "If it makes you feel any better, I think I've spent half my life being pushed out of the kitchen by her with a broom. Of course, back then I completely deserved it." He grins at me, and I grin back at the image of Oliver as a child, pockets stuffed with stolen cookies.

"I've heard some of the stories. So tell me, did you really try to strap yourself to the roof?"

"I went through a Clint Eastwood phase in high school."

"Including getting yourself killed on a train going 150 miles an hour? Nice. Very teen thinking of you."

"Well, what was I going to do? Run away and hop on a train?" A smile flits on Oliver's lips as he glances over his shoulder while adjusting the eggs in his arms. "But seriously, how much could you and Dad possibly have talked?"

"Oh"—I shrug, a mischievous smile lifting of my own—"just enough to be dangerous. If I were you, I'd consider throwing some extra marshmallows in my cocoa and arranging for some one-horse open sleigh lifts to excursions to keep me from talking to the other passengers—"

“Horse-drawn sleighs are what it takes to win you over, eh?” Oliver stops at another door, same red, same brass knob. He moves to reach for his pocket, no doubt for the keys, but with the bundle in his hands, he struggles.

I tingle at his words but quickly brush them aside.

“Here.” I take the eggs and the green and red peppers and the mushrooms from his hands.

I must admit, it makes me feel a little special standing back here in the tiny hallway. No “Frosty the Snowman” playing over the speakers. No elaborate carpeting or golden tassels and elves rushing around with silver platters. Just the quiet rumble of the train moving underfoot, and the rush of a pale winter sunrise dancing on the walls. Handfuls of groceries. And just Oliver and me.

It’s funny. As special as that suite was, this is even better.

I’m not sure what I expected out of Oliver’s cabin, but the moment I step inside, I know it wasn’t this. Whereas the suite was like a holiday page from a catalog, Oliver’s room looks . . . normal. Beneath a row of large windows is a cognac-tan couch, well-worn but in the kind of way that invites sitting. A bookshelf and television sit next to the opposite wall, but instead of seeing a row of comic books and animals in cages, I’m looking at a healthy dose of westerns and travel books interspersed with a few board games with tattered edges and the evidence of group hangouts. A bed lies on the opposite wall with a crumpled gray comforter lying on top, not yet—or who knows? Perhaps never—made. A treadmill is pushed in the corner directly to my left. And straight across from me is a row of kitchen cabinets, a tiny stainless-steel sink, and an even tinier oven range so small it looks like an Easy-Bake Oven. We move toward it.

Oliver’s phone rings again, and I fully expect him to check it, pull a face about whatever disaster was happening on board needing saving, drop the ingredients off on the small countertop, and wish me luck.

But he doesn’t.

Subtly, he just silences it.

“So,” I say, setting the peppers and eggs on the counter, “is this where you live all the time?”

“Oh no. I have a little place in San Francisco right now. We follow a two-week on, two-week off system, and I run a lot of tours from there. Plus, I like the sunshine.”

I nod. “Yes, I’ve always wanted to visit San Francisco—especially on those twenty-degree days in February. It’s on my bucket list.”

“Too bad we’ll miss it this time,” Oliver says, and opens a drawer full of knives. “Knife?”

“Please.” I select a serrated one. I begin to feel self-conscious and say, “Hey, if you want to leave me the key, I can be sure to lock up. After all, it’s not like I can really escape if I turn out to be a klepto—”

But before I can even finish my sentence, he’s selecting his own knife from the drawer and shutting it. As his now-silenced phone begins to hum as it vibrates in his pocket, he says, “I’d be a poor conductor if they couldn’t do without me for thirty minutes. So. What are we making?”

Part of me feels selfish. Part of me knows I ought to press him, telling him I know how busy he is and how I can handle it. How I’m well aware of how he takes the brunt of the work leading excursions by night and managing the train’s activities and general chaos of the day. Part of me knows this.

But another part of me . . .

Well, he’s a grown man, isn’t he? He can make his own decisions.

And as if to solidify the moment, my own phone rings.

I pull it out.

It’s Jonas.

Jonas.

I stare at the name on the screen, incapacitated for one standstill second.

Then silence it.

As the phone slips back into my pocket, I smile. “How about you handle the dicing, and I’ll make the cheese sauce for the omelet.”

I reach in my purse and start taking out the bottle of lemon juice and canned coconut milk.

As he’s running the peppers under tap water and his eyes gaze at me, his hands slow. When I pull out the bottle of nutritional yeast from my shoulder bag, he’s openly amused. “So, you just keep nutritional yeast on hand, do you?”

“I have a particular fondness for nutritional yeast, actually, so yes,” I reply without slowing. “It began when I started experimenting with cheese-alternative recipes for a lactose-intolerant client, and then when I discovered how tasty *and* healthy it actually was, I started using it for all my clients. I love it.”

As I shake the bottle over a mixing bowl, he eyes the yellow flakes pouring into the bowl. “It looks like fish food.”

“They all say that at first. You’re just like every one of them.”

“And how many of ‘them’ are there?” He moves the peppers to the cutting board. The kitchen counter is so small we stand practically hip to hip.

“Currently? I have three clients. Two I split between mornings and afternoons, one I only stay with overnight when her son’s out of town. I’m in home health.”

“Do you like it?”

Well, if that wasn’t a trigger question. “I went to school for hotel management. It was never the plan to be doing this so long.”

“But do you like it?” he asks, undeterred.

I hesitate. “Yes. I’ve been doing it since I was sixteen. I get to be a professional friend maker. Frankly, I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

“Then why did you study hotel management?”

“Oh, Jonas thought it made more sense.” The answer slips out quicker than I’d intended, and I hesitate afterward ever so slightly. “He thought it was wise to use my interest in hospitality in a way that was more financially advantageous. I just . . . never really got around to it.”

“Ah. Mr. Yates. The one who I’ve heard had the misfortune of missing out?”

“On this trip? Yes.”

“The trip, yes. And of course, more.”

He gives a wry smile, not so much flirtatious but comforting. The kind of companionable smile that says, “He was a fool, wasn’t he? But look how much better off you are already without him.”

Oliver turns his gaze back onto the peppers as he continues to dice. “I’ve been there. Only, it was parent pressure instead of girlfriend, and I proved to be a little more stubborn than you and skipped the college degree altogether.”

I raise my brows. “From the way your dad talks, I figured he wanted you to always take over the touring business.”

“Oh, he did. He just thought I needed a plan B too. I felt otherwise.”

“Well,” I say, grinning, “it looks like it all worked out just as it should be.”

“Same for you.”

And to my surprise, the way he’s looking at me while he says the words brings a rush of warmth to me. And not just because I can’t help but admire the way he stands there, the tiniest five o’clock shadow across his cheeks, pepper in hand.

No, it’s also because he’s looking at me like, well, he thinks my chosen career isn’t a disaster of a decision. Like it isn’t absolutely pathetic to see a twenty-five-year-old woman living off thrift-store finds—despite the depths of her love of vintage wool threads—and holding off dentist appointments as long as possible, and living with a roommate, and eating more noodles

and better than is deemed acceptable, and making it all work for this job instead of taking one in management for three times the pay. Like I wasn't an idiot for getting a degree and not using it—as I've heard on so many occasions before.

No, what meant something to me was the way he looked at me like I was right where I was supposed to be. Am supposed to be.

And that look in this moment . . . well, I can't help but start to believe it.

Chapter 7

One-Horse Open Sleigh

Nearly two weeks pass, and the landscape has changed from sea breeze hills and snow-dusted gentle forests to the wild and soaring peaks of Montana. The time has both flown by and stood still. So much so that it's hard to imagine life off the train after it's become everything I've eaten and breathed and lived for so long.

True to promise the activities have abounded both inside the train and out, and before I know it, the messages that pass between Elodie and me are covered in dozens of pictures. Of Christmas symphonies in Chicago and ice skating in a tornado of flurries in Minnesota. Of eating things I've never tried before and dancing like I've never danced before and frankly just having the best time of my life. Every evening as I spy the train sitting in the station, smoke curling up toward the dark sky as it waits for my return, my heart warms.

I feel like I could live on this train forever. Truly.

It's so painful to imagine leaving that I've had to stop letting my thoughts drift there entirely.

"I don't like oatmeal." Clarence looks at the bowl on his tray, then at me as if I've betrayed him.

"Don't think of it as oatmeal." I pause midsip of coffee. "Think of it as overnight apple cinnamon rolls. You like cinnamon rolls."

He grumbles under his breath, but as I move my attention back to the paper, I see he's edging near it. This is how our days on the train have turned. When lunch arrived after that

first successful breakfast cooked in Oliver's quarters, and Oliver dropped by to see Clarence's pained expression as he chomped slowly on the hard-boiled eggs sliced over what appeared to be sprouts, sans dressing, he leaned in and whispered in my ear, "Any chance you want to upgrade this?"

I jumped out of my chair faster than a speeding bullet. Clarence loved my stir fry noodles in tahini sauce, and every morning and lunch since, I've taken on the task of preparing his meals. Not because I have to, of course, but because I want to. I really want to, actually. While other passengers revel in the endless service and relaxation, the reality was that just wasn't me. My feet started itching the first day on the train for somewhere to help. Whereas Elodie and my mother and every propaganda on the train emphasized telling me to relax, relax, relax, I found it was much more relaxing to have something to do. Someway to help. And preparing Clarence's meals turned out to be a perfect outlet.

Plus, it was nice how much I ran into Oliver. How often he stayed to cook beside me—despite how often I could hear his phone vibrating—and the stories we shared back and forth about our lives and experiences. Eventually he asked about the elephant in the room (how exactly things didn't pan out with Jonas), and eventually he in turn shared about a woman named Phoebe in San Antonio who almost lured him away from his train life. We watched movies in the background as we cooked. Some of my favorite moments, in fact, were dicing and stirring in companionable silence.

And yet, he never pursued me beyond friendship. And despite the hundreds of times I've reminded myself that that was a good thing during this season, I couldn't help but end each night with a little disappointment.

Throw in the expanding list of missed calls I've successfully ignored from Jonas that began on day two of the trip, and the disappointment has grown.

Well. To be clear, I've successfully ignored them all after that first dreadful mistake of a pickup.

I was in the middle of a Santa's Workshop class one afternoon, my nose pressed to the hot glue gun in my hand as I took aim at the tiny wooden bead for a Scandinavian Wooden Snowflake elective I opted for before the evening outing. It was a small class that day, most opting for a foxtrot class in the Mistletoe Room instead. And most were long gone while their ornaments sat on the table in the corner drying. But that didn't mean I was alone.

"I have never, and I mean never, seen anyone take ornament making so seriously."

Oliver's elbows rested on the table as he sat, leaning forward in his seat, beside me. So close I could smell the pine-scented dish soap coming off his hands, which I'd become accustomed to in his kitchen. "You're going to miss dinner."

"No." I shook my head. "*We're* going to miss dinner if you stay here chastising me for making the perfect snowflake. Also, as I've said before, this glue gun is defective. It's not my fault."

Oliver smirked. "Right. Just like the first and second glue guns were defective too. Such a bizarre shame."

Right at that moment my phone on the table began ringing.

I paused on the trigger of the gun, gaze flitting over to the phone. It shook on the table, and I fully expected to see Elodie's name dancing on the screen. But it wasn't. It was Jonas.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Oliver glance at the name, then shift away.

I silenced it, turned it over, and returned my attention back to my ornament.

Oliver was silent through the hot gluing of two more beads on my snowflake.

"You don't answer his calls?"

"No," I said, picking up another small bead with my glue and transferring it to the ornament.

"Never? You haven't answered any of them?"

So he had noticed. “There isn’t anything to say.”

Long pause.

“Not even . . . stop calling? Take a hint and leave me alone?”

I could hear it in his voice. It bothered Oliver that Jonas was trying to contact me. And that caused the hint of a smile to rise to my lips.

I set the glue gun down. “Jonas and I have been through several breakups over the years. Probably half a dozen.”

Oliver frowned.

“They’ve never lasted more than a week, month tops.”

The frown in his blue eyes deepened, and I hurried on. “And I always let him come back. It’s been three years without a breakup. I thought we had finally moved beyond the threat of one. I thought we had finally moved on to . . .” I hesitate, not wanting to say the word *marriage* or anything related to it. “To other things, but obviously that wasn’t the case. And . . . maybe he hasn’t moved on, but I have.”

I lifted my chin, as Elodie almost nightly instructed me to during her evening TED Talk with me as the single audience member. The theme: *Why You Are Better than Jonas and How You Will Do Everything I Say to Get Him Rinsed Out of Your Life*. “So. I’m going to do things my way this time. And that includes letting Elodie act as my contact and mediator on my behalf.”

The air visibly lifted with Elodie’s name. Oliver had heard enough of Elodie by this time—even heard her over speakerphone a time or two in all her brassy glory—to like and trust her intrinsically. “And so what do you do?”

“My job,” I raise my chin, “according to Elodie, is to silence my phone. Next week I’m supposed to move on to blocking the number, but . . . I’m just not quite there yet.”

I felt cowardly as I said it. After all, what sort of idiot hung on to the threads of a bad relationship? Even if it was just a number you didn’t ever want to answer?

“Ah. I see. Elodie does have it all figured out.” But despite his tone, Oliver’s eyes were warm. In them he seemed to be holding a well-ful of thoughts. “And really, it’s wise not to rush,” he said at last, then picked up the glue gun and held it out to me. “Sometimes, I think, just sitting with the reality of what you inevitably must do is enough.”

That night, I blocked Jonas’s number.

And, surprisingly, didn’t feel that sense of remorse I had so dreaded. Surprisingly, I didn’t feel anything at all.

I pause in my scanning of the newspaper and turn to the chessboard on the seat beside me. It’s been an hour now, and I still haven’t pressed the trigger on a move.

“He’s going to go for the bishop,” Clarence says, and I look over to see a heaping spoonful of oatmeal in his hand, the bowl half empty.

“I thought about that. But surely he wouldn’t expose his castle this early in the game . . .”

I spend another minute mulling it over, then hasten when Clarence announces he spies Oliver coming down the aisle.

I knock over his pawn with my bishop a millisecond before I feel him standing over me. He pats my chair.

“Cutting it a little close, aren’t you, Fairbanks? So. Have I stumped you?” Oliver stands above me, hand resting easily on the top of my chair, looking like a child who knows he’s two moves away from undeniable victory.

“Like the last two times? Oh wait. Sorry, I get so confused between you and Clarence.”

Clarence, who did in fact win the past two games, grins surreptitiously over his bowl.

It didn’t take long for Oliver to go from being the interested bystander in our games to wanting a go of his own on the board. The only problem, of course, was that a single game tended to clog up an entire day with how busy he was running from game to business. So eventually at a stop outside Cleveland one night, we found a solution. Found another

board, and now we keep two games running: one between Clarence and me, and one with Oliver. The only rule is that every time he passes by our compartment, a move *must* be made, and every time he stops at our seats, I must've made my own move or else I forfeit a piece.

This, as one might expect given how often he finds himself rushing from one car to another, often turns out to be quite humorous. Let's just say I've won (and lost) my share of queens by millisecond mistakes.

"Will you be coming out tonight?" I say to Clarence, who has chosen a quieter evening in his car the past two nights over the fray.

I see Clarence give his son a meaningful look, although why, I can't tell. "Plan on it. Going to help Mrs. Byrd out with a little inventory this afternoon first."

I shake my head. "You put the definition of retirement to shame, Clarence. I think you work more than most employed people here."

And it's true, although I've learned over the past two weeks that that's exactly how he likes it. Much like me, Clarence can't seem to completely cease work, and more often than not in the afternoons, I find him gone missing into the kitchen to help with some disaster. (According to Mrs. Byrd it's always a disaster, whereas to Clarence, pots could be flying past his head and he'd comment about the flock of Canadian geese out the window.) And the number of times staff have deferred to him . . . I have literally had to stop an elf from waking Clarence up over a question about restocking toilet paper. It seems that no matter what, when you've been in charge for so long, there's just no getting out of the words *conductor in chief*.

Which, to be fair, did save me. It was the afternoon after the fiasco of a room tour with Ian, and I was head deep into a book when Ian sidled up to me.

"Package delivery, Miss Fairbanks," he had said, his voice a near whisper as his eyes shifted from Clarence's sleeping face back to mine. There was a twinkle in his eye as he held the

gold-and-green package in both hands. “Now I know it isn’t Christmas yet, and we’ll have to keep it in my room for a while, but as this came special from the North Pole . . .”

“Oh,” I said as I looked at the box, trying to gauge what exactly those holes poking through the wrapping could be for. My arms didn’t move. “Oh, Ian. You shouldn’t have.”

He practically kicked the aisle floor with his elf shoe in his bashful excitement. “If you’re worrying about not having a gift for me yet, don’t. You’ll have plenty of time to find something for me by Christmas too.” He winked. “Partner.”

My hands were glued to my book. It wasn’t that I *didn’t* want to move to take the box. It was just that I was temporarily paralyzed. “What”—I felt my back pressing against the armrest—“is it?”

He wagged a finger at me. “Now, now, Miss Fairbanks. You know the rules. You have to open it yourself.”

He looked so earnest, so innocent, that, with great effort, I managed to set my book down. I sealed my fate and took the box from him. It was heavy. Python-curled-in-the-center-of-the-box heavy. Carefully, I avoided touching any of the open air holes. “Is it . . . alive?”

At this point Clarence rounded out of a dead sleep and said, as if he’d been a part of the conversation all along, “Elf, where are you supposed to be at sixteen hundred?”

Ian stood immediately upright. “Working, sir. Here, sir.”

“Is it true that you are partaking in unholiday behavior by displaying favoritism in gift giving while everyone else is left to be mere onlookers?”

Ian checked over both shoulders, suddenly self-conscious. Nobody was watching us. “No, sir. Well, yes, sir. It’s just that, sir—”

Clarence leveled his gaze at him, and his bushy brows nearly covered his eyes. “And I *know* you wouldn’t be soliciting the interests of single young ladies while in uniform. Because certainly you recall Section 22B of the contract referring to the imperative of staying in character.”

“Oh, ye-ye-yes, sir.” Ian looked down at his elf costume.

“And I would absolutely hate for us to lose such a fine employee as yourself due to lack of compliance with said contract.”

At that, Ian snatched the package from my hands.

There was a long moment of silence, Ian looking absolutely terrified, Clarence gazing at him like a father trying to decide in a moment of discipline if he had sufficiently gotten across his point. At last he dismissed him. “I believe they need a hand with the caroling karaoke contest in the Mistletoe Room.”

After Ian had zipped out, I turned to Clarence. “Do you really have a line about staying in character in your contract?”

“The question is”—Clarence tapped his cane to his temple—“will he be brave enough to come back and point that out?”

As it turns out, Ian wasn’t brave enough.

In fact, had I not eventually given myself enough of a pep talk to seek him out and tell him the reality of the situation from my end—that I was sorry, but we just didn’t seem like a good fit together—I don’t think he ever would’ve shown his face in our car again.

On the bright side, he handled it well. Remarkably well, in fact, to the point that he admitted his own glowing attraction to me had faded since the moment I’d referred to dear Chaucer as “it.” We parted on good terms.

“Your move,” Oliver says, taking my bishop with his and, sure enough, exposing his castle without qualm. “Hey, I’m going to assist with the wreath making at four. Were you planning on going?”

“Yes. I’d like to make one for my mom for Christmas.” I check my watch and start to rise. “Which actually means I’d better go get changed now for tonight’s activity. I’ll see you there.”

“I’ll save you a ‘properly working’ glue gun.” Oliver winks at me, and for my part, I can’t help but feel my cheeks flush.

The next few hours pass in peace. By the time the wreath-making activity is over, my hands are sticky with pine sap and hot-gun glue, stray needles adorn my hair, and I'm fairly certain I'm going to smell of spruce for days. But I did manage to make a rather sweet wreath covered in both holly and silver bells, along with a little posted sign saying *Merry Christmas*. I know Mom will be pleased.

The evening activity is supposed to be a night out at something called *Dickens of a Christmas*. I know little about the specifics aside from the fact that we'll be located in a small town outside Glacier National Park. So I am sure to dress appropriately for the extreme weather I've experienced the past two days as we chugged along the northern border of North America. The previous afternoon I took part in a Christmas sweater embroidering workshop, which actually turned out so surprisingly lovely (thanks in great part to Mrs. Faris, a teacher with great insights regarding her embroidery machine), that I put it on for tonight's event. Instead of the loud Christmas knits I've seen and worn a hundred times over, this one is subtly in the spirit: a cream sweater dotted with embroidered firs and spruces in a variety of threaded shades of green, a dozen small snowflakes hanging overhead.

I've put on my warmest pair of wool socks (quite the treasured thrift find, a handknit pair with the words *Noel* across the ankles) I could find under my boots, and before I step off the train, I slip on my thickest pair of mittens.

My coat swirls around my jeans where the tops of my boots meet them, and the second I step out onto the platform and feel the mascara on my eyelashes start to freeze, I remember I've forgotten my hat and should turn around. Only, the very same moment I have this intuition, I see something very strange.

It's Clarence. Standing in the center of the huddled crowd of passengers clapping their sides and bouncing impatiently in their boots.

Clarence. In a Santa suit.

Clarence. Leading the group.

“Come on then, everyone! Stay close and follow me. *Ho ho ho!*” He heads in the direction of a small cluster of buildings ahead, holding to his cane, as usual, but on his other side is petite Mrs. Byrd, her arm wrapped firmly around his waist.

For stability?

Or theatrics? Is she playing the Mrs.?

Or . . . could that possibly be a real, live romantic gesture?

“What . . . ?” I begin walking toward the group, and as I do so, my head swivels around, looking for Oliver. Why hadn’t Clarence mentioned this to me? The man’s walked a sum total of a hundred steps back and forth for the past two weeks, going less than half a mile an hour *on carpet*. And then here he goes traipsing around town with two feet of snow blanketing every square inch not covered in salt, playing Santa for the train.

But no, no, don’t mention the grandiose plan to me. Talk about your love of fish sticks you had in a particular diner outside Kansas City thirty years ago for half an hour, sure, but don’t even think to mention—

My thoughts halt as Oliver comes into view. He’s standing at the far end of the station’s empty parking lot, lit only by a couple lampposts and the receding lights of a turning car.

When our eyes lock, his lips tilt slightly upward, and he beckons to me with one gloved hand.

The other holding firm to the reins. The reins.

Of a one-horse open sleigh.

I freeze.

Something inside me says, *he’s not really meaning you*, and I check over my shoulder in both directions. But nobody is there. Nobody except a few of the staff watching from the windows who, when they spot me, dart behind the curtains.

He really means me. *Me*.

My boots crackle along the deeply salted sidewalk as I move toward him. The sleigh grows larger the closer I come,

and when I finally have made my way across the parking lot and taken several knee-deep steps through the snow-blanketed field to the sleigh, I take it all in. The horse is larger than any breed I've ever seen, its black mane glistening beneath the moon of the cloudless night sky. Icicle clouds curl from its nostrils as it exhales and shakes off a thin layer of snow. The wooden red sleigh itself is small enough for two or three passengers in the cab, with a raised area another foot higher for the driver. Only Oliver is not sitting in the cab. He's alone, standing in the driver's area, waiting for me.

"Want a lift?" he says.

I raise a brow. "I don't know. Are you driving?"

He grins and takes my hand, steadying me as I put my foot on the wrought-iron step and pull myself up.

Icicle clouds form around my face as I exhale and look around. On the wooden seat is a wool blanket. To his left on the seat, a wicker basket.

He lets my marveling linger for a full minute, then explains. "I know a guy."

"What? Who lends you one-horse open sleighs on occasion and you lend him trains?"

At this Oliver's face breaks into a full and wide smile. "Something like that. Shall we?"

As we settle in together, side by side, and I feel his warm body against mine, I can't help but remember the question that had seemed so innocent days ago. "*Horse-drawn sleighs are what it takes to win you over, eh?*"

"I can't believe this." These are the words I find myself repeating as the horse clomps its way upward on the path between the trees. The moon trails along overhead, lighting the lean white bodies of the quaking aspen and the glittering mounds of snow at their feet. A long way off lies a cluster of pines at the base of the first of a collection of gargantuan mountains, all reaching toward the moon with sharp, needle-thin tops as though trying to pop it. Overhead hang a hundred thousand stars.

I turn and face Oliver. I'm so overwhelmed by it all, so afraid to really show how much it all means to me, that instead I say, "So this is how you treat people who beat you in chess, then? You treat them to one of their dream goals?"

"That's another thing I like about you, Willow," Oliver says, not baited by the jest. He gives a light shake on the reins when the horse slows. "Your dreams are so attainable."

I note the way he said *another* and pocket it quietly.

"Attainable?" I look at the scenery around me. "I'm sorry, but this? This is not easily attainable. My dreams are challenging to achieve, sir. *Challenging.*"

Oliver tilts his head toward me and raises a brow. "You told me in Lancaster that you achieved one of your deepest lifelong dreams by eating roasted chestnuts over an open fire."

"Because *how many people get to do that?*" I exclaim. "That *is* a legitimate goal."

"You said in Minnesota you met a lifelong goal by *ice skating.*"

"It was on a *frozen lake.* Frozen. It was dangerous, really. I could've fallen through and died."

"We drove onto the lake to get there in trucks, Willow. You wouldn't have fallen through while skating."

I suck in my breath. "That wasn't a *road?*"

Oliver snickers, his own breath blooming in thick plumes around his face.

The forest is silent, all except the horse's steps and the softly jingling bells along the sleigh's sides. The moon provides the only light, but it's more than sufficient in leaving the blue-tinted glittering of snow all around. It's so peaceful it feels as though we've stepped into a church, and for several minutes we sit in silence.

Oliver steers the horse left as we move into a clearing.

When we stop, he reaches for the basket.

"Coffee? Or cocoa?" He holds up two thermoses.

I choose the cocoa, he goes with coffee, and before long we've got the large wool plaid blanket draped over our legs and my mittens are toasty with the hot mug in my hands.

Our sleigh faces the mountains, which is breathtaking, but my eye catches the cluster of lights from the small town glow from below. The candy-cane-red train gleams in the moonlight. From the top of our small hill, I feel almost like the Grinch must've felt looking down at the inhabitants of Whoville. Only, instead of feeling lonely and bitter and anxious about the future, as I can so freely admit I felt mere weeks ago, I'm full.

I look at Oliver. The way his hand rests on the reins. The way he so peacefully gazes out at the mountain scape.

Yes, I'm happy. Happier than I've been in ages. Maybe ever.

"I got you something." Oliver reaches under his seat. "Nothing fancy. Just . . . a little something to commemorate the trip."

The rectangular box is wrapped in simple brown kraft paper, twine crisscrossing where a single candy cane lies attached to a bit of holly.

"Oh, Oliver, thank you. I—I got you something too," I say, stuttering as I take it from him. "A little Christmas present. It's in my room."

And it's true. After a Christmas musical one evening in Minneapolis, I slipped inside a convenience store and printed a candid photograph Jenkins took of the three of us one afternoon. It had been the chess game of our lives, and in the shot Clarence was leaning forward, bearded chin on his cane, as he watched me knock off Oliver's knight in my final, triumphant move. Oliver, cardigan long ago cast aside as the heat of the game progressed, was sitting opposite me, head in his hands. I grinned maniacally. Multiple passengers were hanging over our seats, arms raised in midcheer.

I had bought a little frame from the convenience store and framed it, but the longer I looked at it in my room that evening, the more my confidence waned.

It was my eyes.

The way they were only on him in the shot.

The way they gave me away.

But now . . .

Carefully I slip off the twine, candy cane, and holly, and tug at the tape on one end. I open the lid of the box, and inside sits a cardigan. Soft, I feel as my fingers rub the wool. I lift it out of the box.

The dye is of blue beryl, the color of Oliver's eyes, and embroidered throughout is an ice-skating scene—swirling white and silver threads beneath an ice-skating couple, dotted snowflakes above. I touch the zipper, where a small felted ice skate serves as the pull.

My brow wrinkles as I look closer. There's an embroidered green truck in the distance, the same wreath on its front bumper as the one that evening. And the girl, she looks . . . She has my hair . . .

And the boy smiling beside her, his eyes . . .

I turn to Oliver. "Where did you get this?"

"I asked Mrs. Faris to make it the night after we went ice skating. She had me make up some drawings, which I admit I was pretty terrible at, but after a few rounds—"

"I *love* it," I breathe. "I can't believe you did this. I can't believe she did."

"I had to bribe her for it. Did you know the back wall of the Chestnut Car now sells her embroidery?" There's a pause. "But seriously, of course she did. She took a liking to you." The air crackles with a flurry of snowflakes and electricity as he hesitates. "We all have."

This is it.

My heartbeat quickens.

His gaze lingers on mine momentarily, but when I don't immediately reply, he carries on. "I know you've just gotten out of a serious relationship, Willow, and I have no intention

of rushing you into anything. I've held back as long as I could these past two weeks. But . . . the reality is, you're getting off that train tomorrow in Seattle, and if I don't say something now, I'll regret it for the rest of my life. The thing is . . . I want to ask you if you might stay."

I raise my brow. This, of all things, was not what I was expecting. "Stay?"

"The next tour is leaving after the New Year, and I want you to join me. Join us."

I blink. "What about my job?" Slowly, I begin to shake my head. "I can't just become unemployed."

"No, that's the thing. I'm offering you a job," he says in a rush, as though he's thought this all the way through. "You've done so much for Dad. I want you to be his health companion. Help with his meals. I've already spoken with Mrs. Byrd about it all." My brow rises, but he presses on. "You could work with her to start creating meal plans for those on board with more restrictive diets. We could start becoming more tailored to those with allergies, lactose intolerances, paleo, keto, sugar-free diets. The sky's the limit. We could even start advertising with that new feature. In fact"—Oliver puts a hand on his chest—"if you don't want to pursue anything beyond friendship with me, that's fine, Willow. The offer still stands. Come on board with us. Come check off all those items on your bucket list. See San Francisco in February. Ride down the South Rim of the Grand Canyons by mule. If you're not interested in me, just consider the last two weeks the longest job interview of your life."

I hesitate, and my mouth upturns. "Why do I get the sense that you're lying about that last part?"

"Not lying. If I have to think about how to woo you under the flag of friendship later on, so be it. The point is, it's going to be incredibly hard to win you over when you live a thousand miles away, and I feel like I deserve a fair shot."

I laugh at how he's turned this into a victimizing thing, all while my mind runs a hundred miles an hour. No words are coming to mind, just emotions, but I feel my mouth open to

respond anyway. Forget what Elodie says. Forget the fact that I am technically in a period of emotional crisis and relationship jail. If there's one thing I've learned from my experience with Jonas, it's that love doesn't happen on our timeline, no matter how hard we try to force it. Sometimes we just have to take life by the horns and embrace the ride.

Elodie would understand.

And right now, even with all the triggering words of such a drastic decision flitting in and out through my mind, words like “rent” and “salary” and “When-you-tell-Elodie-you’re-leaving-her-*and-the-city-and-the-state-she-is-going-to-be-flinging-pans-and-French-obscenities-for-weeks,*” the reality is I want this. Of course, I do. *I want this.*

I'm about to say this, or more likely blurt something to the same effect, when my eyes spot a scene that's formed behind Oliver's head.

A taxi has entered the parking lot of the train station below, and out of the back door a man pops out. A tall man slipping on black driving gloves before he shuts the door. In a long black coat. And black boots. Black boots I'd know anywhere.

He shoves his hands in his pockets and moves briskly toward the waiting train.

A moment later, he steps away from it and looks straight up the hill. At me. His eyes lock on mine and there's no question about it. It's Jonas.

No. *No no no.* Not now, of all moments.

“And I was hoping . . .” Oliver says, searching my eyes, “you feel the same way.”

“I”—I refocus my gaze on Oliver—“do.” I take one of his gloved hands. “I really do. I think I've wanted this since we first met.”

“Me too.” Oliver exhales and laughs. “And I'll be frank, I'm pretty sure Dad wants this as much as I do.”

I grin, all the while seeing Jonas in my periphery, trudging through the feet of snow up the hill. Determined.

And that's the thing, isn't it? He sees me sitting in a sleigh with another man, single, obviously having a moment, and doesn't have an inkling in his mind not to ruin it. He doesn't care that I look deliriously happy. He doesn't care that I'm going to have forever etched in my memory the picture of Oliver meticulously working out the details for this evening—the sleigh, the mountains, the question—and then like a big blot of ink stain over my beautiful new cardigan will forever be the reminder of Jonas, coming up this hill to interject himself into the moment.

I just want to capture Oliver and me and this hilltop moment like a snow globe, so that no matter how hard Jonas tries to pry himself in, all he'd succeed in doing is shaking up the globe and making a more enchanted, flurry-driven scene.

Jonas lifts his hands to his lips, preparing to call out, when suddenly something lobs across the field and lands to his left. He stops. Looks at the round hole in the snow by his feet.

He takes another step and stops as another white blob comes lobbing through the air.

The third hits him squarely in the back, and he turns.

And there, at the bottom of the hill beside the big red train, is Ian, standing tall in his green elf suit, a bundle of snowballs in his hands.

The hero.

My mitten goes straight to my gaping mouth, and at last Oliver turns.

Jonas, seeing the crazy elf, starts back up the hill, but Ian starts lobbing them faster. Eventually a second elf joins in. Then a third. Even Mr. Jenkins, looking quite refined in his black suit, lands one on Jonas's shoulder.

“What on . . . ?” Oliver begins, but I cut him off.

“Kiss me,” I urge, pulling his gaze away with my mittens on his cheeks. “I'd like you to kiss me now, before we have to go down and deal with Jonas and any of that down there.”

“That’s Jonas?” Oliver says, but then his eyes alight as he seems to catch what else I just said. Despite the growing war behind him, he pulls me in without a second’s hesitation. I feel the press of his glove against the back of my head, and our cold lips mingle, offering each other warmth. Flurries land on my cheeks and closed lashes and fall softly on my hair. The horse gives a soft neigh and shakes its mane.

And suddenly it’s just us, on the hilltop, ice-crystalline branches leaning forward in anticipation, stars twinkling as they hold their breath above.

Our very own snow-globe moment in time.

And with that kiss, the surety that everything in my life just officially changed.

All because, despite my own fears and disappointments, I said yes in those coffee-stained, jingling slippers to whatever unknown adventures lay ahead, and took a step onto The Christmas Express.

Epilogue

Christmas Day, the Following Year

“Vous appelez ça un biscotti? J’ai fait de meilleurs biscottis dans mon sommeil.”

I jab Elodie in the ribs as she mutters, no doubt related to the fact she’s just whacked the biscotti against her cup and no doubt something about making better biscotti in her sleep. Mrs. Byrd shoots daggers with her eyes at us from the other side of the expansive table, and I press on Elodie’s foot under the table with my heel until she takes a bite, rubs her belly, and murmurs an unconvincing, “Mmmm.”

Mrs. Byrd resumes slapping mashed potatoes on Clarence’s plate.

Clarence stands a few minutes later, and I pause in pressing the napkin over my lap for the blessing. It’s Christmas morning. The passengers of our twelfth tour of the year have departed after many hugs and exchanging of contact information an hour earlier. We had several repeaters from the year prior, it was nice to see, but what was even more special were the several first timers. Elodie. My mother. And even one extra-special attendee we all have come to love: Seraphina, the girl Ian met in a computer game six months ago and hasn’t shut up about since. She truly is his soul mate. We know this because she spends half her salary on cosplay costumes for Comic Cons, of which they attend many.

“Lord, we are thankful,” Clarence begins, and I take a moment to peek around the table of the Mistletoe Room.

Mrs. Byrd squeezes Clarence's hand, in what I have come to recognize as a quiet love that started with help in grieving his wife's death and turned into a companionable comfort, different, but nonetheless as strong as anyone else's, including Oliver's and mine.

The seats are full of the people I've come to cherish as much as family over the last year—staff and employees who have turned out to be some of the best friends both day and night. Not that I am without my monthly fill of Elodie, who meets me every few weeks on the platform of Moynihan Train Hall station, making winding motions while glaring at the conductor to wrap it up so she can pull me off and get me up to date on all the things.

The past year has been the best of my life yet. I have so many things to be grateful for. And so much because I embarked, regardless of the fear that had me trembling, on that very first adventure.

I feel a squeeze of my hand and the warmth of a kiss on my cheek. Opening my eyes, I realize the blessing has ended, and Oliver is gazing at me, his baby-blue eyes warm. Only, he's no longer sitting beside me, but in the silence had dropped to one knee.

For a long moment he seems to work to find his voice.

When he does at last, a slightly shaky speech unfolds from his lips, about how his life was changed the day I stepped on the train a year ago, about how he can't imagine one more day without me. I squeeze his hands as he speaks, my own throat burning as he ends with, "Merry Christmas, Willow. And I hope, if you'll have me, to many, many more."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the faces of loved ones around the room, the gaping mouths as they open their eyes to discover the scene that's unfolding before them. Mom has her hands clutched to her chest. Elodie is openly weeping.

From another corner of my periphery, I register the twinkling ring propped up inside the open box in one of Oliver's hands.

But I'm not looking at either of those things. All I can see is Oliver's earnest face, the man who has traveled thousands of miles with me over the past 365 days, and who still wants to spend hundreds of thousands more.

And I want that too.

Of course I want that too.

My reply comes in my kiss, and as I feel his lips press against mine in return, and his arms eventually clasp around me and raise me up off my chair, toes dancing above the floor, I hear the round of claps and whoops and cheers and the tinkling of a dozen spoons and knives being clinked against glasses.

"Merry Christmas," I repeat, kissing Oliver on the stubble of his cheek and whispering in his ear. "And to many, many more."

Pining for You

Dedication

*To Christine Berg,
Dreamer, Believer, Talented Artist, and Whimsical Friend
with the Happiest Christmas Tree Farm
in the World Worth Writing About.*

Chapter 1

Theo

Three weeks into dating, and already odds he'd marry this woman were approaching 45 percent.

It was a spontaneous though not unexpected thought, flickering in and out as quickly as the votive between them. After all, here he sat: Theodore Watkins III, bachelor of thirty-five years, financial adviser who lived by facts and figures. He was well aware of the statistical odds of discovering an eligible woman within ten or so years of his own age in Abingdon, Virginia, town of eight thousand. Aware even more, as he looked into the blazing blue eyes of one of the most beautiful women he'd ever encountered, of the slim chance of stumbling upon one so poised and intelligent. Compatible. Charming.

Absolutely perfect.

Although, yes, the last time he walked into her home he'd discovered an unnerving number of framed photographs of her previous boyfriend lining the hallway. One was so candid of the man walking to his car, sunglasses on, you could almost, *almost* wonder if she'd snapped it from across the street. And sure, judging the bizarre shift in neckline from blue to green in that framed snapshot at the end of the hall, you could almost, *almost* be led to believe she'd photoshopped him into the family Christmas photo, Santa hat and all.

But what was photoshopping a person into a photo besides a noble desire for inclusion? And what was snapping a photo in broad daylight without the subject's knowledge but one mere step beyond affection? Skew it a bit one way and it might

require a restraining order, sure, but skew it the other and she was the world's best girlfriend.

Right now, she was the world's best girlfriend. Theo couldn't think of one person he'd rather be sitting with at this moment.

Well, one. But that person was fourteen years and 2,629 miles away, and he had learned a long time ago how to carry on with a good life despite the ever-present memory of her in the back of his mind.

Ashleigh glanced up from the menu and caught his gaze. Her lips, pink as the roses decorating the tables, parted slightly. Her cheeks warmed as her eyes slipped back to the menu, no doubt attempting to hide similar thoughts behind her long black lashes. But the secret was out, had been out for a few dates now. She was enjoying herself as much as he was, and neither of them was interested in playing games.

At this rate, they'd be shopping for rings by June.

"You know," Theo said, placing the menu and its lines of French descriptions on the crisp white linen tablecloth. "*Fiddler on the Roof* is opening on Saturday. I wondered if we could watch the performance, take Bree and Chip out after the show to celebrate her role as Golde—"

"You mean voluntarily sit beside our exes so we can reexperience at what precise moment Chip lost interest in me?"

Ashleigh delivered her polished words with nothing but serenity as she gazed at the menu, although he could've sworn he saw her left eye twitch.

She set her menu down and reached out to give his hand a lighthearted squeeze. "I will be forever grateful to those two for setting us up, Theo, but that doesn't mean I can forget so easily. You, however, are a wonder."

She held his hand until he bowed his head with a nod.

"Of course. My apologies. I brought it up too soon."

He hadn't lied. By *soon*, he just meant relative to the life span of a two-hundred-year-old bowhead whale.

It had been more than a year since Chip and Bree had said their "I dos," almost two since Theo and Ashleigh each had to endure "the talk" with their former significant others. Despite the unpleasant conversation, Theo had understood Bree, both then and now. The heart wanted what it wanted. Openness to heartache, unfortunately, came with the dating landscape. Through it all, Theo had maintained a friendship with both Bree and Chip. The weekend prior he even celebrated with them at their baby shower.

Baby steps. Ashleigh just needed to take baby steps.

Like removing the framed photographs of her entwining her arm with someone else's quite-possibly-photoshopped husband. That would be a good start, particularly before any unfortunate incident whereby Chip or Bree happened to see it one day.

Theo's pocket vibrated just as the waiter stepped up to the table. The man gave a short dip of the head. "Good evening, ma'am. Sir. Are you ready to order?"

"You go ahead, Ashleigh," Theo said as he slipped his hand into his pocket and peeked discreetly at his phone. His occupation often leaked into his life after hours, but he did his best to remain courteous in the company of others. Especially Ashleigh.

But one glance at his phone and he paused.

The name hovering on his screen wasn't from Harris, calling about the upcoming company merger, or from gubernatorial candidate Lee, wanting reassurance about how the investment into Quicken would affect his future and reputation. It wasn't even his frequent after-hours caller, multimillionaire Hardy, announcing he'd "accidentally" purchased another Jaguar while on vacation and needed to hide the diminutive expense on the account report from his wife.

No, it was a name much more important. One that caused him to do something he'd never done in the middle of their meals—slip from his seat with a “Forgive me, I have to take this” to Ashleigh and the waiter.

The caretaker of his family's Christmas tree farm.

The caretaker himself.

Skye's father.

Chapter 2

Skye

“**Y**ou have to go to the hospital.” Skye struggled to keep hold of her father without hurting him further as she eased him into his recliner. Carefully she undraped her arm from his shoulders. “This is going to be one of those nonnegotiables. Like paying taxes. Stopping at crosswalks.” She waved a hand at his slumped shoulder. “Seeing a doctor when part of your body has been crushed into a thousand tiny fragments.”

He looked at her as though she’d just pushed a three-weeks-expired crab cake into his mouth. “Nonsense. It’ll heal itself ___”

Skye glanced down to his shirt. “Is there something poking *out* of your arm right now—”

“My arm’s just like a starfish—” her father continued.

“Dad? Is your *bone* coming out of your *body*?”

“It’s made to grow back on its own.”

“That is *incredibly* inaccurate. You are welcome to look at any amputee as a living example—”

“Just need to give it time.” He exhaled sharply as he pulled the lever with his good arm and the recliner popped back. He nodded to her. “You go look it up, honey. You’ll see. I’ll not be wasting my time on a bureaucratic system trying to take my money.” He picked up the remote and flicked on the television. “Won’t fall into their trap . . .”

Skye threw her hands out as she spoke over the television. “Sure. I bet all those doctors hard up for money were just lying

in wait to push your tractor over while you weren't looking. It's probably some grand ploy happening all over the country. The headlines will be splashed across the news tomorrow: 'Desperate Surgeons Discovered Hiding in Cornfields from Sea to Sea.'"

He nodded, his eyes on the TV. "Now you're starting to think."

Skye bit her bottom lip to keep from wasting her breath on a fruitless response. It was time to get her mother.

She'd been inside her parents' house almost every day for the past three months; before that, years had passed since she left her childhood home. The strangest thing about being gone and coming back, however, wasn't how much things had changed. It was how much things hadn't.

The blue-and-white wallpaper, the pale-pink couches, the old flamingo table lamps—these were all as they had been when she left for Seattle fourteen years ago. The same lemony Pine-Sol smell permeated the air. Even the flickering television, boxy and crying out to be used as a prop on some set for an *I Love Lucy* musical, was the one she had watched through high school. Everything in Skye's life had changed in the past fourteen years. But for her parents? Nothing.

Well, nothing except for the dozen landscape oil paintings covering every square inch of wall space above the couch.

Skye's eyes drifted to the glimmer of a poker chip on the shag carpet, now visible beneath her father's reclined chair. She frowned. Frowned deeper as she picked it up and the words *Bristol Casino* glinted against the lamplight. A one-hundred-dollar chip.

Terrrrrific.

Nothing here had changed *at all*.

Her father's attention and expression shifted as he realized what she held. He started to reach for it, winced, and settled back again.

"Now how'd that get there?" he said gruffly, eyeing it as if it had slithered in like a lizard and taken post beneath the chair

of its own accord. “Must’ve slipped out of my pocket and been stuck in this chair for ages.”

Sure. Because her mother—tidiest woman in all of Appalachia—would’ve let a single *day* go by without vacuuming under the furniture.

No, if that coin was under the chair, he’d gone today. Maybe last night.

She’d only recently come to terms with the reality of her parents’ extreme financial situation. It was the very reason she’d packed up her successful, vibrant Seattle life three months ago and headed back to Whitetop, Virginia, population 412—now 413. At the moment she was going to have to remember the stubborn man was missing some very critical functions in his limbs.

Medical attention first, Skye. Kill him second.

“I’ll take that.” He held out his hand, grinning at her as though she were a kindergartener who’d accidentally picked up a cigarette.

“Don’t you worry about it,” Skye replied with a tight smile, clamping the coin deep inside her fist and then shoving it into her back pocket. She gave his knee a heavy-handed pat as she spoke. “You. Just. Leave. It. To. Me—”

A rapping on the front door cut her words short. Skye’s eyes moved from the door to the clock on the wall to the blank expression on her father’s face. Her parents always had their little church group over on Thursdays, but who would be knocking on their door at 8:00 p.m. on a Friday night?

“Are you expecting someone?” Skye said, crossing the old, familiar carpet. She opened the door. “*Theo?*”

The television in the background dimmed as Skye spoke the name she’d refrained from speaking for just about as long as the carpet beneath her feet had been in existence.

The yellow porch light shone on the man who wore a two-piece suit as if he were entering a fine establishment instead of her parents’ double-wide. Mist settled on the broad shoulders

of his beige overcoat. He belonged in a boardroom, not on a porch with green outdoor carpet and aluminum chairs.

And yet his clean-shaven chin still carried the lightning scar where he'd fallen off that log and into the creek years ago. Whereas the world beyond was matte black, his skin beneath the porch light was shades of elm-wood brown. His eyes, onyx and wide as they looked down at her, were the same ones she'd looked into the whole of her childhood.

And in those eyes, one very clear expression.

He was just as shocked to see her as she was him.

"*Skye.*" Her name was a whisper before he cleared his throat and tried again. "Skye . . . I . . . didn't expect to see you. How is he?"

Despite asking about her father, his eyes stayed on hers, probing, as though he expected her to vanish at any moment.

They'd done their best to avoid each other for fourteen years. And yet here they were. It had finally happened.

"He's . . . good." She shook away the bombarding thoughts and questions as she pulled the door open wider and waved a hand to showcase the man in the recliner. She could do this. She could act normal.

"Theo," her father said, looking just as startled as Skye as he scrambled for the remote.

"Considering he got knocked over in a tractor without a seatbelt while isolated out in the middle of nowhere, then dragged himself the length of the farm to get home, he's okay. A bit delusional, believes he's some type of arm-growing starfish who doesn't need medical care. I expect it'll take about two, maybe three days tops for him to bleed out."

"What?" her father said.

"Hm?" she replied.

It was bizarre. She was actually managing to keep a cool tone, as though years hadn't lapsed since she'd seen Theo face-to-face. As though she hadn't wondered a hundred times in the past three months—as she looked out the airplane

window at the blanket of clouds, as she dusted off the mantel of her new fireplace, as she unpacked each cardboard box and set each book in its place—how this precise moment would go.

The moment she bought the plane ticket, she knew she was going to run into him eventually.

Theo swiped a raindrop off his brow as he stood on the mat. “Bleeding out. How unfortunate.”

“And unnecessary. Come on in.” Skye pressed her hand to her rib cage to still her nerves as she stood back.

“Theo. I didn’t expect you.” The recliner creaked as her father pulled the lever, lowered his feet, and attempted to stand, his elbow supported by his other hand. Her mother appeared and pressed him back into the chair.

“Ralph, sit down,” Skye’s mother said, pushing gently on his good shoulder until he dropped back down. “I called him.” She shot a sugary smile across the room to Theo.

Both Skye and her father held the same expression as they watched her cross the room to land a peck on Theo’s cheek. *Why?*

As if hearing their question she continued: “Under Section 3A of the Workers’ Compensation policy, employees should notify employers of personal injury—both to self and property—within a reasonable timeframe. And of course”—she slipped off Theo’s overcoat—“Theo would *want* to know how Ralph was doing, wouldn’t you? Now, dear, how was the circuit? I know you must be so relieved to get tax season behind you.”

Theo touched his freshly exposed cufflinks with a bit of a startled smile. Her mom, quick as a flash, had settled his coat on the hook and was standing before him, waiting patiently for his reply.

“It was . . . tedious, I have to admit.” He smiled around the room, his eyes landing on Skye’s only for the span of a blink.

“Mr. Calhoun didn’t try to pull the wool over your eyes again, did he?” Mom said as though she spent her nights and weekends handling the finances of Southwest Virginia’s elite.

Theo laughed.

Skye's mother laughed back, then went into the nearby kitchen.

"I'll be glad to get my weekends back, I'll say that much. It looks like I've missed quite a bit. How are you holding up, Mr. Fuller?"

"As I told Maggie a hundred times, I'm *fine*. Just a bit of bruising." He grunted as Skye's mother returned and dropped an ice pack onto his shoulder. "You needn't have come all this way on account of me."

Skye felt the old unease rising in her stomach as she watched her injured father try to wave away the ice pack and struggle to stand. Her chest tightened as she watched his eyes rove every crook and cranny of their small living room, checking for anything amiss, things Theo might notice. He pushed several magazines into a neat stack, moved the can of beer onto the coaster beside it. It was behavior her father rarely displayed, behavior she loathed almost as much as the casino coin in her back pocket.

He was ashamed. In his own home. The one Theo himself—charming as he may be—was responsible for.

How everyone in this house acted oblivious to this fact was the most infuriating thing of all. Or possibly worse: nobody in this house knew she knew the truth.

She was alone in her mother's kitchen last December, sore from neck to fingertips as she stirred the fifth batch of snickerdoodle cookies for her parents' church's annual Christmas banquet. The scent of hairspray wafted down the hall as her mother sprayed her curls in place. Her father was finishing up another long day at Evergreen Farm, loading some of the last trees onto cars for the season. The dough was giving Skye such fits that the old wooden spoon cracked clean in half. As she looked for a replacement, she almost didn't open that last drawer—what would traditionally be called the junk drawer in other homes but was too immaculate for such a slur. And yet on impulse, she did. But instead of a stirrer, the item that caught her eye, folded neatly beside scissors and tape

and sewing needle, was an open piece of mail with the letterhead of Evergreen Farm—glinting just like that coin in her pocket—and a statement of her father’s yearly salary typed neatly in the body of the letter. The low number was jaw dropping.

At the bottom of the cover letter was Theo’s signature.

She packed up her bags in Washington and moved back to Virginia the following week.

Be calm, Skye. Be cool.

“Have a seat, Theo,” her father said. “Let me get you a drink—” He let go of his arm and made to push aside a couple couch throw pillows, then groaned as he gritted his teeth and doubled up his grip on his elbow.

“Sit down, Dad.” Skye moved around the coffee table and lowered him to the couch before he could protest. The firmness in her own voice must’ve startled him enough to obey. She sat on the edge of the coffee table, eye level. “That’s it. You’re going to the hospital. Now.”

“I’m fine—”

“You’re not fine. You’re clearly not fine and if it’s broken you’ll need a cast, maybe even surgery—”

“Oh, and I’m sure you would’ve thought my knee needed surgery fifteen years ago, too, but look at ’er now.”

Skye squeezed her eyes shut as he slapped his knee, the same knee with the torn ACL that slid out on occasion and caused him to fall and roll on the ground like an NFL player with—well, a torn ACL. “All it needs every now and again is a little tune-up—”

“Rubbing Vaseline on your knee every six months isn’t a tune-up, Dad. If I had a word to express how *unhelpful* that is —”

“*Inutile* would serve well, I believe,” her mother chimed in as she passed them, handing Theo a cup of lemonade, then moving toward the closet.

“You bet your bottom dollar it isn’t helpful,” her dad said, giving it another slap. “In fact,” he said, struggling once more to rise, “I think I’ll give it a little tune-up right now . . .”

Skye felt the groan growing within her, threatening to erupt any moment. She clenched fists and teeth as her body tightened. She was going to have to do it. She was going to have to haul this man over her shoulders, throw him into the truck, and drive him down the mountain. Or worse, call an ambulance.

“Mr. Fuller, did you get a chance to pick up that Lowe’s order I requested?”

The crackling in the room faded.

Skye and her father peered at Theo.

Her father frowned. “What Lowe’s order?”

“Oh, you know. The one for the lumber for the new tree shed. I believe I called it in last week.”

“Last week?” Her father’s frown turned urgent. “You made an order at Lowe’s last week? Well, I didn’t—they’ve had it a *week*?” He started reaching behind him, feeling for the “going out” jacket so often laid on the back side of the recliner.

Theo, cool as a cucumber as he sipped the lemonade, watched Mr. Fuller rise from his chair. “Well, if you haven’t gotten to it, I could run down myself—”

“Maggie!” he called, stretching his neck toward the kitchen.

“Right here, dear,” Skye’s mother said, standing at the front door, raincoat on and a duffel bag over one shoulder. She held open a second raincoat for Skye’s father. “Skye, I’ve switched over the laundry, moved the Crock-Pot into the fridge, packed an overnight bag, and made some sandwiches for the ride. Can you be sure to lock up after we leave? Theo, do you mind assisting Ralph to the car? It’s slick out there.”

He nodded. “Certainly.”

They passed a smile to each other as she turned toward the door after her husband. Skye could practically see the high-fives they were making with their eyes. Lowe’s was all the

way down in Abingdon, quite conveniently all but next door to the hospital. All her mother had to do at this point was stop at the hospital and throw the passenger door open beneath the emergency-room sign while hospital staff handled the rest.

“Oh, and Theo?” Her mother turned as if a thought just occurred to her.

“Yes, Mrs. Fuller?”

“The seedlings came in today and a heat wave is expected next week. Those seedlings, as I’m sure you’re aware, will need to get in the ground immediately.”

Theo looked slightly startled. “Oh. Yes. Of course.”

“And the tractor will need to be seen to.”

Theo’s uncertainty deepened. “Oh, sure. Right.”

She flapped her hand. “But I’m sure you can handle an upturned tractor.”

Theo swallowed.

Skye’s mother let the silence linger, her smile making a panoramic move around the room until it landed on her daughter. “Although even the hardiest of farmers would no doubt appreciate a second pair of hands for the job.”

Skye’s eyes narrowed.

Do not say it. You do not have to say it.

You are a grown woman who is perfectly capable of not saying it.

“I’ll help.” Skye shut her traitorous mouth the second the words flew from her lips.

Her mother gave a short nod, as though she was the conductor of this little play and her flautist performed the solo right on cue. “Terrific. Now that it’s settled, Theo, I went ahead and turned up the heat in the cabin and slipped an egg casserole in the fridge for you in the morning. Let’s be off, then, shall we?”

Theo's startled gaze turned from her mother to Skye, and Skye did her best to avoid his eyes.

If Skye wasn't so peeved at the turn of events, she would've laughed.

Instead she followed her parents and Theo outside and stood on the gravel driveway, watching her parents' truck swing onto the road and the taillights fade until they disappeared. Her all-consuming thought was that she was exactly in the one place she had told herself she never wanted to be.

Alone. On a mountaintop. Beside the man who broke her heart fourteen years ago.

Chapter 3

Theo

She was exactly as he remembered.

Her hair was shorter now, the thick auburn waves curling around her chin instead of trailing long past her shoulders. The loose sweater ornamented her natural attributes; the olive color offset her brown irises. She used less eyeliner now, but the subtle black line framing her almond-shaped eyes highlighted her best feature in a more refined way than it had in those days of oversized plaid shirts and ripped jeans. She looked . . . positively radiant.

Skye stood in the driveway watching the road, both hands tucked in the back pockets of her slim jeans. That stance. Another thing that hadn't changed about her.

The full moon and a thousand stars hung directly overhead. A few were blocked by the occasional cloud, but the sky was free of light pollution and the air was thick with dew from the rainfall. Theo inhaled, feeling as though his lungs were being purified. The gurgling creek on the other side of the road was the only sound for miles. Nothing but forest lay behind them. The single road in front of them took the occasional traveler up and down the mountain on either side, and to Evergreen Farm ahead.

Where rows and rows of Fraser firs and white pines glinted in the moonlight.

A rush of wings overhead caused Theo to wonder if the pounding in his chest was so loud it had caused the bird to flee.

He took a step forward. “Skye.”

Skye dropped her head and turned. Smiled, but it looked forced. As though he was blocking her way. As though she had been trapped and now she had no choice but to converse. “So. Exploiting a man’s weakness for his own good. Nice play. Tell me, are you actually planning on building a new shed?”

Theo smiled slightly as he kicked at a piece of gravel. “We are now.”

Everyone knew Mr. Fuller was one of the most hardworking men around, but he had a classic weakness: he always worked alone. This worked splendidly as he single-handedly managed “his farm” throughout the year, but during the Christmas season, the very presence of part-time staff—with their jingle-bell hats and ho-ho-ho attitudes—was enough to give him hives. Theo couldn’t count the number of complaints he got each year about the “cranky old man getting in the way” while the staff tried to sell trees and hot chocolate. At this point, the complaints were practically a Christmas tradition.

A genuine smile drifted like a whisper across her face, then a cloud seemed to cover her again. She started moving toward the trailer.

Theo slipped both hands into his own pants pockets. He waited for several seconds as the creek filled the silence and the distance between them grew. But his question grew, too, with every second that passed. “So . . . I can’t help noticing it’s not a holiday and, unless I’m mistaken, there’s no memorable occasion going on at the moment. What brings you back to Virginia?”

Skye paused, her hand on the door handle.

For the first time that evening Skye’s eyes brightened as she looked back at him, and she tipped her head toward the dilapidated stone cottage bordering the farm across the road. The old, abandoned shack held quite a few of their childhood memories—

Theo frowned.

The house was covered in shadows by the overhanging trees, but as Theo squinted he made out the simple frame of the cottage. And the bulky object parked beside it.

Theo squinted even more and the compact form of a Prius evolved. “Is that . . . a car?”

“It’s my car.”

“You? But why”—he ignored the growing pressure in his chest, the sense of something about to unfold he wasn’t quite prepared for—“are you parked there?”

“Why? The only reason why. Because I live there.”

Theo whipped around from the house to her. He took a step toward her. Then back toward the house. “You *live* there? *Here?* In *that?*”

Skye’s smile slipped from her face as she tugged the door open. “Yeah, well, I know it’s not as *grandiose* as the cabin you have up there—”

Her eyes darted to the Evergreen Farm sign swinging oh so slightly above the long gravel driveway where, at the end, the Watkins family cabin nestled in a stand of pines.

He’d offended her. But honestly, how she could have been offended was unfathomable. The old cottage was at least a hundred years old; it had been uninhabited for more than fifty. There was a reason they’d snuck in there for wild adventures as kids: it was deserted, every window was either cracked or shattered, and half the floor was missing.

But then something else startled him as he pulled his gaze away from the house.

She had moved back. Here. To Whitetop.

Skye was *back*.

The realization hit him like a tidal wave.

“How long have you been here?”

“Twelve weeks,” Skye said, reaching inside and flicking off the light switch. The living room blackened, leaving only the porch light above her head to illuminate them.

The door creaked as it shut, and she turned the lock with her key.

“Well, thank you for coming,” Skye said in a perfunctory way, hopping down the stairs instead of stopping to look him in the eyes. She spoke like she was passing a mailman on the way to the mailbox. “I’ve gotta get some things sorted out if I’m going to spend the next week running the farm.”

“You mean helping me run the farm.”

Her foot hovered over the bottom step. For a long moment she was silent, her silhouette tipped downward as she stared at the mud-slopped grass. Then, with a determined jerk of her head, she looked up. “Look. I appreciate you”—she seemed momentarily stuck as she waved her arms around—“coming out here to check on Dad . . . but . . . I think we can go ahead and give up this illusion about you running the farm. We both know this is about as far out of your arena as humanly possible, and anyway . . . I’m sure you have plenty of . . .”—she indicated his coat, again seeming to search for words—“duties of some sort to handle with your life in Abingdon, so I’m going to make it easy on you. I know how to handle a tractor. I know how to put the seedlings in. Frankly, this will all be easier if I handle it myself. Consider yourself off the hook.”

Theo stood rooted. He heard everything she had said, but the words and sentiments flew by faster than he could snatch them. He wanted to speak, felt the need to speak, but also felt the sneaking suspicion that if he didn’t choose each of his words wisely, he’d miss an opportunity he couldn’t identify. Frankly, he needed to get alone and think.

After several seconds ticked by, she juted a thumb behind her. “Well, my shack is calling. I’d better run. Good night, Theo.”

Theo nodded, which she seemed to take as release from the conversation, and began walking down the driveway and across the road.

He watched her figure slowly disappear beneath the overhanging trees as she stepped onto the small bridge leading

to her—most unbelievably enough—new home.

A single car and its beaming headlights momentarily lit up the road between them on its trek up the mountain.

There was so much to process.

Skye had returned. Half a lifetime had passed since their last conversation. They had no doubt changed since their last meeting. He was in a steady relationship with a woman who brought more life and joy to his days than he'd experienced in years.

It was clear Skye wanted him to stay out of her life.

But at the bottom of all the mess and complication was one thing Theo realized the moment she opened that door. One thing he could not deny when he saw her face after all these years.

She was the one person in the world he had never, ever, stopped wanting to see.

Chapter 4

Skye

She was halfway across the short bridge over the creek before she took a breath.

So she'd been a little hard on him.

No, Skye. That's the lie you're supposed to feel. Keep your grip.

She knew better. If her parents wouldn't admit it, accept it, and deal with it, she would. This was why she came back. To fix it.

And by *it* she meant her parents' undeniable life situation.

Proof one: the slowly dilapidating double-wide behind her. There was no denying that for all his flaws, her father was one of the hardest working, loyal men in all of Whitetop, perhaps the state. He'd watched over Evergreen Farm for the past thirty years as though he owned it. He treated the land and business with such respect, frankly, he *should've* owned it. Heaven knew he was the only one who kept the farm alive and well all these years. Whereas the Watkinses liked to "play country" and roll up on the occasional weekend in their flawless, spun-by-Norwegian-mountaintop-villager-where-bells-chime-across-the-town-announcing-every-vegan-sweater-finished outfit to make s'mores over their granite-top fire pit, her father was out there in blizzards or heat waves, rain or shine, keeping that farm going. Getting it done. The Watkinses owed the success of Evergreen Farm entirely to Ralph Fuller.

And yet a sixteen-year-old babysitter would be offended if offered the salary rate she'd seen on that piece of stationery.

Signed by Theo himself.

Theo was the Fullers' employer, and despite all the fond memories of Skye's childhood, despite his undeniable charm and the care for her family he *appeared* to show, her parents needed to grasp the truth: *he* was the reason they lived this way. *He*, with his luxury cars and tailored suits, who for several years now had been capable of providing a living wage but didn't.

Forget the grievances of two decades ago.

That experience may have pained her enough to run away to Seattle, but this? This was a whole new brand of infuriating.

He could try to fill the gaps with platitudes, but since he didn't back them up with action, they were only empty words.

In the meantime, she had a farm to run.

She stepped into her yard, and the honeysuckle bushes overtook the scent of Theo's cologne. Following the cobblestone path, she slipped the key out of her pocket, then moved onto her slate porch step.

"Skye, wait."

Skye pressed her lips together.

Forced herself to turn.

Theo stood at the head of the path, surrounded by heady earth and dimpled leaves collecting teaspoons of mist, alien to her world in his pressed tie and the beige overcoat swaying lightly at his calves. If he thought he could possibly handle her world . . .

"Do you think the old path is still there?"

"What?" She followed his nod toward the swath of trees between the back of her cottage and Evergreen Farm. Beyond it, at least half a mile away, stood the dark silhouette of the Watkinses' cabin backing up to the foot of the ridge. She

didn't want to say it. Right now, she didn't want to remember the memories they'd had. But the silence grew.

"It's been a long time," she said at last. "I doubt it."

He started loosening his tie. "I'll give it a shot anyways."

She blinked. "You're . . . going to give it a shot. Walking into those woods. At night."

A smile played on his lips as the tie uncurled and slipped off his neck. "At night," he repeated.

A few seconds passed as Skye tried to hold her firm expression in place. She would *not* bite. She would *not* take the bait.

In fact, she would walk into her cottage right then. Say *Suit yourself* and shut the door.

But even as she edged toward the door, she couldn't help watching him stride over and stop at the perimeter of the woods. Her frown turned to a squint as he began stretching one arm over the other.

She suppressed the bucking smile trying to escape as he began doing squats.

After he started taking what appeared to be practice steps into the black woods, only to step back in search of another entry point, she couldn't help calling out, "Theo, what are you *doing*? The last time you attempted to walk through those woods in the *daylight* it took you two hours."

A stick tapped his ankle and he jumped back a solid three feet into the safety of her yard.

She rolled her eyes.

"I recall," he said.

"You came out the other side all but *naked*—"

"The memory haunts me."

"—covered in mud and leaves like a thirteen-year-old girl covers herself in glitter—"

"I had no choice but to camouflage myself."

“Theo.” She leveled her gaze at him. “You came out carrying a whittled stick like you were fighting for your life in *Lord of the Flies*.” Her sweater fell off one shoulder and she tugged it up before pointing at the woods. “I don’t know what you’re trying to prove right now. And I don’t know all the ways you’ve changed, but I do know there is *no way* you are going to walk through those woods in the pitch-black dark. So why don’t you just go on home?”

“In my defense,” Theo said, turning to face her properly, “the bear was *hunting*. In the woods. For me.”

She threw a hand out. “For the millionth time, it was a bear. A tiny, adolescent *black bear*—”

“A rabid beast cloaked in deceptively adorable fur,” he replied.

“Well, maybe if you’d listened to me and hadn’t doused yourself in that ridiculous fruity concoction you liked to call cologne—seriously?” Skye put her hands on her hips as he began rubbing dirt over his glinting cufflinks. “Why are you doing this?”

“Simple,” Theo said. “It’s been months since I’ve been back, and I would be remiss if I didn’t take the opportunity to enjoy the spoils of a fine evening like tonight—”

As if on cue, a thick raindrop landed squarely on Skye’s head. She looked up to see one of those little ominous clouds anchoring above their heads. “It’s raining.”

“It’s *misting*,” Theo replied, holding his palm upturned toward the sky with a smile. ““As dew leaves the cobweb lightly threaded with stars’—”

“Aaand there he is,” Skye said, turning on her heel. She raised a hand over her head as she walked toward her door. “Well, you enjoy that good old-fashioned poetry walk. Let me guess. Your favorite little guy, Sterling?”

“Teasdale,” he replied, clearly suppressing a smile at the fact she so easily remembered his most annoying high school habit of reciting poetry at every leaf and stump like some afflicted peasant of the 1500s. ““Dew.””

“I’ll see you around.”

“Bright and early,” Theo called back, turning the flashlight on his phone toward the forest.

Skye felt the grinding of wheels in her stomach but forced herself to ignore them.

“Wait a moment. What is this? This is new.”

Skye turned. The beam of Theo’s phone flashlight fell upon a building twenty yards off and moved slowly up and down its glass walls.

Strips of moonlight passed through the overhanging trees and glinted off the new windows. A dozen hanging flower baskets cluttered the awning. A couple of old easels stood propped against one wall.

He took a step toward it. His eyes lingered on empty paint bottles on their sides by the door.

Protectively, Skye took a step toward it. “It’s my greenhouse. And . . . studio.”

His eyes lit up at the word. “May I see?”

For only a moment, Skye wavered.

She looked at him standing there with both hands in his trouser pockets as he gazed at the greenhouse. His skin nearly melted into the dark forest behind him. He was only a sliver of a silhouette as he took in her new and greatest treasure, his expression clear. He wanted to see it. Part of her, the old part of her, wanted to show it off to him.

She turned away. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Before Skye closed the door, she watched his shadowy figure move into the forest with the small beam of light guiding the way.

She wouldn’t let him get to her. He could try to cozy up all he wanted, reminisce about old times, but she wasn’t going to forget—not what happened then. Not what was happening now.

But as the flashlight blinked and flashed as it moved deeper into the forest, she couldn't help calling out, "Oh, and watch out for the brown recluses! There was just an infestation of them at the greenhouse."

The flashlight's beam shook and sputtered toward the sky just as Skye grinned and shut the door.

Chapter 5

Theo

There were a hundred things to do. But first, a shower.

Theo all but tore off his clothes as he entered the code into the cabin's security system and entered the two-story foyer. He slid out of his shoes and his jacket as he moved up the stairs. As he entered the hallway he unbuttoned his top collar. The house was still on the cold side, the thermostat showing a slowly rising fifty-four degrees. Honestly, *how* had Skye's mother known he was going to stay, and *when* in those twelve minutes he was at their house had she snuck away to turn on the heat? He went directly to the master bedroom.

Must. Get. Into. Shower. Immediately.

Theo dropped his dirt-encrusted cufflinks onto the porcelain trivet and flicked on the bathroom light. His feet were cold as he stepped onto the tile, but chilled feet were the last thing on his mind at the present moment. No, the most pressing matter was the spiderwebs. The dozens of spiderwebs he had encountered as he trod through Skye's forested backyard to get here.

All for the sake of a conversation.

A tickle crept along his neck and he slapped at it before turning the shower knob.

So, he still had a little problem with spiders.

Any sane person aware of the three thousand species of spiders in the United States, most particularly the two *fatal* ones local to the area, would have a problem with spiders. He hastily worked the buttons on his shirt, and with increasingly

concerning tickles covering at least five areas on his chest and back, he gave in and finally yanked it off. The two remaining fastened buttons made a distinct *snap*. They *pinged* as they bounced and then scattered across the tile floor.

He was *not* arachnophobic.

Everybody else in the world was just, in his mind, absolutely insane.

He stepped into the still-icy shower, well aware of all he'd been called since he was a child. Everything from a simple "scaredy-cat" and "chicken" to the diagnosis at one point given by the child psychologist: "entomophobic."

But what befuddled him was that there was no name for those who *voluntarily* put their lives on the line by making sleeping outside a *sport*. Boy Scouts. Campers. Those absolutely out-of-their-minds hikers who walked through the town every year with their fiddles and tin cans in their six-month-long, 2,200-mile trek of the Appalachian Trail.

Insane.

Who would *choose* to cocoon themselves into sleeping bags like saucy enchiladas for every Lyme disease-bearing tick, leg-amputating brown recluse, rattlesnake, mountain lion, bear, or serial-killing maniac to discover?

Somebody needed to write *that* condition in the book of psychological disorders.

In truth, Skye had been right to question him when he volunteered to help out over the next few days. She was right to doubt his interest in turning tractors and clearing land and planting seedlings in a minefield of undesirable experiences. But she wasn't right to doubt his interest in turning tractors and clearing land and planting seedlings *with her*. When you find yourself suddenly face-to-face with your life's greatest regret, you don't walk away. Even with the threat of spiders.

So yes, in a moment of bravado, he walked through those woods and hiked between rows of firs beneath a dewdrop sky.

Yes, he had regretted every moment since the first blind *slap* of the spiderweb hit his face.

Yes, every square inch of his body had begun to itch by the time he emerged from the woods.

Yes, he was very aware that after he dressed he was going to have to walk the length of the farm again, this time via the safe, wide berth of the long gravel driveway, to pick up his car from the Fullers' driveway and make the forty-five-minute drive to Abingdon for some belongings.

But in exchange for real conversation, he had cracked Skye's concrete demeanor with the topic of his own weakness. Was it worth it?

Absolutely.

Whatever it took.

* * *

Theo's headlights followed the zigzagging road that clung to the side of Whitetop Mountain. The second he hit the halfway spot down the mountain and was back in service, his phone started beeping with notifications. Glancing at the screen, Theo caught one name repeated several times. He wasn't surprised.

He took a breath, then pressed the Bluetooth button on his steering wheel. "Call Ashleigh."

The phone made it through one full ring before she picked up. "Theo. I'm sorry—I know it's late. You just had to leave so quickly—"

"No, I'm the one who needs to apologize. Believe me, that's not customary for me. I've never walked out in the middle of a date."

"Well, I've never had anyone walk out on me in the middle of a date, so we're even."

Theo heard the shy smile in her tone and felt the corners of his lips turn up.

But then he remembered where he was, and where he was about to return.

His headlights shone on another deep turn in the road, and Theo turned the wheel. “I would’ve called back sooner but I just got down the mountain enough to get service.”

“You’re still up there? With your employee?” The surprise in Ashleigh’s voice was understandable, but Theo frowned slightly at the almost imperceptible tone of disapproval. But then, when he’d explained the situation as he broke off their date and dashed out the door, the barrage of questions revealed she hadn’t quite understood then either. “*You’re driving up to Whitetop to visit someone who takes care of the farm? At his home? Tonight? Now?*”

“I was. It’s going to take longer than expected to deal with the situation up here. I need to gather some supplies back in town before heading back.”

“You’re staying?” This time the disapproval was clear as crystal. “*Why?*”

He recalled the image of Skye in her slouchy sweater opening the door. The millisecond of shock in her deep brown eyes. The emotions that swirled in her irises the moment before she blinked and the concrete mask dropped into place. He saw no hate or bitterness. Neither did he see blankness, as though she had removed him from her life and forgotten him.

Quite the opposite.

The look—a momentary, millisecond look—suggested she had seen someone she cared for in the deepest, most secret parts of her soul.

If he was wrong, if he had only seen the reflection of his own desire in her shining eyes, then, well, it didn’t change a thing.

“Theo? You still—there?”

“Sorry,” Theo said, “I’m about to hit another dead spot.”

“Why are you going to stay at the Christmas tree farm?” The threat of a lost connection heightened her urgency.

He knew his answer.

But here, now, with the voice of the woman who'd been a constant source of companionship these past few weeks filling the car, he found himself pushing the brakes on the words that had formed in his head. Felt himself turning in another direction to answer her question in another true, if indirect, way.

Theo grinned. "Why, to return to my heritage. To be a farmer," he said, just as the line went dead.

Chapter 6

Skye

Someone was on her porch.

It was six fifteen in the morning, and someone was on her porch.

The sky was only just starting to break through the linen curtains over her window when she wrapped her robe around her and followed the sound of the creaking porch swing to her front door. When she opened it, there was Theo, clad in what appeared to be knockoff Carhartt pants, still crisply creased in that hadn't-been-washed-yet way, holding two cups of steaming coffee. He wore an ill-fitting orange flannel as his shirt of choice, the crisscrossing plaid of blue and orange so bright it would no doubt glow in the dark.

He was just breaking off a sip of his coffee, looking toward the creek with one ankle resting on the other knee, when he heard the sound of the door opening.

Seeing her figure in the doorway, he dropped his boot to the ground. The porch swing creaked. "I realized last night we never set a time."

"Honestly, I'm surprised you made it out of the woods alive." Skye's voice was hoarse, making her wonder what shape the rest of her was in at that precise moment. She wrapped her robe around her tighter. "But good grief, Theo, I would've gone up and gotten you."

"Would you have?" A somewhat challenging smile lifted the corner of his mouth. He returned his gaze to the babbling brook. "Anyway, I don't mind the wait. It's nice sitting out

here. I have my coffee. I made you some if you'd like it. Very peaceful." But even as he spoke the last word, a branch snapped in the distance, and she could see his neck tense.

Her eyes almost missed the black sedan sitting in the grass beside her Prius.

"C'mon in," Skye said, opening the door wide as she moved into the living room. "We don't want you to get mauled by the blood-hungry bears following the scent of your organic Peruvian-roasted coffee beans."

Theo followed her without further prompting.

"I see you brought the car today. Didn't feel like a poetic stroll this morning?"

He laid one hand casually along the mantel. "Oh, I got a refreshing stroll in much earlier. Went through the woods a good two or three more times. Communed with the bears."

"Yeah?" Skye said, taking the second cup from his hand. She raised a brow at the mantel. "There's a spider crawling toward your hand."

She smiled as he snatched his hand up so quickly the daddy longlegs skittered in the opposite direction. "I'll be a few minutes."

Though she acted cool and collected, she found the coffee cup trembling slightly as she shut the bathroom door. But then, in three minutes she'd gone from a dead sleep to drinking coffee with the ghost of her past. Her heart hadn't adjusted quite yet.

"I can hardly believe it," Theo called from the living room. "This house is unrecognizable."

"Believe it," Skye called back, her heartbeat slowing enough to allow her to take a sip of coffee and turn on the water. "This renovation took me every bit of the past three months."

"*You* did all this yourself?"

The question was both infuriating and complimentary. It was the same fiery comment of his last night that made her

want to dunk his head in the creek. She splashed some water on her face and called through the door, “*You* don’t think I could?”

“Given how it was before, I didn’t think anyone could, not single-handedly.”

Her annoyance eased as she splashed her face a second time.

The floorboards creaked as Theo moved from room to room.

Skye rubbed face wash into her cheeks.

It had taken quite some time, but she’d determined last night how to handle him—more specifically, how to handle herself around him. She was not going to be rude. She didn’t *hate* Theo. Well, when she’d watched her mother at Food City scraping pennies at checkout last weekend, hate had crossed her mind. But she was not going to let hate lie there useless. No, what she was going to do was use that particular experience to fuel her behavior over the next few days.

There was nothing to gain by acting furious at Theo, and there was potentially everything to gain by treating him exactly like he wanted: as an old friend. So she would do that. She would remember the good ol’ days. For the sake of her father she would help Theo, because left to his own devices, he’d plant the seedlings sideways and drive the tractor into the creek. And when the opportunity came, she would act like the mature adult she was and communicate with him about her dad’s pay. Not overtly, of course, but in a subtle way, so that when the time was right, she would bring up a point that would make him pause and rethink the course of his actions. That would make him realize how unjust he was being.

How had the mother said it in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*? She would let him think he was the head of his own decisions, but all the while she would be the neck that turned his head in any direction she wanted.

This wasn’t going to be about what happened fourteen years ago. This wasn’t going to be about *them*. It was just going to

be about ensuring her parents got what they deserved.

Honestly, this was a golden opportunity.

All she had to do was avoid hating the parts she hated about him, appreciate the parts she had at one time truly appreciated about him, and to be sure, above all, not to let her heart get in the way.

“How’s your dad doing?” Theo called.

She cracked the door open an inch and peeked at the man standing in her dining room. Running his fingers down the length of the dining room table, one hand resting in his pants pocket. The same jawline. The same broad, if not broader, shoulders filling out his shirt.

He had taken the best features of his youth and improved on them.

Frankly, it was irritating to see.

Skye closed the door and rummaged through her makeup bag for something to cover up the dark circles beneath her eyes. “Broken collarbone and some bumps and bruises all around,” she called back.

“Will he need surgery?”

“They don’t think so. He’s just going to have to take it easy awhile.”

“I’m sure that’s killing him.”

Skye opened the foundation case. “Mom caught him trying to sneak out to the tractor at 3:00 a.m. You have no idea.”

A few moments went by in silence.

“You don’t keep any paintings for yourself?” Theo called.

Skye stilled. She’d been an artist for twelve years. For the last six she’d done well enough that it supplied her whole income, but still, his words surprised her. A small secret revealed: he kept up with her life. Even though she hadn’t been around, he knew about her art. Did he *want* to know? Did he seek out information about her, keep tabs on her all these years?

Skye shook her head. Of course her parents would mention her life from time to time. Of course it would come up on occasion.

“I can’t stand it actually. I just have the itch to take them down and keep working on them.” Skye clicked the foundation case shut as she thought she heard him murmur, “How unfortunate.”

“Come again?” she said, raising her voice as she leaned against the sink toward the mirror and pulled out the mascara wand.

“Do you feel the same when you see your own work around town?”

“Like where? I’ve never had a chance to find out.”

“Surely the Martha would. You’re a local fine artist. You’re a newly returned regional treasure.”

Skye laughed. It was a childhood dream of hers to be featured at the Martha Washington Inn one day, but the dream held no value now. She was better known on the West Coast—and pleasant enough, in a few regions of English-speaking Europe—than here. “The Martha doesn’t know my name from Adam. No, I dropped that dream a decade ago.”

“This kitchen is stunning,” Theo called, his voice more distant. “I never would’ve imagined these bold colors would work so well together, and yet—” His voice ticked up a notch with renewed admiration. “Where did you find this island?”

She smiled as she ran the mascara brush through her lashes. Of course he thought it was stunning. Her own father had walked through the house, grunted, and said, “An orange kitchen. Never seen one o’ those before,” before focusing on the more pressing point—why was there no TV? But no, this was Theo. “It’s a dresser I found at a yard sale,” Skye said, moving on to the other eye. “I just did a little rehab on it and —”

“And put butcher block on top. So clever,” Theo said. “You could go into business as a designer.”

She imagined him running his fingers over the butcher block of her deep-teal dresser island, analyzing, processing. In fact, she would bet anyone a hundred dollars he was actually doing that right at that moment.

“Are you touching my butcher block?” Skye called out.

There was a guilty pause. “Did you not want me to?”

Skye smiled to herself as she dropped the mascara into the bag and gave one last look in the mirror. Well, she was no anti-aging Theo, but her brown eyes looked larger and rounder now, and the blue-tinted bags beneath them were concealed. Her cheeks carried a subtle pink pop, and with a few brushes through yesterday’s untamed curls, she looked as presentable as she was going to get next to Idris Elba out there. Two minutes and a paint-clad pair of pants, sweatshirt, and ponytail later, she was slipping into her work boots at the back door. Meanwhile Theo stood at the copper farmhouse sink, looking like a kid in a candy store.

“Want a banana or something before we go?” Skye said, ripping off one for herself from the bunch on the counter.

Theo gave a startled turn. “I ate some of that casserole your mother somehow providentially baked and managed to drop off at the cabin during the ten-minute span we were all together.”

“Ah. She is a crafty one, isn’t she?” Skye replied. “And let me guess. You managed all this—the 5:00 a.m. poetic stroll, the slow-morning breakfast—just after your morning workout?”

Theo’s brow lifted. “There’s a Peloton at the cabin, and yes, I did so happen to make use of it for a few minutes. How did you know?”

“Well for one thing, you are the one person on earth who has actually improved with age.” She put up a hand as his brows rose. “Don’t take it personally. It’s a fact, and I’m trying not to hate you for it. And second, you are the most meticulous, self-disciplined person I know.” Skye waited for him to pass and then shut the door behind her. “I once left you

unattended in Dad's toolshed and came back to find you'd reorganized the whole thing alphabetically."

"So? I like organization. Everybody likes organization."

"Yeah, well, we were six," Skye replied. "Anyway, I imagine that level of neurosis as an adult equates to having one of those commercial rotating racks of color-coded ties in your smudge-free, floor-to-ceiling mirrored closets and jogging religiously every morning before dawn. Am I right?"

As she moved to turn the lock, he shifted his back against the railing, their bodies suddenly compact on the back porch covered in empty pots facing the greenhouse and woods beyond.

"So, you think I've improved with age, eh?"

She pressed her lips together as she dropped the key into her pocket. "I also called you neurotic in the same breath. But sure, if that's what you want to focus on . . ."

Theo's eyes were bright. "It's the orange flannel, isn't it?" He tugged on the cuffs, which were about three inches too short.

"Yeah. Speaking of," Skye said, hopping down the steps, "you really went a bit overboard with that good ol' country boy outfit."

"Forgive me," he said, following. "I wasn't exactly brimming with options at ten o'clock at night."

She stopped and turned to face him. Put up a finger. "Wait a minute. You honestly drove all the way down the mountain last night to enter a store two hours shy of midnight? To buy that? You honestly don't own a single pair of pants that can get dirty?"

Theo rubbed the back of his neck.

When it was clear that his nonanswer would be his final answer, she laughed and turned toward her car. "Seriously. You haven't changed at all."

Both her breath and foot caught on the last word.

With effort, she planted her boot and kept walking.

She was losing herself so quickly, forgetting valid resentments in favor of childhood memories. Sure, he hadn't changed at all. She was right to have said he hadn't changed at all. Because he hadn't. He was just like he was fourteen years ago.

Her eyes flitted over to the tallest Fraser fir in the center of the field. She'd given her heart to him then, on that blanket beneath that tree and a midnight sky. They'd whispered their first pronouncements of love to each other—not like the thousands of times they'd said it before, like the burst of a laugh before you take another's hand and hop the creek, like friends. No, they'd peeled off the bravado that night, slowly, in layers, until they were looking into each other's eyes and saying it with all the sincerity they could pour from their lungs. Bare before each other. Vulnerable. She had, for once, let herself be vulnerable.

And then he left for UVA.

The calls came every day that first year.

Then every other day the fall semester of the second.

Then every weekend.

Until one day, one brisk January day of his junior year, he held her hand once again as they walked along that long driveway, the wind nipping at their feet and flurries swirling between trees, and she was just beginning to breathe again as he poured out all the fantastical stories of college memories and friends. She listened while quietly stacking away the insecurities and fears that had built up over the months, squeezing his hand until there was no space between their fingers at all. Months of tension in her shoulders and the consequential headaches started to ease.

And then, the growling of the gravel driveway. Both of their heads turning in surprise.

The white BMW packed with girls, halfway up the road, suddenly skidded to a stop.

The music poured out of the car as one girl, with rippling blonde curls, stepped out of the car to face the sweetheart of a boy she had driven so far to surprise. The wind stripped her neck of the white scarf she was just wrapping around herself and sent it flying, yet no one moved.

So Skye would remember that Theo hadn't changed. After what she had seen of her father's salary, she was certain of it. He was charming and said all the right things. He had an aptitude for appearing so loyal you'd trust him with your life, but when push came to shove, where was he?

He was Theodore Watkins III. Savvy financial adviser whom clients entrusted with all their money. Beloved employer whom employees slaved away for on a dime. Light of her childhood, best friend of her youth, man who collected hearts.

She needed to remember what was true. That he hadn't changed.

She grinned suddenly, making for the Prius as she pulled out her phone and began tapping. She knew just the way to remind herself.

Chapter 7

Theo

The air shifted and he had no idea what he'd said to cause it.

One moment they were reminiscing and laughing; the next she was jabbing the car keys with her thumb and telling him quietly to get in.

He didn't get it.

She even noted that he had aged well. Sure, she said it like the fact was a nail in her shoe, but still, the words were there. He'd heard them.

But then suddenly she was pivoting on her heel, furiously tapping out a text on her phone and charging toward the Prius with fresh determination.

Whatever was going on, this was a classic Skye move.

For all Skye's gifts, communication was not one of them. Not when it came to something serious. Fun things, funny things, what to eat for dinner, or whether she liked your present—Skye could give you a thousand reasons for her honest opinion. But the raw things? The real things? The matters hidden deep within the heart? Well, you'd have better luck recovering gold from the 1715 Treasure Fleet in the middle of a hurricane than getting her to admit you hurt her feelings.

He knew that fact all too well. She'd once moved as far as she could across the country for that very reason.

The Prius rumbled beneath them as Skye pulled the gearshift into reverse and the car started moving backward.

Theo hesitated. “And . . . is there a reason we are using the Prius instead of walking to get to the tractor?”

“I thought you didn’t like walking through the woods,” Skye retorted, gazing intently into the rearview mirror.

“True, yes,” Theo said, his knees knocking against the glove compartment. “But if I’m not mistaken, your gaze possesses a somewhat villainous flair, and your Prius doesn’t have four-wheel drive. Wouldn’t it be easier to walk?”

Skye squinted as she turned her head to the back window, moved one arm to hold on to the back of his headrest, and whipped the car around his Tesla.

“*Skye.*” He inhaled sharply as the side mirror of his own car came into view—more specifically, came into view an inch away from hers.

He threw his shock her way. “Did you pick up getaway-car driving skills while in Seattle?”

She knocked the gearshift into drive, and the gravel beneath them sputtered as her car swerved toward the road.

Theo clutched the seat with one hand and pointed with the other. “You can’t be serious. There’s a bridge.”

Skye glanced over. “You’re trying to hit an imaginary brake. My mother does that.”

“Eyes on the *road!*” With one hand pressed against the roof and the other against the passenger window, he pushed himself off his seat. His head knocked against the ceiling. The ledge of the rickety wooden bridge was all but beneath her right tire as the wheels spun. The jagged rocks in the creek below peered up at him in the glow of dawn. He squeezed his eyes shut.

“Your mother is the most commonsensical person in your family,” he cried out. “Have you ever considered that she is right to question your driving skills?”

Theo felt the bump, then heard more spitting gravel, then felt his body collide into the passenger door as Skye swerved left onto the road. It took several seconds for him to lower back down into his seat and let go of the roof.

When he opened his eyes, Skye was grinning at him like a madwoman. “Good thing you were holding that roof up to protect us. Otherwise, we would’ve been goners for sure.”

“Road!” he called, clenching his teeth as they approached one of the many, many swift turns.

Skye cackled. “Theo, how many times do you think I have driven down this mountain?”

“Don’t try that on me,” he replied through gritted teeth. His grip on the passenger door was nothing short of ironclad.

He couldn’t be sure—he wasn’t willing to risk looking away from the road—but he thought he sensed her shifting. A moment later, he felt the car slow.

His grip loosened reluctantly, his hand stiff and aching. He clenched and unclenched it before folding his hands together.

For several minutes, Theo watched the trees whip by out his window. “So,” he said at last, “care to divulge where we are going?”

“Not at all.” She was pleasantly upbeat as she turned the wheel around another switchback. “We’re going to Luke’s.”

“Luke’s?” It took a moment, but then the name rang a bell. “Ah. Luke’s.”

Skye raised a finger, clearly enjoying herself too much. “That’s the one.”

So that’s what she was up to. The pieces were starting to come together.

At least now he knew the rules of this game. “I do recall meeting him that one time and receiving the rather unfortunate experience of a broken nose. Did you know that led to reconstructive surgery?”

“I did not,” Skye said, not even bothering to hide her upbeat tone as she turned the wheel.

“Which led me to miss the Mediterranean trip that was a required piece of my spring course,” Theo continued, “and as such, required that I find another class to fill its place.” He

turned to her. “Only every class was full at that point. But one.”

He let the silence linger until she surrendered and turned her head his way.

“Which was?” she asked.

“*Basket weaving.*”

Skye barked a laugh. “I hope you got some great baskets out of it.”

“Oh yes,” Theo replied. “While my friends returned from Athens and spent the spring semester reading ancient Greek literature aloud while taste testing brizola, I sat in a circle with eighteen females under rather clangy wind chimes and labored over a basket that would end up looking like a deranged duck. For the record, it was the only class at university in which I got a C.”

Skye pressed her hand to her heart in the most unconvincing manner possible. “Oh, poor you. That must’ve been awful.”

Theo swept an invisible thread off the bulky plaid sleeve. “Yes, well—”

“Really. That, of all things that could’ve possibly happened that semester, must’ve been *the worst.*”

Theo exhaled. Took a moment to consider the timing of what he was about to say. He would’ve done things differently, waited until they had spent more time together, but because she was bringing it up . . .

“For what it’s worth, I deserved it. After everything that happened—”

“And here we are,” Skye interrupted, her cheeks pinking. She jerked the wheel into the parking lot.

So, Skye had simply wanted to poke the fire, blow and stir the ashes just enough to make the embers glow. It made sense. This would be their dance, he suspected: shuffling closer, then breaking from the heart of the matter again and again, more and more, until one moment, one unexpected moment, she was ready.

And for him? He had waited fourteen years. He could easily wait a little longer.

The car slid into the first available parking space beneath the gas station's sign: *Luke's*.

Skye popped her door open and Theo followed suit.

As for Luke, Theo had a theory. And it was time to test it. "I'm guessing Luke is still that same lovable, easygoing man I had the pleasure of meeting?"

On that fateful night fourteen years ago, Luke was 280 pounds of pure muscle who had a keen enjoyment of watching martial arts videos and practicing in his living room. He was part of Skye's long-running friend group and apparently had been waiting for a heroic opportunity to put his homegrown skills to use. Hence, after Theo had made that fateful mistake of running to Skye's friend's house to try to talk to her, the broken nose.

Skye's eyes twinkled as she grabbed hold of the front door. "You nailed it."

So there it was. Luke was Skye's attempt at a bit of revenge.

Theo grinned.

The doors jingled as they entered and slipped past rows of chips and chocolate bars, ATM machines, and quarter slots for M&M's. They walked toward the man behind the register. He was holding something up to a customer, and as the customer stepped aside, Theo saw all of him. The gas station's logo on the lime green T-shirt was stretched across his chest almost to the point of being unreadable. The chiseled jaw was gone, replaced with baby-face cheeks, victim of a recent sunburn. The bowl cut was gone, replaced with much fewer, tender-looking hairs. A single gust of wind could cause them to fly off like dandelions in spring. But the most startling change of all was his face.

His wide, positively buoyant face.

Luke caught their eyes and stretched out his arms. "Theo! You came just in time."

Chapter 8

Skye

If Skye's confusion grew any stronger, the contortions of her forehead would seal her eyes shut. As it was, she barely managed to follow Theo as he walked up to the register.

"Luke," Theo said, reaching across the glass and giving him a shoulder pat. "It's good to see you."

Luke beckoned to Skye. "Come see this. I need both of your opinions."

It took a few moments, but Skye forced herself to shuffle forward to form the strange triangle of people. Luke rested his elbows on the counter and leaned forward. He tapped the envelope as he spoke in hushed tones. "I have . . . in my hand . . . at this very moment . . . the secret to the baby's gender."

Well, it wasn't the super, ultrasecret, undercover plan to save the world, but it was still something.

Skye's eyes widened. "I thought Tracy didn't want to know."

Luke wagged his eyebrows. "She doesn't. Just got back from the doctor yesterday. She had him write it on a piece of paper and seal it up so we could take it to Blackbird Bakery and get a cake made for the shower, you know, pink in the center if it's a girl, blue if it's a boy." (To his credit, Luke looked like he was about to burst out of his shirt with excitement.) "Anyway, she forgot she had a highlighting appointment for one of her clients, so she gave this to me and made me promise I wouldn't look." He looked at the envelope

in his hand like it was a treasure map. His blue eyes shone like a baby's. "And I'm keeping my word." He pushed it in Skye's face. "Read it."

"No way." Skye threw up her hands and took a step back. "Your wife would kill me."

"C'mon," Luke urged, leaning farther over the counter to push the envelope her way. "Read it."

"Absolutely *not*," Skye said, moving behind a row of candy bars for good measure.

"Aw, c'mon, Skye, I can't read it myself. I made an oath."

"So you give it to everyone else who comes in here and try to figure it out by their reactions? Heck no. I've experienced the wrath of a pregnant woman. And that was over the one time I accidentally threw away her *yogurt*. Can you *imagine* what she'd do to you—to *me*—if she found out we knew the sex of her *baby*?"

Luke, who was looking more like the retired version of Mr. Incredible by the moment, put his fist on the counter and dropped his head. But a moment later, he was popping back up, smile back in place. "Theo. I know I can count on you."

Theo put up both hands. "You know I'd love to—"

"You won't even have to *say* it out loud," Luke pressed. "Just read it to yourself."

The corner of Theo's mouth tugged upward until it formed a wry smile. "Why? To see if you can guess by my expression?"

Luke pointed to Theo. "*Exactly*." He looked down at the scribbled back of a receipt. "So far I have three eyebrow raises and two winks."

"Which leads you to believe . . . ?" Theo said.

"It's a girl. Naturally."

Theo shook his head. "Well, a fifth girl would be eyebrow raising for sure. I look forward to hearing the official word in due time. But in the meantime, I believe we are here for a reason." Theo glanced toward Skye. "Right, Skye?"

What was going on? Who were these people? In what parallel universe had she landed?

She shook herself back to the matter at hand. “Right. We’re here to pick up the tractor.”

Luke reached beneath the register and tossed her the key.

“Thanks, Luke,” Skye said, closing her fingers around it. “It’ll be back by dinnertime.”

“Take your time,” Luke said, already back to staring at the tally marks on the back of the receipt.

They had just reached the door and opened it when Luke called out, “And Skye?”

Skye turned at the sound of her name. “Yes?”

Luke grinned. “Good to see the Evergreen Twins back together again.”

Chapter 9

Theo

Theo couldn't help smiling as he reached out to catch Skye stumbling off the curb. They walked toward the tractor parked beside two dumpsters.

For Luke to have called them by the name they'd been tagged with two decades before was the perfect finale to the perfect conversation.

"I don't . . . how does he—know you?" Skye said, shuffling her words as poorly as her feet.

Theo shrugged. "It's Luke. It's also the only gas station in town. I'm up here a lot."

"And . . . you just became friends."

"Well, he hasn't invited me over to grill out in his backyard . . ."

Skye nodded as though this was obvious.

"Since last year," Theo continued, "but sure, I'd say we're friends." He tipped his head thoughtfully. "He is, after all, one of the only people to appreciate my lasagna."

"You make him lasagna," Skye mumbled, more to herself it seemed than to him. She stepped up to the tractor. "Sure you do. Sure you do."

Theo tried to slip his hands into his pockets, but the insides of both felt like the outside—sandpaper. "So." He looked up to the tractor behind her. "What's next?"

Skye popped open the glass door and took a step up. “You take the Prius. I take the tractor.”

As she settled inside, she tossed a set of keys at him.

Theo caught them. Looked at them. “Ah. See, I believe I forgot to mention I’ve never driven a stick shift before—”

“You’ll be fine.” Skye put the key in the ignition. “Just be sure to press the clutch all the way to the floorboard with the gear shift in neutral first.”

“The clutch,” Theo said uncertainly. “Right. And that is the . . .”

Skye’s brow creased as though she both could, and couldn’t, believe the man before her. “Left. The little pedal on the left.”

“Right.” Theo nodded.

Skye pointed up the road. “We only have to take it those five or six miles, but the road will be steep, so you’re going to have to keep it firm in second and be careful not to let it stall out.”

He nodded again. Stalling out. On a mountain with woods on one side and a cliff-like drop-off to rocky crags on the other. “You know, I am actually very good at jogging—”

At last, Skye cracked. “Oh my *gosh*, Theo. You are not going to jog next to the tractor for six miles in your . . . your”—she frowned as she glanced down at his feet—“absolutely hideous cowboy boots that look three sizes too small.”

Theo looked down at the overly ornate, gold-threaded black boots. “Two. But it was all they had.”

“*Come here.*”

He raised a brow and took a step forward.

“You’ll ride with me.” She stepped down from the tractor and waved impatiently for him to get in.

Theo hesitated, then glanced up the road.

“*Get in.*”

He felt momentarily helpless, unable to drive not only the tractor—which, given his occupation and lifestyle, was at least understandable—but a standard-transmission vehicle as well. Had he known, however, that she had expected him to drive her car, he could've driven his own, dropped her off at the gas station instead—

“You first.”

Theo's thoughts dissolved as he peered inside. “Can this handle both of us?”

Skye gave him a look as if to say, *Did your eyeballs just see Luke? What are you trying to imply about my weight?*

“But of course we'll fit,” Theo said. “With you being so petite, the tractor will need me simply to keep us grounded.”

“For heaven's sake, Theo, *just get in.*” Theo felt her two hands press against his shoulders and push him forward. He scrambled up the steps and, careful to avoid touching any gadgets, sat on the cracked seat. The weathered steering wheel was large and tilted toward the sky. Numerous dials and switches were arranged beside the armrest to his right. Glass surrounded him.

Skye dropped all of her weight on his knee. He nearly grunted but managed to hold it in. “Ah. So that's how we'll fit. That makes perfect sense.”

She frowned at him and turned the key. The engine rumbled.

Skye flicked the switch and turned the vast wheel, and the massive tires of the tractor began to move. Theo's world slowed as the wisps of her hair tickled his cheeks. While trees flickered by in his periphery, his breath caught on the scent he had almost forgotten. After all these years, her hair still smelled of strawberries and cream.

He lifted his voice to match the grumbling noise of the tractor. “You use the same shampoo.”

Skye jerked the wheel and looked over her shoulder. “Try not to sound like a creeper while I'm stuck in here with you. And . . . I can't believe you remember that.”

He didn't reply, but instead looked out the window. Only then did he realize just how quickly the trees whipped by. "How fast does this tractor go?"

"Twenty-five." She looked back, noticed the car crawling behind them, and pulled closer to the creek-side edge. She pushed the window open and waved them on. Theo watched the tire creep over the white line and inhaled sharply before looking the opposite direction.

But as he watched her intent posture, her alert gaze, the confidence with which she handled the wheel, he remembered another thing he hadn't called to mind for years: the way he used to trust her. Blindly trust her, really. Always eager for the next adventure.

"Do you remember the time I let you drive me around in that four-wheeler?" Theo said, his voice barely audible above the rumble.

There was a pause. Then a laugh. "The ATV? I was grounded for three weeks. How could I forget?"

Theo smiled to himself. "It was so cold that night. Do you remember how cold it was?"

Though her face was half obscured by her loose curls, he saw her wistful smile. "My fingers nearly froze clicking that flashlight so many dang times. I thought you'd never see it."

He chuckled. "Oh. I always saw it."

She didn't respond, no doubt because she didn't need to. They both knew he did. By the time they were teens, every weekend, every summer break, every chance he could convince his family to pack up and drive to Evergreen for a reprieve, he always went to bed keeping one eye on his window, just in case he'd see that blinking flashlight. Their code.

"It just took a while to see it coming from the barn," he continued.

The tractor rolled past Skye's cottage, the roof dappled with sunlight that spilled through the leaves of the great maple.

The sign for Evergreen Farm came into view, and Skye turned onto the gravel. “The snow was coming down too thick for you to see from my bedroom, and besides, I had to rig up the four-wheeler. I was coming for you whether you were sleeping or not.”

He grinned as they progressed along the bumpy gravel driveway between the trees. He recalled the energy, the adrenaline high, of spotting her blinking flashlight through the heavy snowfall. How he’d bounded out of his bed. How quickly he’d slipped into his warmest boots and bibs, barely snatching up his toboggan before cracking open the heavy front door and sneaking outside. He never had any idea what Skye planned; he was only certain there was nowhere else he’d rather be.

That evening, Skye screamed and laughed as she whipped the four-wheeler in figure eights beneath the midnight storm on the snow-covered field. Theo gripped the sled for dear life and laughed along with her. Screamed and laughed. Screamed and laughed. Until they saw her father in the distance, stalking out of the woods.

Theo blinked toward that empty field, now filled with rows of adolescent trees. “That was by far the most fun evening of my life.”

Her eyes flickered almost imperceptibly to the thirty-foot Fraser fir standing in the center of the field. The one in all this time he’d never cut down. “The most?”

He pressed his lips together. He could never forget the night before he’d left for UVA.

“The most *fun*. Another evening has its own category for simply being the most.”

She let go of the wheel with one hand to pull her hair behind one ear. Her large brown eyes gazed back at him. The corner of her mouth turned upward. “The most. You have a category where one evening wins for being *the most*. If that isn’t the most grammatically incorrect thing I’ve ever heard from you —”

Her hair slipped from her ear and covered one eye. Without thinking, he returned it to its place.

Suddenly they both stopped. Words stopped. Theo felt the tractor slow to a stop. And what was in her wide brown eyes welled, brimming with emotions, questions, memories.

His breath caught in his lungs, a heady strawberries-and-cream scent encapsulated by four walls of glass.

But then one word came to mind. *Ashleigh*.

“You know, I forgot I needed to make a few calls before we got started,” Theo said. He nodded to the cabin not so far in the distance. “I’ll just hop out here and meet you at the tractor.”

“Good plan,” she said, only too eager to push the door open and move down the steps before her sentence was finished. “It’ll take me a while to get the ratchet straps on anyway.”

While the tractor continued pattering in the opposite direction toward the ridge, Theo took his first clear breath. Put his hands on his hips as he strode up the gravel driveway and then made his way to the cabin’s wide porch steps.

He couldn’t pretend anymore.

It was time.

* * *

Theo slid the landline phone off the counter. Picked it up and began tapping.

Before eight thirty yesterday evening, he had been happy. He was in a relationship with someone who was as eager to be with him as he was her. If their relationship were a flower, it’d be a sunflower growing six inches a day. They were thriving.

But then the woman he once loved more fiercely than his own life had returned, as if from the dead. And maybe she didn’t care a whit about him. Maybe he didn’t have a chance, but he couldn’t go for it this time without giving his all.

And he wouldn’t—ever—try to build the foundation of his relationship with Skye on a lie.

He had fallen before for a girl at UVA, a friend who'd somehow, without clear definition, turned into something more over the course of months.

He wasn't even sure how it had happened all those years ago. He started dating Skye mere hours before he left for UVA, and then, through five more long semesters, he lived apart from her. Day in. Day out. Making friends. Memories. Growing a whole life apart from her. Trying his best to make a life out of calling every night, visiting on the infrequent weekend. But with every passing semester the workload grew, the hours hunched over those books lengthened, and the calls shortened. It got harder to deny the bond growing with Chloe as they pored over books and met with friends. Just before winter break of junior year, they'd taken one step too far. Then Chloe, with mutual friends in tow, had hopped in a car during winter break to surprise him at Evergreen.

And it all went horribly, horribly wrong.

He'd realized the lines had blurred then and, without redrawing them sharply, he just let them bleed.

He would not do that again.

“Hello?”

Ashleigh's voice came on the line and he took a breath, lifting his gaze to the row of oil paintings lining the living room wall. His eyes traced the small cursive script in the corner of each one: *S Fuller*.

“Ashleigh . . . there's something I need to tell you.”

Chapter 10

Skye

She had to pull herself together.

Skye gave the toe strap one final yank at the anchor point of the overturned tractor and hopped off the tire. Already she could see Theo walking toward her in the distance, although to be fair, people in a plane seven miles up could see his blazing orange flannel.

They hadn't been reunited even twenty-four hours and already her emotions were getting in the way. She had to remember the issues at hand and not even *think* about making out like teenagers in Daddy's tractor. The fact of her father's abysmal pay remained. And while Theo was and always had been a master wielder of words, his actions were indisputable: he was a man driving around in a hundred-thousand-dollar Tesla while paying her father, who had been the farm's faithful employee more than thirty-five years, a *quarter* of that. *A quarter.* That was a fact. Along with the fact that while Evergreen Farm's eight-seater hot tub and Peloton bike waited shiny and ready for the occasional Watkins weekend visitor, her parents were living with the same furniture in the double-wide of her youth. These were facts.

She needed to focus on getting *that* figured out instead of doing something she regretted.

She wiped her dirty hands against her pants, then shaded her eyes and watched Theo move into the forest. Her lips turned up in a smile.

"Theo, what are you doing? You look like a chicken."

Theo's casual gait had turned into something else. He was lifting his knees unusually high and slow as he stepped over broken tree limbs and moved cautiously around thickets. A long, slender branch stood before him and he carefully pinched it between his fingers and pushed it aside to pass.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I look like a sensible man who is aware that three to 384 spiders—two of whom live in our area and are fatal—exist within one square meter of you at any given time. You, on the other hand, look like a Neanderthal."

"Well, this Neanderthal would outlive you by a hundred years if we got stuck out here, so how about you give walking like a human a try?"

As he stepped over a thick log, she turned back to Luke's tractor.

"C'mon, you can help me run this strap to the hitch." As she stepped over snapped limbs, she worked to undo an unruly knot in the toe strap. "Once we get the tractor upright, we'll need to keep the tension on it so I can get it over that mound without flipping it again. I'll need you to move the—"

"Skye!"

Skye barely had time to turn her neck his way when she felt Theo's chest crash into her body and then, a moment later, was swept off her feet. Literally swept. Followed shortly by a branch slapping her across the face as he began barreling through the woods.

For a moment, all she could do was hang on to his neck for dear life. And notice, despite herself, how firm his chest was. *Good grief, it's just like a marble chessboard. Like the hardest pillow you've ever slept on in your life. Like asphalt. If I just press my cheek against it . . .*

She jolted at the thought and pulled her neck as far away from him as she could, which, given the circumstances, wasn't very far.

"Theo! *What are you doing?*"

Skye yelped as Theo high-kneed into her back as he ran.

“Stop, you crazy man! *Stop!*” She felt like she was trying to command a runaway horse to yield. “*Theo!*”

It was time for another tactic. Her cheek scraped against his orange flannel as she put both arms around his neck and began pulling herself up. *Good grief. How is the man not getting hives from this material?*

She yanked her legs out of his arms like the pair of them were in a swing-dancing act and swung back until her boots hit ground.

They dragged against twigs and dirt for a moment, her arms still locked around his neck, his arms wrapped tightly around her rib cage.

To his credit he didn't tumble; instead, Theo slowed to a stop. He looked down at her feet as though to ensure she was securely grounded, his clean-shaven chin brushing her forehead. A tingle crept up her spine as he let go.

For a couple moments they just stood there, inches apart, the wind dancing on newly sprouted leaves as it passed through the trees.

And then, most awkwardly, she realized she hadn't let go.

“Your shirt is *horrible*,” Skye said, letting go of his tree-trunk neck and half expecting her cheek to have been rubbed raw. She touched it and looked up at him, partly wanting to laugh, partly wanting to ask if he'd just gone clinically insane.

“There was a snake,” he said through breaths. He pointed behind her. “There was a snake.”

Skye blinked and took in the man, like a poor alien in this place called Earth. “So you hoisted me up and knee-highed me out of there.”

She smiled, her tone lighthearted, but the world in her periphery was shifting subtly. The blanket of trees and their leaves gained a more vibrant green hue. The sunlight peeking through the dimpled leaves shone a more golden yellow.

The man deathly afraid of snakes had stepped into striking distance to save her. Was willing to put himself in front of his

greatest fear in order to help her escape. It was touching. Absolutely crazy and ridiculous and paranoid, but also . . . touching.

“A rattlesnake can strike up to half its length in distance,” he continued. “And given the rattlesnake typically can get as large as six feet—”

“There’s no way you just saved me from a rattlesnake, or any lethal snake for that matter,” Skye said, putting a consoling hand on his shoulder. The stiff, itchy fabric bit her hand and she immediately retracted it. “I’m sorry, Theo, I really do hate to break it to you after the heroics and all, but black snakes are a dime a dozen out here.”

“It wasn’t black.”

“I’m sure it was—”

“It wasn’t.”

“I’ll bet you anything that’s what it was.”

“You’d bet dinner?”

The words came out of Theo’s mouth so quickly he looked almost as startled as she was that he said it. Skye looked at him for several seconds, watching for clues in his expression. For regret in his words.

But his onyx eyes only grew steadier as they gazed at her.

Finally, she nodded. “Dinner. Fine. If you win, you buy me dinner. But if I win”—Skye raised a brow—“I get to hand you the snake.”

Theo looked as though he had just choked on his own breath. “No. Something else.”

Skye shrugged. “What’s the problem? You’re the one so sure of this bet.” She grinned, seeing the red splotches forming on his neck. “Good grief, Theo. Either you’re getting hives from the idea or you seriously need to take off that flannel.”

“Fine. Deal.” Theo put out his hand.

Skye shook it, a smile starting to form. “This is going to be so good.”

A minute later Skye was standing on the spot.

“Okay, Romeo, where is it?”

Theo, looking both incredibly uncomfortable and committed, stood in the barest patch of dirt cleared by the tractor and scanned the area. Skye, meanwhile, began stalking through the thick underbrush beneath the canopy of woods.

“There.” Theo pointed, looking ready to jump on the tractor itself.

“Theo, it’s a yard snake, not an anaconda. It’s not going to get you twenty feet away.”

Skye moved toward the base of a lightning-cracked tree.

“Stop. Not that close.” Protesting spasms came out of Theo’s throat with every step.

Finally, she stepped directly on the spot he was pointing at and looked up. “There’s nothing here.”

“*Skye Renee*,” Theo hissed, pointing at the ground beside her, “*do not make me pick you up again.*”

Skye stiffened, her neck tingling at the sound of her name. Theo was so focused on the ground at her feet he didn’t even seem aware of what he’d said.

“Are you sure it’s even here?” Skye said, returning her gaze to the ground. “I don’t see—”

A patch of grass rippled but two feet away, and she took a guarded step backward. She squatted, squinting to see through the blades. “C’moon, black snake . . . ,” she murmured. “Theo wants to hold you.”

She reached forward, started to sweep aside some blades, and then—

The beady eyes of a beige snake stared at her, its body already twisted into striking position.

Skye snapped her hand away, rose, and took three measured steps backward just as Theo started to move toward her.

“Well, I’ll be darned,” Skye said, pushing both hands in her back pockets. “You called it.”

Theo took Skye by both shoulders and moved them back five more feet. When he let go, he put his hands on his hips, looking as though he was trying to be both relaxed and smug, but preoccupied by the fact they were still in the woods. “Well, I have done quite a bit of research on snakes. Phobias tend to lend a hand in that—”

“So you win. And”—she tilted her head back at the snake—“while I doubt it would’ve done anything, it could’ve bitten me if I got too close, so . . . thanks, Romeo. I guess I owe you dinner.”

Chapter 11

Theo

It took another hour to flip the tractor, and another two to return Luke's, but by lunchtime, with Skye's persistence, he had mastered the act of driving a tractor five miles an hour on flat land. It was quite the accomplishment.

They spent the afternoon on their knees planting seedlings, and when the sun started to creep toward the horizon, with sodden pants and dirt crusted beneath every nail bed, Skye set the last seedling from the box into the hole Theo had dug and gave the small, fragile treetop an admiring pat. She stood, flyaways escaping from her ponytail, powdered by the rust-colored dirt. Looked up at him after a long day's work. Smiled.

She was breathtaking.

"You're up," she said, and Theo blinked, remembering he was still holding the shovel.

"Your father is an impressive man," Theo said, pushing the dirt back into its hole.

Skye, hands on both hips, tilted her head in his direction. "Yeah? How so?"

Theo shoveled another clod of dirt into the hole, his hands aching. "How *not* so? Apart from Christmas season, he's single-handedly managed this farm the whole of his adult life. I bet the work we did together today he could've done alone in the same span of time."

Skye laughed. "Theo. The work we did today *I* could've done in the same span of time." She waited a beat, pushed

some flyaways from her eyes. “Anyway, yes, Dad keeps this place alive.”

There was an undercurrent in her tone as she said it, something uneasy.

She kicked the dirt and looked up at him. “I don’t think I realized how much he truly deserves for all his hard work until I moved back here. Back in Seattle, I went to a bakery beneath my studio every morning on my way to work. Spent ten dollars sliding my card through for a muffin and honey latte and didn’t think twice. Why? Because I made three hundred times that on every piece and every commission and business was steady. But here it’s different. Dad’s hands crack and bleed for his living. I’d forgotten what that felt like until I came back.”

She squinted as she looked at him, her brown eyes looking deep into his. “Isn’t he admirable?”

Theo inhaled as he set the shovel on the ground. Exhaled as he heard the subtle accusation in her question.

There was so much she didn’t know about her father.

He worked out the words before he spoke, careful to dodge the minefield. “I can honestly say I’ve never met a more loyal man—to the farm and to his family. And that, most certainly, is admirable.”

Skye held his gaze, blinked.

Unspoken words danced in their eyes.

He kept the secret he’d promised not to reveal. But was he bound from sharing it even with her? He’d have to ask. Get clarification. Or not. After all, the news shouldn’t come from him.

But what was she not saying?

As he opened his mouth, he thought he heard her almost imperceptible sigh. She returned her gaze to the receding sun. “Well, let’s get to that dinner, shall we? I’m starving.”

Theo’s jaw tightened and he hesitated, trying to decide whether to let that shadowy topic slink away. But she clapped

her hands and a cloud of dirt drifted into the air. She slapped a determined smile on her face. “And I’m sure you’ll want a shower.”

Another time then.

“I wouldn’t complain,” he said, well aware of the dirt covering every crevice of his body. At this point, he’d had the urge to itch something for a solid twelve hours.

“Fine. Pick me up when you’re done?” Skye said. She seemed to realize how forward she sounded and shrugged. “It’d be silly to drive two cars into town.”

“Actually, if it’s all the same to you, I’ll cook. I have a meal in mind.” He smiled, catching sight of the mammoth tree in the center of the farm. “And a place. If . . . if it’s okay with you. I figure, why not toast to good memories? Because . . . we did have them, don’t you think?”

A questioning microexpression formed as her lips tilted, and she slowly followed his gaze over her shoulder.

He saw the merest twinkle come to her eyes.

He exhaled, truly exhaled, for the first time in years.

“Time?” Skye inquired.

He glanced to the sun melting into the trees, ran through the movements and motions that would need to take place in the next few hours. “Seven thirty.”

“Dress?” she said, her brow raised.

He chuckled good-naturedly. “What else for a fine meal by a fine chef under the stars? Semiformal.”

Skye looked into his eyes for one long moment before taking his shovel. “How could I have doubted you’d have it any other way?”

Chapter 12

Skye

Of course the man wanted semiformal.

Skye rummaged through her closet, each hanger scraping across the metal bar as she swiftly rejected every item. A white blouse she donned back in Seattle for gallery events. A sunflower dress at least a decade old. A pink number she bought half a dozen years ago and never wore.

The dress options were crammed between baggy sweaters and tank tops in the small closet barely larger than a coffin. Nothing fit for anything resembling the word *semiformal*.

Because she didn't *do* semiformal.

Back in Seattle, her favorite places to eat were local, hipster. Her favorite meal consisted of a vegan macro bowl coupled with a light brew. She could get away with wearing anything at those restaurants—anything except semiformal.

Skye pushed another hanger across the rack and stopped.

Touched the forest-green silk, trouser-leg jumpsuit.

Perfect.

She grabbed the hanger off the rack and threw the outfit on her bed before moving to the bathroom. She walked past the mirror and pushed open the curtain. Her face was worse than she'd imagined. The mascara she'd applied that morning had run far, far away from her eyelashes. And her hair . . . Skye frowned as she reached for a dirt clod clinging to the elastic band of her off-kilter ponytail. She looked like a wild, mud-covered minion.

Terrrrrific.

Theo had worn an orange flannel as conspicuous as an orange cone and managed to out-style her. He sported his share of dirt and sweat, but the effect was the opposite. While she went downhill by the hour, he became more masculine. Wiping the sweat off his forehead. Smiling with those ultrawhite teeth as they caught up on the past fourteen years. And that moment when he picked her up and ran like a wild man away from that snake . . .

A wild, ridiculous, very debonair man indeed.

Skye yanked the ponytail holder out of her hair. She gave herself a long look. Watched as her mud-crusty hair fell to her shoulders. Glanced down at her pathetic array of makeup options and irons, at the dried-up hairspray can in the bottom of the drawer.

She pressed her lips together.

Felt the childish impulse well within her.

Fifteen minutes later, her freshly showered hair dripped onto her robe as she shut the door of her house and crossed the road to her parents', the green silk jumpsuit draped over one arm.

* * *

An hour later, Skye glanced at the window as her eyes caught the headlights of Theo's Tesla passing on the road. She pulled the barrel out of her hair and let the last curl drift off the roll. Her mother stood in the doorway of the small bathroom, watching Skye with eyes bright as a baby doe's.

"I'm about to have to go, Mom. Thanks for this."

"Oh, honey, anytime. *An-y-time.*"

Skye felt like she was getting ready for prom.

Her mother didn't have to say it. It was as clear as the spotless glass on the bathroom window that she was pleased as punch about exactly everything that was happening in that moment. Her daughter going on a date with Theo. Her daughter walking across the road to ask to borrow her irons

and makeup. Her daughter even *living* across the road so she could walk across it and ask for irons and makeup.

The smile on her mother's face was one of pure happiness. As it had been every day since her daughter had stepped off that plane three months ago.

It was moments like this that reminded Skye she'd made the right decision to move back. Not just to ensure her family was going to be okay financially, but to see her mother so happy.

Skye put the cap on her mother's lipstick tube and set it back in the neat row within the medicine cabinet.

"I think I know what I'll be getting you for Christmas," her mother said, nodding at the curling iron cooling off on the vanity. "And look at you. You look just *radiant*."

"You should've seen me an hour ago," Skye said, deflecting the compliment but still smiling. "Where's Dad? You guys have anything going on tonight?"

Her mother shifted in the doorway. "Oh. He went out an hour or so ago to run some errands. He said he'd be back soon."

"I thought he wasn't supposed to be driving with his shoulder."

"Yes, well," her mother said, her smile tightening as she smoothed down her robe, "you know your father. He's as stubborn as an ox."

"But you're more," Skye said, shutting the medicine cabinet and turning to her. "I have no doubt you could take the keys from him. You always win."

"But first one must know which battles to fight."

Skye saw the fiery twinkle in her mother's eyes. A moment later she patted her daughter's hand. "Now, you go off and enjoy your evening. I look forward to hearing all about it when you can."

"Right." Skye took a breath. Moved a curly lock out of her eyes. Glanced back to her mother. She couldn't say it. Couldn't ask the question about her father and Theo she'd

been dying to ask since that day. So she said, “You really think this is a good idea?”

Her mother took Skye’s hand. Squeezed it. “Honey, I’ve been waiting since the two of you toddled down the gravel road together at four years old, you holding his hand and tugging him through the fields to pick out your favorite Christmas tree, for precisely this moment.”

Chapter 13

Theo

A frothy seascape in the paintings across the room watched over him as he cooked. Tie flipped over one shoulder, Theo stirred the pot and lifted a spoonful of the concoction to his nose. The savory scent filled his senses. He dipped a silver spoon in the pot and tasted. *Sublime.*

He turned to the kitchen sink, his back to the row of Seattle-coastline paintings.

It was remarkable how the day had transformed his emotions.

What had started that morning as a coffee mug full of nervous anticipation had become an uncontrollable energy. It leaked out in the lightness of his step as he moved from stainless steel refrigerator to oven range. In the swiftness of his hands as he bounced from replying to a client's email to ripping open a bag. He was almost sure what he needed to do.

Almost.

Theo snapped the last container shut and placed it in the bulging cooler. He withdrew the chilled glasses from the freezer and set them carefully inside.

With one last glance at the centermost painting, a rocky boulder shrouded by mist and pines in the middle of the ocean, he picked up the cooler.

It was now or nothing.

Twenty minutes later, as he sat on a picnic blanket laden with plates and bowls beside the thirty-foot fir, he saw her

emerge from the woods.

Green silk flowed gently from her capped sleeves to the cream high heels at her feet. A belt of the same fabric was knotted at her waist. Her dark locks, twisted in dramatic curls, matched her smoky eyes, and as she stepped silently along the path between ferns and mossy undergrowth, she resembled a fairy.

A vision.

He felt his breath stop. He stood there in his suit, gazing and waiting, beneath the giant fir.

When she stopped at the blanket, she moved a twisting lock out of one eye and behind her ear and gazed down.

“You are—you look . . .” He paused, unable to select a fitting word from all the synonyms running through his head. So he said simply, “Beautiful.”

A rare shy smile crossed her lips, and when he saw the heat creeping up her neck, he waved at the spread. “Dinner is served.”

The rosy blush around her ears faded as she peered down. When she saw what the blanket contained, she threw her head back and laughed. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

He smiled. “And by that you mean nothing but highest compliments for the chef?”

“Where’s my caviar?” she said, slowly settling on the cream-colored pillow on the checkered blanket and adopting a cross-legged position. “I was expecting caviar.”

He raised a brow as he opened the cooler and pulled out the chilled mugs. As he spoke, he filled her glass with authentic root beer. “Do you like caviar?”

“I’d rather eat crawdads.” She raised a brow. “And in case you’re momentarily confused and assume all hillbillies in these hills eat crawdads, the answer is no. Still, when you said semiformal . . .”

“You didn’t expect ramen?” He handed her the chilled mug. “Skye, if we were going to eat out *here*, how could you

possibly have expected anything different?”

She took a sip of the root beer, her cheeks glowing as the last rays swept across the horizon, then raised her glass. “I’ll give you that.”

He watched as she slowly took in the spread. Paper plates everywhere, featuring these items: Little Debbie cakes arranged like the Eiffel Tower, Swedish Fish candy arranged like one large piece of salmon. A New York–style cheesecake—the one thing he had made from scratch—with raspberry sauce dripping off its sides. Doritos piled on another plate. A pot of ramen noodles sat in the center of their blanket, two bowls empty and waiting in front of each pillow.

Snacks they’d hoarded throughout their childhood.

“You remembered it all,” she mused. “Down to the last Swedish Fish.”

“Sounds like you did too,” Theo said, then raised his own chilled mug. “To memories. I hope—” He paused. He felt words building up in him like water pressing against a dam. “I know what I did those years ago was unthinkable, but I hope in time you were able to forgive an old friend for his errors and remember fondly the good moments in its stead.”

Skye hesitated. Nodded. Raised her mug. “I forgave you for that a long time ago, Theo. But even so, to memories. The good ones.”

She clinked her glass to his, then raised it to her lips.

Theo followed suit but frowned slightly as sassafras root and vanilla bean washed down his throat. It tingled. He had what he wanted: her forgiveness. She was here, sitting beside him, willing to eat this meal again. But if his error fourteen years ago wasn’t the silent wedge still between them, what was it?

Even now, he could feel the tension.

But why?

Skye set the mug down and leaned back on both elbows. She looked up at the darkening sky. “Of all the pieces I’ve

painted in my life, I've never been able to capture this view."

A warm breeze swept over the field, and Theo looked up to the sparkling gems above them.

"It taunts me," Skye continued, kicking her feet out so they rested one ankle over the other. "This view taunts me every night. In Seattle it wasn't so bad. I had light pollution to thank for that."

"Well," Theo said, rolling up both sleeves to the elbows, "on the bright side, you now reside in the best place to try again to capture it."

Skye let out a low chuckle. "Oh. I've tried. I've got a greenhouse studio full of trying. It'll be the death of me."

"I'd be . . . incredibly honored to see it."

For a long moment Skye didn't reply. Her clear eyes stayed focused on the stars, so long he began to doubt she'd heard him. But then she blinked. And before he knew it she was standing over him, reaching down to pull him up. "C'mon."

Minutes later, they were at the greenhouse, Skye reaching into her silk pocket for a small, single key.

A trail of bulbs flicked on down the center of the greenhouse as they stepped inside, illuminating the floor-to-ceiling glass and overflowing greenery. The air was thick with the scent of fresh dirt and flowers and turpentine. Rows of carrot tops stuck out of the nearest raised bed, kale and arugula behind and beside them.

Skye brushed aside a geranium from a hanging flower basket.

The greenhouse was crowded, and Skye squeezed between the trailing tomato vines and rows of peas to get to the center of the room. She didn't look back as he followed.

As the rows of vegetables cleared, she stopped at a wooden, paint-splattered stool. Put her hand on the seat that looked like it had been her sturdy companion for a decade.

"It's messy but . . . here it is. This is my life." Her tone held nervousness.

He smiled as he stepped out from the rows of vegetables. His gaze was steady on the canvas resting on the easel. “It’s breathtaking.”

She pulled a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “I’ve only just begun that one,” she said, trailing her fingers along the row of freshly washed paintbrushes on the table. “It’s just the underpainting, really.”

“Nevertheless, those details—the juxtaposition of smooth and irregular forms in the fore- and backgrounds,” he said, moving toward it, examining it closer. He reached out with one finger and she took a step forward, her breath hitching. “It’s still drying,” she said, but his finger had already stopped an inch from the canvas.

He turned and smiled, keeping it soft. Of course he knew better than to touch her work in progress. “I love this line of light here, along the tree line.”

His gaze turned to her reference photograph. She’d taken that shot beneath the entrance of Evergreen Farm.

“Will this be a new series?” His gaze went to three completed canvases leaning against the greenhouse wall. All were different angles of Evergreen Farm. The rows of Fraser firs. Icicles dripping off the white pines. The Watkinses’ cabin nestled against the ridge.

Her eyes flickered to his, as though she was surprised by his expression of familiarity with her pieces. As though it was not possible that he had followed her career since she left for the University of Washington to pursue fine art all those years ago. That it wasn’t possible he knew the way she worked. Knew she always painted series.

But of course he had. He did.

“I—I don’t know,” she said at last, turning back to the painting. “If I can ever quit wasting my oils on half-finished skies, then yes. Maybe.” Her gaze flickered to the other canvases of all shapes and sizes against the wall, all abandoned with stretches of black, blue, and silver paint streaked across them.

Theo stepped toward the painting on the easel. Carefully moved his eyes over the painting.

He felt her presence beside him. She crossed her arms over her chest, silently gazing at it as well.

“I never was able to cut it down,” Theo said at last.

“I know,” she said after a moment.

“You should’ve seen the lengths I had to go to to keep the family from doing so.” Theo chuckled, recalling the number of times he had to make his case to the twelve brothers, parents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. “I almost resorted to making PowerPoint demonstrations. I was almost at the level of strapping myself to the tree in protest.”

“The newspapers would’ve loved it,” Skye replied. “That was your chance for front-cover exposure.”

They both chuckled quietly in the vast room until their gazes slowly turned to each other.

Theo raised a brow. “Well, I suppose our ramen is getting cold out there.”

Skye grinned. “Cold ramen. The only thing possibly less appetizing than warm ramen.”

Tentatively, he extended his elbow. “Shall we?”

Tentatively, she took the crook of his arm. “We shall.”

As they entered the field once again, the toads in the distance began to hum. For several minutes, they just listened, walking in step, Theo feeling her arm pressed against his side. The grass Skye’s father mowed each week bowed beneath their feet with each step. Each fir shivered lightly in the breeze as they passed.

The world, in that moment, was perfect.

“I haven’t been completely honest with you, Theo,” Skye said, breaking the silence. But instead of feeling her pull away, she seemed to cling tighter to his arm.

A part of him didn’t want to ask. The bigger part of him couldn’t resist. “How so?”

“I said I got over it a long time ago. Up until three months ago I really believed I had.”

“Until you moved back?” Theo said, raising a brow.

“Just before that. I was at my parents’ house and found something that . . . that just made me believe the worst in you all over again.”

He swallowed, the burn lingering in his throat. What had she found? An old picture? A memento?

“I need to talk with you about it,” Skye continued. “I need to get this off my chest before I could even possibly take one step further.”

“Of course,” Theo said, pulling her tighter, not wanting to let her slip away. “Anything.”

Their feet hit the gravel driveway and he stopped, letting go of her arm to face her properly and look her in the eyes. “What do you need to ask?”

Skye’s eyes glimmered as she pressed her lips together and looked up at him. He saw the hope in her eyes and his tension eased. Whatever she was about to ask, he could see she *wanted* him to reply with the right answer. Whatever it was.

“When I was with my parents—” Skye began.

The sound of a car rolling onto the gravel cut her off. Skye stopped as they turned, blinking into the beam of two small headlights.

He knew that car.

Skye’s voice was low. “Who is that?”

She withdrew her hands from his, already bracing for what she didn’t understand.

The car hit the brakes twenty feet away.

Theo felt his jaw flex. “It’s a woman I know. Ashleigh. It’s not what you think—”

Skye started moving backward, spotlight like an actress onstage. Her hands were balled at her sides. “Why is she

here?”

“I—” Theo squeezed his eyes shut. If Skye had found some trinket that reminded her of how he had broken her heart, and she was struggling to get over that, he couldn’t imagine what reliving *this* horrible moment in their history might do. He pressed his hand against his temple. “I’m not sure. If I’m honest, I’m not sure. I broke it off with her today—”

“You have a girlfriend?”

But already Skye was waving him off, her bracelets banging against each other with the movement. “You know what? I don’t want to know. I don’t want to be a part of this.”

The driver’s door opened. Ashleigh set one high heel onto the gravel and stepped out. “Theo?”

“Skye, *wait*,” Theo called, but it was no use. Skye, hiking up her pantlegs, was walking as fast as she could toward the woods.

He could hear Ashleigh’s door slam shut, but Theo didn’t turn his head. He called out to Skye. “What did you expect me to do? I only ran into you yesterday. I did everything I could to get things right here.”

“See, now there’s where you’re wrong, Theo. You didn’t do everything you could. Fourteen years ago, you didn’t do everything you could. If you had, we wouldn’t be doing this right now.” Skye turned. For the first time, he saw Skye’s eyes spark against the moonlight.

Theo’s forehead creased. “But I did. I ran after you. I even got a *broken nose* running after you. And I called and apologized to your voicemail more times than I could count, until you flew all the way across the country and changed your number—” He halted. Threw out a hand. “What else could I have done?”

“What you *should’ve* done is flown out to Seattle and begged me to come back. You should’ve banged on my parents’ door until they gave you my address. You should’ve given up UVA and flown out to Seattle and found some crappy apartment as close to me as possible and apologized every day

of your life until I took you back. I gave you *everything*, Theo. I got into that Seattle school *two years before I went* and turned it down to stay near you. To be with *you*.” Skye lifted her chin. “You should’ve put it all on the line for me too. Just like I put it all on the line for you.”

Theo swallowed as Ashleigh took a step toward him. “But you told me to leave you alone. You said in no uncertain terms —”

Skye threw her head back in exasperation. “I was *lying*, Theo. I was angry and hurt and I was *lying*. And I blindly assumed you cared about us enough not to give up based on a few words.”

“*Your* words,” Theo said quietly, taking a step toward her. “I thought it was what you wanted.”

For several moments they faced each other in silence, Skye’s face drained of color. Finally, she waved an arm at Ashleigh, who was sliding back into her car. “Clearly you have some things to sort out. I’ll leave you two to it.”

She stalked three more steps before turning one last time.

“You know? All day I kept trying to *understand* how the person I knew could treat my father this way—”

Theo put up a hand. “Wait, what?”

The gravel sputtered as Ashleigh’s car flew into reverse.

“I saw the letter, the one with your fancy letterhead detailing his salary.” She shook her head. “Honestly, Theo, you treat *my father* as unfairly as a migrant worker straight out of the Depression. He’s devoted his *life* to making an organic tree farm actually successful—which takes a lot of time and labor—and you can’t give him more than minimum wage.”

Theo squeezed his eyes shut as he tried to process what she was saying. Rubbed his temple. “You think that I would do that?”

She put her hands on her hips. “Isn’t that what you’re doing?”

He pressed his lips together, put his hands on his hips. Everything was becoming clear. The anger and distrust that had been hidden behind her eyes all along. This wasn't just about what had happened fourteen years ago. It was about now. Then and now.

All those comments about his organic Peruvian coffee beans and how her father worked so hard.

“You think I would pay your father so little—”

“That they would still be living in their double-wide driving that same thirty-year-old truck with the broken AC? Yeah, Theo. Yeah, I do. What evidence do I have to tell me otherwise?”

Theo pressed his hand to his chest. “Me, Skye. I would hope you'd know the truth because you know *me*.”

They stared at each other wordlessly as Ashleigh's headlights fell between them and the car backed swiftly down the lane. By the time the lights swerved onto the road and dissipated through the trees, the moment held the feel of a punctured balloon, slowly deflating into a small mass on the floor.

He wasn't sure if he or she turned away first, but moments later they were moving in separate directions, each trudging slowly beneath a pale moon and its electric sky of stars.

Chapter 14

Skye

Skye's heels sank into the mossy ground with each step. Her fingernails bit into her closed palms as she marched through the small patch of woods and came out at the greenhouse on the other side.

She felt like she'd been tossed underwater. Like she'd been invited to a nice waterfront restaurant and was sitting on a fine patio drinking champagne one moment, clinking her glass with a man beneath a string of hanging lights, and the next was falling backward out of her chair into the water.

It was startling. Infuriating. Confusing.

But what rubbed her raw was a slimy feeling in the pit of her stomach she couldn't quite shake. The feeling that he wasn't entirely to blame for what had just happened.

And worse than the feeling of being furious at him for his mistakes was the feeling of being furious at herself for the possibility of hers. She had to know. Right then. She had to talk to her mother.

Skye marched through her side yard without stopping and walked across the bridge. Two knocks on her mom's door, and her mother appeared.

She took in Skye's expression and then opened the door wide. "Oh, honey. What happened?"

"Well, to cut to the chase," Skye said, peeling off her sodden heels at the threshold and stepping barefoot inside. "We were about to start a *lovely* meal when Theo's newly departed *girlfriend* showed up."

“Oh no.” Her mother shut the door, her hand pressing against her chest and the faded stripes of her apron. The air smelled of sautéed garlic and onions.

Skye’s fists tightened. “Yes.”

She took Skye by the shoulder and guided her to the kitchen. “Let’s get you something to eat.”

Skye followed her into the yellow-wallpapered kitchen and sat in one of the three chairs surrounding the breakfast table. She put her elbows on the table. Raked her hands through her hair. Her mother set a glass of milk in front of her and moved back to the stove.

Skye picked up the glass numbly. “I don’t even think I know what I’m supposed to *think* here.”

“I’m sure it’s all very confusing for the both of you,” her mother said softly, sliding a bowl of soup in front of her. “But then, you both have had entirely separate lives until yesterday.”

Skye frowned.

“Did he say how long he’d been detached from this other woman?” her mother asked, setting a stainless steel spoon beside the bowl and slipping into the chair beside her.

“Hours.” Skye exhaled, turning the glass in her hand. “Apparently somewhere in our day together he stole away long enough to break up with her.”

“And then she came to see him, probably to try to make amends, and it threw a wrench in his well-planned date,” she mused aloud.

Skye saw where this was going and frowned. “You’re taking his side.”

“Of course not,” her mother said, taking her hand. “I’m on your side. I’m on both your sides. Although, I wonder . . .” Her mother stood and returned to the stove.

Skye watched her mother stir the pot, saying nothing more.

“What? You wonder what?”

“If you’re not being a bit too hard on him.”

That was it. She had to know.

“Why do you like him so much?” Skye set her glass down. “How can you stick up for Theo when he pays Dad what he does? How does that not infuriate you? Dad, you—you’re both worth *ten times* this.” She waved at the wallpaper. “And Theo *could* give that. Theo *should* give Dad a decent wage.”

Her mother’s ladle slowed to a stop.

“Where did you get this information?” she said quietly. “Did Theo talk with you?”

Skye pressed her lips. Shook her head. “No. I saw the letter in a drawer.”

She saw her mother’s expression and felt an inward quake. This was why she’d never brought it up. This shame that crossed her mother’s face was the reason Skye had kept it to herself.

“I’m sorry,” Skye continued, then waved at the counter. “It was lying in a drawer I looked through while I was making cookies. I didn’t mean to pry.”

Her mother nodded. “Well, I can most *certainly* understand why you’re confused.” She turned back to the soup. “There’s a reason the Watkins family has agreed to pay your father that salary. A few reasons, actually, for why they agreed to my request to lower it.”

“Lower it?” Skye said. “*You* requested to *lower* it?”

“Theo’s letter was just confirming our verbal arrangement.” Her mother nodded. “About this time last year, shortly after”—she hesitated, turned—“the Bristol casino opened. I realized I had no other choice. I drove down to Theo’s office and spoke to him in person.”

“*You* went down to Theo and *asked* him to lower Dad’s salary? Why?”

Skye halted, felt her breath quake. “How bad is it, Mom?”

She hesitated. “Bad enough I needed Theo’s help.”

“But how does lowering his salary help anything? Shouldn’t it be the other way around?” Skye looked around, realizing all too suddenly the television made no noise. “So is that where he is right now? The casino?” She gripped the corner of the table, her voice rising. “Is that the ‘errand’ he was talking about?”

Her mother didn’t move. “That’s where he said he wouldn’t be. But time will tell.”

Skye felt the punch in her gut as she stared into the face of her mother. Her peaceful, placid mother in her apron, soup ladle in hand. “And you’re just going to stand there? And let him throw all your money down the garbage chute?”

At this, for the first time, her mother smiled. “Thankfully, honey, this house isn’t fancy enough for a garbage chute. And yes, in my own way, I’m doing everything I can to help him.”

“What are you doing?”

“Well, for starters, cutting his salary by 60 percent. And by becoming an employee of Evergreen Farm and making twice his salary myself. Theo made quite a sacrifice, convincing the rest of the Watkins family of my plan.” She hesitated, then lowered her voice. “For a long time I’ve known that the Watkinses hold on to the tree farm for sentimental purposes. They spend any profit on their employees.”

“So . . . Dad.”

She nodded. “Your father, and the few part-time employees who come in for the harvesting season. So when Theo told me they’d agreed to essentially double our income, well . . .” She shook her head. “I don’t think they agreed. I think he’s paying me independently. He denied it when I pressed, but . . .”

Skye sat back, stunned.

Her mother cleared her throat. “And then, of course, I think hosting the Gamblers Anonymous group in our home once a week is starting to make an impression on your father too.”

“Those are all *gambling* addicts?” Skye said, her world turned entirely upside down now. She’d seen the group coming to their double-wide every week, the average-looking

men and women carrying potluck dishes. Laughing. Doing and looking as normal friends do.

“They’re all *people* who struggle with gambling addiction,” her mother replied. “Yes.”

“And now *you’re* working on the farm too?”

At this her mother looked absolutely smug as she lifted her chin. “Maintenance supervisor, at your service,” she replied. “A cute little title Theo and I thought up. I’ve always wanted to be a supervisor.”

“In other words . . .”

“In other words, I do exactly what I’ve always done and nothing more. I keep your father in line.”

Skye stared at her mother, at this woman who was twenty steps ahead of her. “So . . . does Dad know?”

“He’s a proud man, Skye. He wouldn’t ask if he did. He prefers to pretend none of this is happening.” She shrugged. “So I pretend along with him.”

“And you guys have enough money. You don’t have to live here.”

Skye’s mother’s smile softened. “Honey, this is our home. My daughter lives in a beautiful cottage across the road. My husband walks to work. And these walls carry the millions of wonderful memories of where I raised our family. Why would I ever leave?”

With her mother softly turning back toward the old stove, Skye finally felt like she had nothing more to ask or say. So instead she looked. Looked at the breakfast table where she’d talked with her mom and eaten every meal before jumping on the school bus. At the china cabinet in the corner carrying all the knickknacks and centerpieces her mother used around the dining room table every holiday. At the couch and recliner where her dad sat in the evenings with her mother, read the paper, and watched TV.

Her mother wasn’t poor. She wasn’t scraping pennies from her coin purse because she had no other option.

She was just content. And had enough healthy self-awareness to live out her contentment.

And Theo? Theo wasn't just the man who'd understood her mother, who'd kept her secret, who'd been there for her. He was the one who'd been saving her parents all along.

Chapter 15

Skye

Three weeks later

Skye strolled down the herringbone brick sidewalk of Abingdon, gift bag swinging from her fingertips, the giant blue bow knocking her knees. She took her time, feeling the warm early-May breeze seize her hair and lift it momentarily, leaving a tingle along the back of her neck. Pink pansies in two hanging baskets cheered up the black streetlamp outside Katbird's Wine & Gourmet Shoppe, and her gaze drifted to the large windows and the display of cheese beside handcrafted Italian pottery. She stopped. Took a step toward the seafoam vase nestled beside crystal glasses. Her mother would love it.

She made a note to pop in on the way back from the shower and give it a closer look.

She walked past the Tavern, admiring the mossy slate roof. Another breeze swept her green silk jumpsuit softly across her skin. She slowed to read a couple lines on the plaque about its construction in 1779.

This was the third time she'd worn the jumpsuit in three weeks—the first with Theo, the second when she went to dinner with Luke and some of the old gang (where, sure enough, Luke had confirmed Theo's lasagna-making expertise). She could've bought or chosen another outfit for his wife's baby shower. But this was what she wanted to wear, she realized, as she looked through her closet this morning. And she was trying these days to practice doing the things she liked without regard for what anyone else might think. To be a bit more like her mother.

She walked past several more colonial-era buildings, taking in both the ancient architecture and the trees lining Main Street. Traffic went by, some tourists destined for the Barter Theatre with its flapping maroon and yellow flags, some citizens moving through town about their business. Skye lifted the Raven's coffee cup to her lips, no quicker or slower than before.

The moment was worth lingering over.

Her steps slowed just before a four-way crossing as a sign came into view. A brown sign with bold script written across it: *Theodore Watkins III, Financial Adviser*.

She stopped. Looked up to the redbrick, colonial-style office building. Considered taking a step toward the door.

But like the rest of the windows, the six glass panes revealing the foyer inside were dark, the office void of life. Just as well. She'd do best apologizing when her schedule was clear.

She knew what she wanted to say, and it could take a while.

Another three blocks and Skye stopped at the Barter. Turned left into the grand entrance to the historic building across from it. Smiled politely to the two teenage valets of the Martha Washington Inn and descended the steps. Garden art and quiet porticos greeted her as she walked along the winding brick path leading to one of the Martha's many entrances.

As she approached the door, she moved the baby shower gift to her left hand and opened the door with her right. She stepped onto the plush, olive-colored carpet and turned toward the spa, where Tracy, with stomach protruding, was finishing up a cut and color before her party started.

Skye stopped.

The baby rattle inside the gift bag jingled as it dropped to her feet.

Slowly, she took a step toward the first row of gilded paintings, her eyes wide. The waves crashed onto the sand of the Seattle coastline, the marine life beneath a seafoam green sea, the boulder and its crop of trees protruding just off the

shore in the midst of the sea. She'd completed and sold this series years ago. Her finger traced her own signature along the bottom edge. The black plaque beside it with gold lettering announced: *Display Only*.

How?

She looked down the wall, counted. One, two, three, four, five.

At the end of the hall, Tracy turned the corner and grinned when she spotted Skye. "There you are! I just finished up. Ready to go?"

Skye drew up her finger at the largest painting, felt her mouth hanging open like that of a codfish. "How did these get here?"

Tracy raised a brow. "You didn't know? I assumed you knew. Theo brought them in two weeks ago."

"Theo?" Skye's throat was drying fast. "But how? How did he have them—?" She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, finding the questions coming faster than she could process.

Tracy shrugged. "All I know is that I saw him in here meeting with the manager with one of your paintings one day, and the next they were replacing all the old displays with yours."

Chapter 16

Theo

Theo rubbed his eyes, weary from hours of exposure to lamplight and computer screens. The office had long closed up for the day, and yet he sat, logging in the numbers on the Excel sheet in the still room.

The Barter ticket sat on his desk, unused, while outside the street was lined with the parallel-parked cars of Barter visitors. It was opening night for *King Lear*, but tonight, like every night the past three weeks, he had work to do. Things to prepare.

Unbelievably, Ashleigh had returned to him that evening three weeks prior. Turned her headlights around. Listened and braved a conversation about mending fences. And for a millisecond, he had considered it. But as he did he realized he couldn't maintain a conversation about building their relationship while keeping one eye on the door, with one part of his heart hoping to hear Skye's knock. He couldn't do that to Ashleigh, who deserved much, much more. And despite his mistakes, he couldn't do that to himself. He couldn't let Skye go. Not again.

So he resolved then and there to do something about it.

To take that risk Skye needed.

Theo sighed and leaned back in his chair, back aching from the day's load of sitting through meals and meetings and reports. His legs ached with the desire to move, to pedal, to run. Perhaps he'd actually go on a run tonight before packing the last box. He glanced out the window to the dark street.

A light flashed into his eyes and he blinked.

He frowned, looked out the window again.

A light blinked again, this time covering the whole of his window with its light. A moment later it ceased, then flicked on again.

Was that . . . ?

Theo pushed back his chair. Stood.

The light continued blinking on and off as he moved to the foyer, then turned the knob on the front door. When he opened it, he was certain.

“Skye?”

Skye, standing on the brick sidewalk beneath the maple, clicked off the flashlight. Her hand fell to her side as he strode toward her.

She smiled slightly as he stepped onto the sidewalk.

He glanced down at the flashlight. “I hate to be cliché, but what are you doing here?”

“I, um . . .” Skye looked from his eyes to his jacket pocket and up again. “I wanted to apologize. I know everything about my dad and . . . I wanted to say I’m sorry. I thought you wouldn’t do anything like that and yet . . .” She shrugged. “I was wrong to think it. I was wrong about a few things. And for what it’s worth, I was wrong to expect you to take all the risks.” She took a step toward him. “And maybe you have a girlfriend now—”

“I don’t,” he interjected.

“And if you do,” she continued, though a smile was starting to rise, “I’m sure she’s lovely, but I didn’t want to let another day pass without taking a risk and telling you I know what I want.”

Theo’s eyes softened. The beating in his chest picked up its pace as he took another step forward. “And what is that?”

She blinked as he tentatively touched both of her elbows and took the final step. “Why, you. Of course.”

A moment passed in silence as he let her words wash over him. Words he'd craved to hear for years. Decades.

Skye blinked again. "Unless . . . ," she began slowly, "you feel differently—"

But he was closing her lips with his, both hands on the tips of her elbows, gently pressing her to him. Time slowed as he slipped one hand to her shoulder, then cradled her neck as they stood there beneath the maple tree, the whispers of passing cars swirling around them.

He could live this moment forever.

As the world surrounding them came into focus again, Theo stepped back and gave his head a vehement shake. "Skye, you bested me again. I was going to woo you first."

Skye laughed, cheeks flushed as she pulled a strand back behind her ear. "Calm down, Romeo. You win in the wooing. I saw my paintings up in the Martha this afternoon. What I don't understand, though, is how you found them."

He smiled and, keeping one hand on her elbow as though afraid to let go, turned them toward the office door. "They aren't hard to find when they've been featured in your living room for a decade."

Skye halted. Looked up to him as he locked the office door. "You've been hoarding my paintings here? In your house? You bought . . . that entire series?"

"No, I have the Spring of 2016 series in my house," Theo said, smiling wistfully as he turned toward her. "What I had in the living room at the cabin, however, my *new* home, were those. Now, how do you feel about lifting a few of my moving boxes?"

Theo felt Skye stop. She turned to him. Her eyes were as large and round as he'd ever seen. Her voice was nearly a whisper. "Are you telling me you want to move to the cabin?"

His smile was his reply.

"But, but what about your work?"

“I’ll commute.” Theo shrugged. “An hour commute is hardly anything. Citizens of the cities are offended by people who drive under an hour and claim they commute.”

“And all the bugs? And snakes?”

“I plan on having to carry you out of a few shady situations, but I think you’ll be safe with me.”

“You’d do all that for me?” She glanced around. “You’d leave all this, for me?”

Theo’s eyes softened. “Skye, whether or not you showed up tonight, I was going to be your neighbor, rapping at your door with a morning cup of coffee, swinging by with the offer of soup every time I hear you’re sick, dropping off a card every Christmas, birthday, and holiday, until . . .”

“Until . . . ?” Skye said.

Theo smiled as he took her hand in his. “Why, of course, until you opened the door.”

Epilogue

One year later

“She’ll sell for ten thousand. Not a penny less!”

Skye picked up Luke’s booming voice over the hum of the crowd.

Swiftly she handed her mother the small flute of champagne. “Excuse me. I have to distract a man who keeps parading around as my agent before my agent actually gets here and kills him.”

Her mother and three of the visitors at Evergreen Gallery laughed lightly as they opened up the circle for her to depart into the crowd. As Skye slipped between the clusters of guests, her name popping up like iridescent bubbles by individuals merrily trying to get her attention, she couldn’t help smiling.

A packed room of family, friends, patrons, and curious visitors.

The crisp white walls were so freshly painted the smell of latex still hung in the air.

Floor-to-ceiling windows showed off the herringbone brick sidewalks of Abingdon and *Evergreen Gallery* in delicate green script on the outdoor signage.

Track lighting beamed neatly over each canvas, each one a new angle on the sparkling night sky.

Only one thing was missing. As she was just reaching Luke—who stood squarely in front of the largest canvas, a blue-eyed baby strapped to his broad chest as he haggled with an elderly woman dripping in pearls—she saw it.

Passing Luke, she moved to the open front door and stepped outside.

Directly across the street, Theo, just having turned the lock on his own office door, turned around. When he saw her, he stopped. Gave a little lopsided smile as he lifted one hand, the oversized scissors dangling from his fingers.

“Found the ribbon cutters!” he called out.

He dodged the oncoming traffic, jogged lightly across the street, and met her on the other side, eyes shining on the woman who’d turned from childhood best friend to lost love, to next-door neighbor, to wife, and now the latest: neighboring business owner and daily lunch date. And all it took was thirty-six years.

She took the scissors from his hand and reached on tiptoes for a kiss, her cheeks glowing like the soft pink rose petals on their wedding day. “Just in time.”

Discussion Questions

Dashing Through the Snow

1. Willow thinks that with the private cabin, she'll get a moment of relief after her hard breakup, only to find she has to make the hard choice of giving it away to someone who needed it more. When is a time in your life when you've done something similar? Was it worth it?
2. After Willow sacrifices her private room, she meets Oliver's father and ultimately Oliver. She was given a blessing in disguise she may not have received otherwise. When is a time in your life you were surprised by something similarly unexpected that changed your life?
3. Willow had a classic case of settling for things in life instead of risking and jumping into the unknown. When have you experienced the same thing, and what was the outcome?
4. This novella included research into real cross-country train experiences. Would you ever participate in such a trip? Why or why not?
5. The theme of the train trip was experiencing a nostalgic and romantic Christmas getaway. What kind of tour would you like to explore if you went on a train getaway?
6. What was your favorite pit stop depicted in the novella. Why?

7. Who was your favorite character in the book (author answer: mine was the quirky, lovable elf, Ian!) and why?
8. What was your favorite scene in the book and why?
9. Oliver waited until they were nearly at the end of their trip before making a move. Do you agree with his reasons for doing this or think he should have brought up the topic with Willow earlier?
10. Which character did you relate to the most? Why?
11. Willow loved her caretaker job despite its low salary. Would you prefer a job you loved with little pay or a job that was mediocre but the salary was strong? Why?
12. The train tour's goal was to create soon-to-be favorite Christmas memories for its passengers. What are some of the most nostalgic Christmas memories in your own life?

Pining for You

1. Skye Fuller ran away from her relationship with Theo in her younger years and pursued becoming an artist in Seattle. She ultimately succeeded, but also lost her relationship with Theo. Do you think she should've left?
2. As it turns out, Theo had subtly given very much in efforts to support Skye's family. Have you ever met someone with quiet integrity? Who were they and what were they like?
3. Theo is a "city" mouse whereas Skye is settled in the country. Do you like how they compromised in the end? Have you ever experienced differences of opinion with a loved one on where and how to live? How did you resolve them?
4. Theo settled on a mountaintop without enough town residents to fill a grocery store in order to be with his

love. Would you do this? What city conveniences would you miss most? (Answer: Mine would be drive-thru coffee ;)).

5. Skye had to learn a thing or two about the danger of making assumptions without seeking clarification of the truth. Have you ever made an assumption that turned out to be wrong? What happened?
6. Skye left Seattle in order to be near her family again and, sometimes the importance of being close to family changes with time. How close do you live to your family? Why? Has this changed over the years?
7. Though Theo loved Skye, there were real challenges and temptations during his long-distance relationship with Skye while at college. Do you think his fall was understandable? Have you ever experienced anything like this? How did it turn out?
8. Theo, a bachelor of thirty-five years, was so desperate for companionship and marriage that he very nearly settled down with Ashleigh, despite a few flaws. What do you think he should've done, had Skye never turned up? Do you think it's right to settle for someone who may be great but isn't quite the person you dreamed?
9. Who is your favorite character and why?
10. Who is your least favorite character and why?
11. Poor Ashleigh has been through quite the ringer, having lost her relationship with Chip in *The Cul-de-Sac War* and now Theo in *Pining for You*. Do you think she should have her own story? (Please email me personally your thoughts on this at melissa@melissaferguson.com! I'd love to get feedback and decide about what to do with poor Ashleigh ;)).

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