



MARTHA KEYES



**SOLO
FOR THE
SEASON**

A GIFT-WRAPPED ROMANCE

*For all of us who peaked after junior high.
So, everyone.*

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Next in the Gift-Wrapped Romance Series](#)

[Gift-Wrapped Romance Series](#)

[Other titles by Martha Keyes](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

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CHAPTER 1

MAGGIE

Grinning like Buddy the Elf, I yank the end of the satin scarf around my neck. Why our accounting firm requires us to dress like we're flight attendants is still a mystery to me after two years working there. Taking off the glorified choker is a daily ritual when I leave the parking lot, but today it marks something special: my Christmas break has officially begun. And it's going to be fabulous.

I turn up the volume on my Christmas playlist as I wait at a traffic light, glancing in my rearview mirror at the sight of Quillen & Associates, which I won't be seeing for more than two weeks. I sigh happily and toss the scarf onto the box of books on the seat beside me. The lid peeps open, giving me a glimpse of the selection I packed. Twenty titles might seem a tad overly ambitious, particularly given the number of movies I have saved on my Hallmark Channel watchlist *and* the continuing education credits I have to get done during Christmas vacation, but I believe in myself.

My phone rings as the light turns green, and my friend Stevie's name pops up on the car screen.

"We're sorry," I answer in my best operator voice, "you've reached Maggie during her ultra-Christmassy, radically-solitary holiday vacation. Please try—"

"Are you on your way, then?" she asks.

"I've got to stop by my house and grab my cooler of food, but then I'll be heading out."

"I'm so excited for you!"

“Excited or worried?” I ask knowingly. Stevie has tried to subtly persuade me against my plan a number of times now. She’s afraid I’ll get lonely. Or appear on the back of a milk carton.

“Excited,” she says definitively. “And also worried. You sure you’ll be okay? I was serious when I said you could stay with Troy and me.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’ll be more than okay, Stevie. I’ll be in my element. It’ll be so much better than last Christmas.”

“Ugh. That’s a pretty low bar, Mags.”

She’s right. But being dumped on Christmas is the bar I’m working with, all the same. Like an idiot, I ditched my family to spend last Christmas with my boyfriend Rich, only to find out his family hardly celebrates it. All they celebrated that Christmas was Rich breaking up with me. I wanted to make sure my next Christmas couldn’t be ruined by anyone, so, while I was holed up in the guest room of his parents’ house, waiting for my flight home, I booked two weeks at Santa’s Haven at Crystal Peaks Resort.

Now that I’ve had a year to get past the breakup, I considered canceling the reservation. But it was nonrefundable, so I figured I’d make the most of it. I’m genuinely excited for it now, though, especially since this is my family’s off year for Christmas. My brothers are with in-laws, and my parents are off in Bermuda.

“You’ll have cell service, right?” Stevie asks.

I clench my teeth as I pull into my apartment parking lot.

“Wait, seriously?” Stevie says. “No service? What about internet?”

“Negatory.” I downloaded all the movies on my watch list as well as all my accounting courses. There’s a promotion coming up at Quillen, and I figured I might as well go for it.

“What sort of place is this? Sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

“Or peace and joy. It’s the experience people want—to disconnect and enjoy being present.”

“If you say so. But how am I supposed to know if you’re okay? Are you sure this place is even legit?”

“Positive. And I promise I’ll be fine. I’m not even planning on leaving the cabin, Stevie. It’s about as low-risk as possible.”

“Maggie . . .”

“Mmhmm?” I already know what’s coming.

“I have to ask one more time. Are you 100% sure you want to be alone on Christmas? Two weeks is a long time even *not* during the holidays.”

I open my car door but stay in my seat, fiddling with my keys. “I’m sure. I just want to do this Christmas on my own—make it what *I* want it to be.”

“A Regency romance reading fest, interspersed with accounting classes?”

“What? No.” I instinctively reach over to press the open lid of my book box down.

“Fess up. How many Georgette Heyer novels do you have with you?”

I glance at the box out of the corner of my eye. “A few.”

“A few,” she repeats. “As in all of them?”

“Nope. Percentagewise, it’s only, like, fifty. Less if you count her murder mysteries. I only brought one of those.”

She laughs. “You’re my favorite, Mags. I’m not judging. I just figured you’d want more Christmassy books.”

“I’ll have my movies for that. Plus, I’ll be surrounded by Christmas everywhere I look. Trust me.”

It’s been a while since I looked at the pictures of the cabin I’d be staying in, but I vividly remember how Christmassy it was. That was all I needed to know.

“Okay,” Stevie says resignedly. “Well, I hope you have the most amazing Christmas ever.”

“Same to you and Troy.”

“If you do end up with service, text me to let me know you arrived safely, okay?”

“Will do.”

I head inside, grab my cooler, and haul it to the backseat of my car.

Once I’m on the road, I reach back with my free hand and undo my French twist, cringing as I pull the bobby pins out. I’ve learned over the years how to slick my hair back so you wouldn’t even know it’s curly, but all bets are off the second it comes out of its tightly wound ‘do.

I shake it out, glorying in the freedom. Aside from a brush, I didn’t bring a single hair product or tool with me on this vacation. Not a drop of makeup, either. Books and movies don’t care what I look like, which is how I know I’ve found true love with them.

I take a deep breath as I wind my way out of sunny skies, palm trees, and LA traffic and toward fresh air, freezing temperatures, solitude, and lovely, delicious snow. Stevie was worried about me spending so much time alone, but she doesn’t get it. Alone is where I flourish. When you grow up as the frizzy, brace-faced awkward girl at school, not-so-affectionately dubbed “Maggot” instead of Margot, you learn to like alone pretty quickly.

It takes a little less than two hours to reach Crystal Peaks Resort in San Bernardino Forest. The sun has already dipped behind the mountains by the time my tires crunch on the blanket of snow covering the drive. The sound brings a stupid grin to my face as I pull up to the reception cabin to check in. I park and get out of my car, then slowly turn 360 degrees, taking in every detail of the scene before darkness claims it.

Deep green pine trees are scattered all over the white peaks, with log cabins tucked away here and there. I try to see if I can tell which one is mine, but it’s impossible from here. In

the distance, snow-covered trees line well-kept ski trails. If I squint, I can make out a few dots of skiers gliding down the lit mountain trails. It'll be great to watch them from my window. There's nothing I like better than living vicariously through risk-takers. You get all the adrenaline and none of the hospital bills.

I let out a satisfied sigh, content with my choice to come to Crystal Peaks, then head into the log reception cabin. It's warm and inviting, with a few shelves of non-perishable food items and a selection of winter gear, feminine products, and the like. An old man with glasses about to slip off his nose sits behind the counter, writing something in a notebook.

He glances up at the ring from the bell hooked on the door, a frown on his face. "Can I help you?" His tone says something more along the lines of, "What do you want?"

"Um, hi," I say, taken aback by his unfriendly demeanor. "I'm just here to check in."

His bushy brows knit tighter together. "Name?"

"Maggie Jensen," I say as though my very name requires an apology.

He turns to a different page in his notebook, runs a finger down a list, and stops. "Santa's Haven?"

I nod.

He glances at me again over the top of his glasses, like my choice in cabin says everything he needs to know about me.. Nerves cause me to smile, and I tuck my hair behind my ear, a useless gesture since it refuses to stay there.

He reaches under the counter, pulls out a set of keys, and sets it down in front of me. My brows go up. Two small silver keys are looped onto a keyring, which is attached to the hat of a skinny, plush elf almost a foot long. It looks a bit like a dog toy, and I wonder whether it has a squeaker inside and whose idea it was to use it as a keychain.

It's very festive, though, and I'm all about festive this year.

"Already been paid in full," he says.

This is not news to me. In my eagerness to make sure this Christmas would be better than last year's—and far away from Rich or his family—I had been ready to pay a king's ransom upfront.

The man writes a few things down in the notebook, then pushes the key toward me. “Up the hill, last cabin on the right. Reception is open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. except Sundays.”

“Thank you.” I grab hold of the elf, whose glassy eyes stare at me above his long, ski-slope nose and duck-lipped smile. I walk to my car, a zing of excitement about the next two weeks filling me. It's twilight, and my mind conjures up a picture of hot chocolate, Christmas music, my box full of books, and watching TV in my cozy cabin in the woods.

I start up my car and follow the road up the hill. The plowed snow gets higher and narrower on either side of me. I focus on the road ahead, wondering what I'll do if a car comes in the opposite direction. One of us will have to reverse until the road is wide enough to pass. I would love not to be that person.

Out of nowhere, something whizzes past me on the right. I jam on the brakes, my heart hammering. A glance in my rearview mirror reveals a man on a snowmobile, cruising over the snow next to the road.

“Crazy adrenaline junkies,” I mutter, trying to calm my heart as I put my foot gently on the gas again. I assume most of the people at Crystal Peaks are skiers, which makes me a fish out of water. Eh. I'm used to it.

My car creeps toward the end of the road, where a glow of light grows brighter over the snow drifts ahead. As the cabin comes into view, my jaw slips open, and I let off the gas. The light it's generating is blinding. String upon string of twinkling icicle lights adorn the gabled entrance and windows.

There's another contender for my attention, though: a dozen Christmas inflatables covering the front lawn. On the roof, Santa's sleigh and a posse of reindeer are perched, as though Mr. Claus himself has just slipped down the chimney to bestow presents on the cabin guests.

“Wow,” I whisper. I remember the pictures conveying a very Christmassy cabin, but this . . . this is a whole different level. I came to the right place.

Smiling, I park, then pull my suitcase out of the car, grab the giant elf key, and head for the front door. The porch is decorated with three huge ornaments, covered in string lights.

It’s not the easiest thing to turn a key in a lock with a half-pound stuffed elf hanging from it, but I manage and push open the door.

A couch with a green-and-red plaid slipcover and about ten embroidered Christmas pillows catches my eye first. But with so much to see, my eyes can only linger for a split-second on any one thing. A half-dozen stockings hang from the mantel, and on top sits a hodgepodge collection of Christmas elves. A glowing plastic wreath with Santa Claus in the middle overlooks the fireplace.

Not a square foot of the cabin is untouched by some Christmas decoration or other, and it takes me a full two minutes to come out of my daze taking it all in. I pull out my phone to check, as promised, whether I have service. Stevie should know I’m about to be smothered in Christmas.

But the top of my screen shows no bars and no internet.

I look up at the cabin again, then out the window, where a few snowflakes have just started to fall. My mouth breaks into an enormous smile.

Five minutes later, I’ve got my cooler unpacked, have shed my work clothes for Long John Christmas pajamas, and am unpacking to my Christmas music playlist at full volume.

Best. Christmas. Ever.

CHAPTER 2

WESLEY

This may be a new record for me: sweating in subfreezing temperatures before 7 a.m. I pull the scarf from around my neck, the winter air immediately providing relief, and toss it onto the snowmobile's basket. I can't help sighing with satisfaction at the view of my morning's work: a plowed parking lot, driveway, and neat pathways up to every one of our ten cabins.

I need a nap. We knew snow was coming last night, which is why I set my alarm for 4:30 a.m., but I hadn't expected to wake up to two feet of fresh powder. I had to work efficiently to get things done before some of our guests hit the nearby slopes.

I start up the snowmobile engine and make my way toward reception. Bill, the resort manager, is bound to be grouchy. He's no Mr. Rogers even on his best days, and his best days never include an enormous blanket of snow. Guests are always anxious to get to the slopes, which makes them impatient of any inconvenience or delay, which means the pressure's on.

He's also getting grumpier as he nears retirement this spring. I'm hoping that irritability won't stand in the way of me taking over management when that time comes.

Despite his surliness, Bill's a good guy. I've been working for him for two years, and he's like family to me now. It's inevitable when you live up in the mountains all year with no cell reception and guests expecting a hitch-free vacation. Winter guests are especially tricky. They're either rich enough

to afford season ski passes or are blowing a bunch of hard-earned money for a couple days on the slopes.

I cut the engine and, before the snowmobile has come to a complete halt, I hop off. It slows and stops a couple inches shy of the wooden fence, which is barely visible with last night's snow deposit. Another perfect parking job, if I say so myself.

I push open the front door of reception and toss the snowmobile keys on the counter. "Morning, Bill." I use my most chipper voice as I shrug off my parka and hang it on the hook just inside the door.

Bill grunts in response from behind the counter.

"Completely plowed in less than two and a half hours," I say with a flourishing bow.

"Not soon enough for the guests in Cabin 3," he mutters. "Called at five thirty to check whether they'd be able to get their car out of the lot by six."

"Which they were." I did Cabin 3 first because I know the guests by now. They've been here six days, and they've called about that many times a day.

I pull off my gloves and set them on the counter, but Bill hands them back to me. "Don't get too comfortable. Got an errand for you."

"Does it have to do with closing the blinds and shutting my eyes for two hours?"

He stares at me, not a quiver of give in his expression.

I chuckle and swipe the gloves from his outstretched hand. "What is it?" A thought occurs to me, and my face falls. "Tell me it's not a clogged toilet, Bill. Not at 7 a.m." I'm assistant manager at Crystal Peaks, but I've also become the *de facto* maintenance guy for the easier issues that crop up—ones that aren't worth calling into the closest town to hire professionals for. I've fixed a lot of clogged toilets and disposals, lit a bunch of pilot lights, changed a lot of furnace filters, and even fixed wiring a hungry squirrel went to town on.

"Worse," Bill says.

My eyes widen slightly as I stare at him. “Santa’s Haven?”

He nods, mouth bunched in an apologetic grimace. Even he realizes what he’s asking of me.

“Can it wait for my nap?” I plead. “I’ll have a lot more patience.”

“It won’t take long,” he said. “Just a welfare check. You know people get worried after these storms.”

I snort. “A welfare check? On a guest at Santa’s Haven? Call the family back.” I reach over the counter and hold the phone toward Bill. “I already know how they’re doing without having to go all the way up there, and they’re not okay. If they were, they wouldn’t have booked that place.”

Santa’s Haven is the eyesore of Crystal Peaks and the shame of Bill Anderson. When the resort was built, it was the first cabin sold to buyers. The plan was to allow each owner to decorate as they pleased—to personalize their cabin—and the Davis family puked Christmas over every inch of theirs. This led to the addition of multiple pages of restrictions and conditions in the contract of future buyers. It was too late for Santa’s Haven, though.

It attracts the strangest customers—we’re talking People of Walmart-worthy. Which makes sense once you’ve seen the place. I mean, what sort of person does a cabin appeal to when even the dictionary definition of “kitschy” wouldn’t claim it? And, for that matter, who rents that type of place any other time of year than Christmas?

But people do. July, November, and December are Santa’s Haven’s busiest months. The owners could get a lot more money if they ditched the theme and hung up some dead deer heads like normal people instead of covering it with creepy elves. The place brings a whole new meaning to the whole seeing-you-when-you’re-sleeping-and-knowing-when-you’re-awake idea.

Bill just stares at me, making no move to take the phone.

I blow a breath through my lips and hang up the phone. “Okay, fine.” I toss my gloves behind the counter and grab the

keys. “One welfare check coming right up.”

“The callback number’s right here when you’re done,” Bill says, lifting a green sticky note with the name Stevie and a phone number below. “I’ll be in the back.”

I salute him, then head out, not even bothering to grab my coat. I won’t be gone long.

“No rest for the weary,” I say as I hop back on the snowmobile. The only good thing about going to Santa’s Haven is that it’s the farthest cabin from reception. In fresh snow like this, that means if I do things right, I can really gun it on my way there.

The winter air whips my face and bites at my fingers curled around the handles. My lashes flutter, trying to keep my eyes from freeze-drying while they take in the incredible beauty of Crystal Peaks on a day like today. I love palm trees and beach as much as the next guy, but this? Branches creaking under the weight of an infinite number of perfectly formed ice crystals, icicles hanging from cabin roofs, and an undisturbed expanse of glittering white snow? It’s something else.

I slow down and veer left once Santa’s reindeer come into view on the roof of the cabin. I glare at them—I’ve had to climb on that dumb roof more than once when one of them has gotten knocked down by strong winds. How many times have I secretly shaken my fist at Bill for this cabin? I understand being eager to get your business idea rolling, but the things they agreed to so they could sell the property and get the project going? Straight up desperation. Bill’s had twenty years to regret it.

As I kill the engine, I let my head fall back and plea for serenity. I can already hear “All I Want for Christmas is You” blaring through the windows. Does hearing the music count as a welfare check? At what point do I sacrifice my own well-being for theirs?

Part of me is hoping to bring back bad news about whoever has rented Santa’s Haven. Maybe a death in the cabin would kill future rentals completely. Or maybe it would bring

in an even *weirder* brand of humans—Christmas in July true crime junkies.

I shiver.

I head for the front door, passing through the obstacle course of Christmas inflatables, one of which I give a friendly punch in the carrot stick nose. Frosty flies backward, then pops right back up, grinning widely as ever.

“One of these days, man,” I warn him. I’ve been tempted more than once to take the Swiss Army knife in my pocket and deflate all twenty of them, but guess who’d be patching them up an hour later or telling Bill he has to buy new ones?

I head up the sidewalk—shoveled by yours truly just a couple of hours ago—and scan the cabin for any of its more common issues. I may as well fix stuff while I’m here, but nothing sticks out, thank heaven. Nothing but the usual over-the-top craziness.

I don’t know whether Santa’s Haven is a worse view during the day or night. At night, it’s like the Vegas of Crystal Peaks—if someone’s Grandma Mabel had been the master planner of Vegas. During the day? It looks like a holiday warehouse unboxed a shipment all over the front yard.

I make a fist and try to find a free spot on the front door where I can knock. The massive wreath takes up the entire top third of the door, so I have to go low. I wait ten seconds, but given how loud the music is, I doubt the guests heard anything. All I really need is visual proof of life—no need for an extended conversation—so I walk over to the window and peer through.

It takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the relative darkness inside.

“For crying out loud,” I mutter, watching the woman inside dance around to Mariah Carey. She’s wearing Long Johns and a beanie covering tangled, wavy brown hair, probably from too much holiday head-banging. I squint as she holds something in front of her. Good grief, is she singing “All I Want for Christmas is You” to a book?

She is. She really and truly is. Heaven help us.

The edge of my mouth pulls into a reluctant smile as I watch her dance around. My brain functioning must have been compromised by my cold, early morning because there's something a little charming about the way she's singing her heart out and dancing like she doesn't have a care in the world.

If I'm not mistaken, these guests are booked for a full two weeks—snatched up the reservation the moment the dates opened up. They're bound to be a rare delight, as evidenced by this strange woman.

The song fades out, and her gaze jumps to me at the window. I hop back, and my heel hits one of the enormous sparkly ornaments adorning the porch. It bangs against the porch rail, then rolls toward the one next to it, creating a huge, slow-motion game of dominos.

“Shh,” I hiss, trying to stabilize it and the other two it's displaced.

The door opens, and I freeze.

CHAPTER 3

MAGGIE

There's a man on my porch, hugging a gigantic Christmas ornament and staring at me like he just got caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

It's utterly silent as I search his vaguely familiar face, trying to figure out whether I know him and how he comes to be cuddling with Christmas decorations on the porch of my holiday rental.

His gaze drops to the book in my hand, and I move it behind my back, suddenly and painfully aware that I'm wearing Long John pajamas and a beanie to cover my bedhead—and that I was just singing “All I Want for Christmas is You” to a romance novel. But what option did I have? The white wonderland I woke to demanded I crank up the Christmas tunes to finish the unpacking I didn't get to last night.

“Hey,” the guy says, releasing the ornament from his grip. It wobbles, and we both watch with bated breath until it settles. He gives an awkward laugh as our gazes meet again. His brown hair is slightly disheveled, but he's a very good-looking human specimen. Nice brown eyes, athletic build, and a disarming smile.

I put a self-conscious hand to my beanie. “Can I help you?”

This whole scenario is really putting a damper on my plans not to talk to any humans until I get back home after Christmas. Should I be expecting regular visits from the

people in the other cabins? Have I inadvertently stepped into a tight-knit community of neighbors who will be accosting me with casseroles and prying into my personal life?

“No,” the guy hurries to say, brushing his hair back out of his face. “I mean, yeah, kind of. You can let me know if you’re okay.”

I stare at him, more confused than ever. Is he asking that because I *look* not-okay? I think I should be offended, but I’m too distracted. My brain works to place the face I’m looking at. An accounting client, maybe? A lot of people come through Quillen’s offices, and it’s very possible he worked with one of the other four CPAs. I’d remember that face if he was my client. It’s a really beautiful face.

When I don’t respond immediately, his eyes flick again to the book I’m hiding behind my back.

My cheeks ignite as my hand grips the book more tightly.

“I came for a welfare check,” he explains, filling the lingering silence.

That’s when it hits me. I *do* know this guy, but it’s not from Quillen. I have to reach much further back into my brain archives, all the way to my second-grade yearbook and the face with a glitter-pen ink heart around it.

The man standing in front of me is Wesley Warren, second-coolest kid on the block at Meadowbrook Elementary *and* Hillside Junior High. He’s also the kid whose face has a thick “X” through it in my seventh-grade yearbook. He started running around with a new crowd in junior high, and it was *his* best friend that started calling me “Maggot.” Wesley laughed. He *laughed*, and that laugh cut right through the stack of Twilight books I carried with me everywhere and straight to my heart.

“Someone called requesting the check,” he says.

I blink, jamming the ancient memories back into the dust-covered cabinets of my brain. “Check?” Did I forget to handle a check transaction for a client before I left yesterday?

“Welfare check,” he clarifies.

Welfare check? I don't think any of my current clients are on government assistance, and even if they were, those checks go straight to the client, not to Quillen.

Every additional second of confusion on my part has Wesley looking at me with more and more concern. "I'm going to go ahead and take that as a *no*, then."

He's looking at me like some rabid dog who might lunge at him instead of a woman who's sincerely confused why she's being asked for a welfare check and who would come here to do it.

He takes a gingerly step back like keeping his gaze on me at all times is necessary for his safety. "I'm just going to go call Stevie back, okay?"

I blink. "Wait, what?"

"He was worried about you." *Rightly so*, his eyes say. "Maybe because of the storm last night." *Or for any number of valid reasons*, his eyes add.

My brain shuffles the puzzle pieces I've been offered and reorganizes them into a new picture. And then it clicks. Wesley Warren isn't asking me for help with his or anyone's government assistance checks. Stevie—who he thinks is a guy—sent him to make sure I'm okay. A *welfare check*, as in to check on my well-being. And he's obviously under the impression that it's in serious question.

He thinks I'm crazy, which seems like a step down from the loser he thought me in junior high. I'm not totally clear on the hierarchy of things, but I urgently need to set the record straight.

"I'm an accountant," I say, explaining why it's taken me this long to understand what he's been saying to me.

His brows go up, not because he's impressed but because, to him, this is a randomly stated (and probably questionable) fact. "Very cool . . ."

"No, you don't understand," I say. "I thought you meant a welfare check as in a check from the government."

The brows bunch together. “Why would I be asking you for a check from the government?”

“Exactly,” I say. “Now you get why I was so confused. I handle all sorts of checks at work, but government assistance checks are not one of them. So, when you showed up randomly on my porch asking for a welfare check . . .”

Understanding dawns in his eyes, and a little piece deep inside me flickers with disappointment. Wesley Warren’s brown eyes are still as mesmerizing as they were in seventh grade. Nay, more so. If I were a vengeful person, I might’ve hoped he’d developed a squint or a permanent sty or something, but I’m not. I’ve forgiven everyone who did me wrong back in the day, no matter how unfairly kind time has been to them. So much for karma.

“Okay,” he says. “So, you’re *not* giving out free money.”

I smile. “Not today. Or anytime soon, actually. Check back with me when I’ve made managing partner.”

He salutes. “Will do. Is that the ten-year plan?”

I scrunch my nose. “Not really.” The thought of still being at Quillen in ten years—wearing those stupid neck scarves—makes me feel extremely sad inside. Even two years feels like a long time. I like numbers, I like helping people navigate the maze that is tax law, but it’s also bland as plain pasta most days. I love pasta as much as the next person, but it needs a nice vodka sauce to be appetizing. What the accounting equivalent of vodka sauce is, I have no clue.

“Anyway, to answer your initial question,” I say, “yes, thank you. I’m fine. I could tell you were genuinely worried about me for a minute there.”

He chuckles, and second-grade me is up in the clouds knowing I elicited such a sound from Wesley Warren. Present-day me is totally nonchalant about it.

“I was,” he acknowledges, “but you’ve resolved my concerns.”

“I’m so glad.” It’s clear he hasn’t recognized me, and I’m not sure whether to be happy or sad about that. “So,” I

continue when he makes no move to leave, “that’s a *check* on the welfare check.” I make a little checkmark gesture with my finger and smile awkwardly.

The edge of his mouth quirks up in amusement. “Oh, here.” He puts up his palm and faces it toward me, then indicates a spot just under his pointer finger. “Checkbox is right there.” He leaves his hand up like he’s a UPS worker waiting for me to sign.

I hesitate for a second, my smile growing, then reach my finger and make a checkmark on his palm.

“Great, thanks,” he says. “Everyone else okay too?”

I frown, confused again until I realize what he’s asking. “Oh, it’s just me.” I didn’t mean it to sound so pathetic.

His brows shoot up. “Is anyone else coming?”

I shake my head with a flicker of that old, familiar feeling: being judged.

“So, you’ll be here all alone for Christmas?”

“By choice,” I clarify.

He puts his hands up in innocence. “Hey, no judgment here.”

I cock a brow. “Really? Because it sounded a little bit like judgment.”

“Not unless I’m judging myself too. I’m in the same boat. I’m Wes, by the way.”

I know.

“I’m the assistant manager here at Crystal Peaks.” He puts out his hand.

That, I did not know.

I reach to shake it, realizing too late that I’m still holding my book. I yank it back behind me, swap it to my left hand like the world’s worst magician, and go back for the handshake. His hand is icy cold, but I try to grasp it like

Maggie Jensen, CPA, instead of Margot “Maggot” Jensen, Meadowbrook Elementary’s favorite teasing target.

Wes looks expectantly at me, waiting for me to introduce myself.

“Maggie,” I say reluctantly, tensing as I wait for any glint of recognition.

He narrows his eyes slightly, and they search my face. “Do I know you?”

“Nope,” I say far too quickly, pulling my hand back like he’s some high-tech hand scanner that’ll identify me by my unique fingerprints. The part about him not knowing me isn’t totally false. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s entirely forgotten my existence. And I’m not the same person I was in junior high anyway. He moved in high school, so it’s been a long time since we last saw each other.

He looks at me once more like he’s not quite so sure. “Well,” he says, turning and heading for the stairs that lead to the side of the cabin, “I’ll let you get back to Mariah—and your book.” He glances back at me with a little glint of humor in his eyes.

Steam is probably coming off my cheeks, but I smile weakly and give a thumbs-up, something I haven’t done, quite possibly, since I was a kid. Having him in the vicinity is triggering all the awkwardness I thought I’d left in my school days.

The edge of a snowmobile is barely visible between the cabin and the enormous inflatable of a gingerbread man half-immersed in a cup of hot chocolate. Wes swings a leg over the snowmobile and leans to the side so he can see me again. “Your phone doesn’t call outside of the resort, but if you need anything, just dial 0 to reach us at reception.”

“Thanks.” I wave and whisper through a smile of clenched teeth, “Definitely won’t be doing that.”

Wesley Warren is a beautiful man, but he and all his charm are better kept in the past, along with my head gear and *Twilight* memorabilia.

The snowmobile engine revs, and Wesley zooms off in the snow like he's in a monster truck show. I head back inside where I can be warm and surrounded by happy Christmas decorations. I have a long list of books and movies begging to be read and watched, besides some classes to get through.

Before I do any of that, though, I go to each window and yank the curtains closed.

CHAPTER 4

WESLEY

Snow sprays my face as I head back toward reception, and I chuckle at the incredibly strange encounter I just had. I was genuinely worried for the woman's sanity when I first arrived—thought she was our weirdest Santa's Haven guest to date, which is saying something. But now I'm wondering if Maggie will be the most normal guest we've had since I started at Crystal Peaks, book serenading notwithstanding. Seeing what book it was would probably go a long way toward settling that question, but alas.

There's something vaguely familiar about her, but I thought maybe she just had one of those faces—until her reaction when I asked if I knew her. Now, I'm positive I do. Why she doesn't want to acknowledge it is a mystery I plan to unravel ASAP—first, by looking up her last name in our guest log.

Her face flashes across my mind as I park outside the reception cabin. Dark brown, wavy hair under a huge beanie, freckles scattered across her face like sprinkles, and a pair of rosy cheeks. And to top it off, a really kind, charming smile.

I enter into reception, rubbing my hands together to generate some heat. I was out longer than expected and should have worn gloves like Bill said. I don't care, though. I'm heading straight for the guest log—then I'll call Maggie's friend (brother? boyfriend?) back with a report on the welfare check.

I suppress a chuckle. She actually thought I was coming to ask her for money.

Bill is behind the counter, phone receiver to his ear, and his gaze jumps to me as he talks into it. “I’ll send him right over.”

I stop and shut my eyes as he hangs up the phone. “Let me guess. Cabin 8.”

“Clogged shower drain,” he replies.

“Intentionally clogged,” I mutter.

“She requested you come right away.”

“Shocking.” I grab my gloves and coat. My maintenance visits to Cabin 8 are a daily occurrence when the Blake family is around, which they are twice a year—once at Christmas, once in the summer. Mr. Blake owns not only five of our ten cabins, but also a big plot of land next to the resort, and the road leading from Crystal Peaks to the main canyon highway. “It’s bound to be an easy fix. You sure you don’t want to take this one?”

“Sure as the sun rises in the east,” he says, writing down the work order in the book.

“I’m just trying to play by the rules, Bill. No fraternizing with the guests, right?”

He glances up at me above the rim of his glasses. “If you can’t fix a shower drain without fraternizing, we have bigger problems.”

I settle my forearms on the counter and stare at him. “I’m not the problem here. Believe me. You should come watch so you can see that for yourself. When I went to fix the disposal yesterday, Brielle was close enough to me I could tell she’d had croissants with canned chicken salad for lunch. And you know what had jammed the disposal?”

He doesn’t take the bait, keeping his eyes on the work order.

“Muffin liners, Bill. Muffin liners. Who puts muffin liners down the sink? And then she asked if I wanted to stay for dinner.”

He sighs and stands straight, removing his reading glasses to look at me squarely. “Look, Wesley. I understand. She’s

scheming to get you to come over, but I need you to be able to handle situations like this. It's very important to me that whoever takes over my position be professional in their relationship with the guests. So, tell me frankly—is this going to be a problem?"

I straighten up and shake my head firmly. "No. Not a problem."

"Good." He closes the work order book. "Just do your best to be nice without encouraging her. We can't afford to cause any problems with the Blakes. If they wanted to, they could —"

"Ruin us. Right. I understand."

I sling my arms through my coat, pull on my gloves, and grab my toolbox. Once the door has closed behind me, I blow a breath through my lips. Bill is right. If I want to take over at Crystal Peaks, I have to be able to navigate whatever weird and uncomfortable situations come up. I'll be dealing with the Blakes for the foreseeable future, so this is good and necessary practice.

It's all the more awkward that I know the family personally. Brielle and I grew up as classmates. Her family loves me and would welcome the two of us getting together. They've made that pretty clear this time around.

But even if there wasn't a strict rule about relationships with the guests, I wouldn't be interested in Brielle. I'm not sure I'm interested in relationships at all. My parents were essentially business competitors, arguing regularly over whose urgent work responsibilities took priority and who should have to stay home with me—only to end up calling a babysitter. It didn't provide me much incentive to seek out my own "happy family."

I speed through the fresh powder to Cabin 8. Clogged shower drains aside, I love it up here. Even though guests filter through Crystal Peaks on a regular basis, it's a lot easier to really connect when there's no internet or cell phone service. People look you in the eye instead of forgetting you're there because they're too busy texting.

It's only inconvenient when I can't blame an imaginary text message or phone call to help me escape my visits to Cabin 8.

My hand is raised to knock when the door opens.

For the love of all that's holy.

Brielle smiles at me, a towel wrapped around her while her wet blonde hair drips down her shoulders.

"Thank heaven you're here," she says. "I was trying to shower, but there's no way I can do that in six inches of gross water."

"Drain plugged up?" I ask, gently shouldering my way inside in a way that doesn't lead to physical contact.

"I guess so," she says as I hang my coat and gloves on the coat rack. "Think you'll be able to fix it?"

"Should be easy enough," I say, waving at her parents in the kitchen and heading up the stairs to the bathroom. The shower curtain is drawn, and there's standing water in the tub, like Brielle said.

I put on latex gloves and pull a drain snake out of my bag, mentally preparing myself to fish through Brielle's dirty shower water. Bill doesn't pay me enough.

Brielle sits on the edge of the bathtub so close I barely have space to move my arms. She leans over while I snake the drain, like she's my apprentice or something. Only she's wearing a towel, and I'm terrified it might fall off any minute.

I pull out a gross cluster of blonde hair, and she smiles guiltily at me, tucking hers behind her ear. Amazing how such shiny, beautiful hair can turn into one of the most revolting clumps known to humankind when it goes down the shower drain.

Despite the extracted bundle, the water doesn't budge. It wasn't that much hair, actually. I've seen a lot worse.

"I can't believe how soon it'll be Christmas," she says as I try the snake again. "Will you be around this year?"

“Yep,” I say, almost wishing I had asked either of my parents if they had plans. I haven’t spent the holidays with them in years, though, and I have no desire to now.

“By yourself?”

I shoot her a smile as I pull up the snake again. “Just how I like it.” Nothing much comes up, and I frown, perplexed by what’s keeping the water from draining. I really hope it’s not a problem down farther in the pipes. Plumbing issues are expensive enough, and when the plumber has to come all the way up the mountain?

Crystal Peaks can’t afford that type of problem right now.

“No one should be alone for Christmas,” she says. “You’re more than welcome to join *us*, you know.”

That’s when my eye catches on something: the little switch by the bath faucet that makes the water stop or drain. It’s flipped up. It should be flipped down. This is not proprietary information—it’s something even a toddler knows.

I glance up at Brielle, who’s looking as innocent as a newborn babe—and dressed like one, too—then I reach to the switch and flip it down. The bathroom fills with the sound of draining water.

“Oh my gosh,” she says, covering her mouth with a hand. “That is *so* embarrassing.”

I make something between a smile and a grimace, pushing myself up to a stand, then heading to rinse off my gloves in the sink. “You’re all set. Your drain is in perfect shape.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” she says, looking at me in the mirror like I spared her a grizzly fate instead of flipping the drain switch. “Have you had breakfast yet? My mom is making waffles downstairs.”

“Thanks, that’s nice of you,” I say, directing my eyes anywhere but at her. “But you’ve got a shower to finish, and I have more work to do.” I hold up my toolbox.

“Such a hard worker,” she says. “The resort is lucky to have you.”

“I sure think so,” I say, squeezing past her toward the door. “Have a good day, Brielle.”

“Give Christmas a little thought,” she says as I shut the door behind me.

Once I escape down the stairs, I have to reject her parents’ invitation to stay for breakfast, too, and I have to do it in a way that doesn’t give offense.

I’m so tired, and it’s only 8 o’clock.

As I set my toolbox in the snowmobile’s seat compartment, I glance a bit further down the road to Santa’s Haven and feel a spurt of energy, remembering the mystery I promised myself to solve: how I know Maggie. I also still need to call Stevie.

My luck is finally in when I get back to reception. Bill is nowhere to be seen—probably “organizing” in the back, which is code for taking a nap—and I hurry behind the counter and grab the guest book. I run my finger down the list of names on the page for Santa’s Haven. Each one I pass elicits distinctive memories. With all the Christmas paraphernalia there, that cabin is the one that takes up the most of my time for small maintenance issues—though, Brielle at Cabin 8 is certainly giving it a run for its money.

My finger stops near the bottom of the list. Maggie Jensen.

I frown. It’s as vaguely familiar as her face was. Has she stayed in one of the other cabins before? I want to solve the mystery, but not enough to go through every single guest entry for all ten cabins over the past two years.

I glance at the phone and the sticky note beside it with the number for her friend, Stevie, who requested the welfare check. Maybe I’ll figure something out talking to him. Kind of a long shot, but one way or another, I intend to get to the bottom of things.

I dial the number and play with the tacky film of the sticky note while the line rings.

“Hello?”

I pause at the feminine voice, then glance at the number. Did I dial it right?

“Hello?” she repeats.

“Hi,” I say warily, “this is Wes from Crystal Peaks. I’m looking for Stevie.” I say it like it’s a question, preparing to hear I have the wrong number.

“That’s me,” she says. “Thank you so much for calling me back. Is Maggie okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, she’s fine,” I hurry to reply, my brow furrowing. I’ve only ever known one girl called Stevie. “I talked to her just a while ago.”

“Thank you *so* much,” she says. “I’ve been worried about her being alone there for so long, and when she said she wouldn’t have reception and then I checked the weather report . . .”

“Yeah, we got a lot of snow last night, but she’s doing just fine.” I smile slightly as I remember her belting “All I Want for Christmas is You.”

Stevie lets out a relieved sigh. “Thank you for getting back to me so quickly . . . what did you say your name was again?”

“Wes. Wes Warren.”

There’s a pause. “Wes Warren?”

My eyes narrow at the note of familiarity in her voice. “Yeah . . .”

“Maybe a long shot, but you didn’t by chance go to Hillside, did you?”

My lips pull up in a smile. It *is* the Stevie I thought it was. “Is this Stevie Jacobs?”

“Stevie Sheppard now, but yes. Wow! I can’t believe it’s you. What are the odds? I haven’t seen you in years—since you moved, I guess.”

It’s true, but since she was married to a hotshot Hollywood actor until a couple years ago—right when I came up to work at Crystal Peaks—she’s probably as much to blame as I am for

not staying connected. “It’s been a really long time. How’ve you been? Did you say your last name is Sheppard now? As in ___”

“Troy,” she says.

My brows go up. She had a massive crush on Austin Sheppard back in the day, but she and his brother Troy were attached at the hip.

“Congratulations,” I say. “That’s amazing. You’ll have to tell him hi from me.”

“Absolutely I will. You know, I’m actually really glad you’re there. Maggie’s family is all out of town for Christmas, and I just feel weird having her up there without service for so long, even though she says it’s what she wants. Would you mind looking out for her a bit?”

“For sure.” I hesitate for a second. “Hey, do I know her too? She looked familiar, but I wasn’t sure why.”

“Yeah, you do. I’m not surprised you didn’t recognize her, though. She’s changed a lot.”

I rack my brain trying to figure out why the name Maggie isn’t ringing more bells.

“You probably remember her as Margot,” Stevie says.

My eyes widen. Margot. Margot Jensen. “Holy cow,” I say slowly.

“Yep. She likes to be called Maggie now.”

I wince. I can guess why. At some point, people realized how close Margot was to “maggot,” and . . . my stomach drops as memories of those school years flash across my mind. She was an easy target for picking on—frizzy hair, multiple rounds of braces, freckles, and always carrying a book to her chest. My friend Skye joked that it was super-glued there. Everyone thought Skye was so cool, including me, but looking back, he was just a jerk. And so was I.

“Anyway,” Stevie says, pulling me back to the present, “I’d super appreciate it if you’d look in on her regularly. I have

a feeling two weeks is going to feel a lot longer than she thought.”

“How regularly are we talking?”

“I wouldn’t say no to daily updates,” she says in a tone that tells me she knows she’s really reaching.

“Yeah . . . I’m thinking she might not love that.” I don’t remember much about my school days with Maggie, but I know how I feel looking back on them. I was a total punk. With my parents both being workaholics, I was desperate for attention and validation, even for a pre-teen. And when you’re a self-conscious kid, the easiest way to make yourself feel better is to make everyone else feel worse. The problem is, you can’t be that critical of others without secretly being that critical of yourself.

“You can blame it on me,” she suggests. “Or you could find excuses to check in—resort business or something.”

I sigh. Given that Maggie’s staying in Santa’s Haven, odds are I won’t need excuses.

“I sound like a crazy person, don’t I?” Stevie says. “Maggie is a very capable adult, I promise. It’s just, I’ve spent a Christmas alone, and I don’t want her to feel like I felt.”

“You don’t sound crazy,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck. “I can make sure she’s okay. Maybe not every day—I’m not trying to have a restraining order taken out against me—but I’ll definitely let you know if something’s wrong. How’s that?”

“Perfect,” she says. “You’re the best, Wes. I owe you.”

“I take cash or card,” I joke. “I’ll be in touch if needed, okay?”

I hang up the receiver and stare at Maggie’s name in the open guest log again. You’d think I’d feel more annoyed at being asked to make frequent visits to that cuckoo fest of a cabin, but I’m not. I thought learning Maggie’s identity would satisfy my curiosity, but I’m more intrigued than ever. She was really withdrawn when I knew her before, but she doesn’t

seem that way now—especially if her rendition of “All I Want for Christmas is You” is any indication.

I shut the guest book. At least for now, it seems like she’s embracing Christmas on her own.

I’ve got quite a bit of experience with that if she needs any pointers. Being at Crystal Peaks is much less of a disappointment than trying to make things work with my parents, though—even when it entails fishing wads of tangled hair from bathtub drains.

CHAPTER 5

MAGGIE

I scrub the last bits of my dinner off the cherubic Santa face on one of many kitschy plates in the cabin. The moment I arrived, it was obvious the cabin owners had gone all out on the Christmas theme, but time and again, I find myself surprised at the lengths they've gone to. For instance, the life-size plush Santa Claus that greets (or terrifies, in my case) you when you reach the top of the staircase. Or the elf-shaped soap dispenser in the bathroom—the soap comes out of his wide grin in a way that triggers my gag reflex.

It's really impressive. And yes, sometimes, slightly creepy when I'm reading a romantic scene from *Venetia* and suddenly feel eyes on me. So many elf eyes. I guess that's better than the human eyes I found watching me through the window this morning.

I put my dish on the drying rack—with a reindeer-themed mat beneath—and grab my laptop to head upstairs, trying not to dwell on the embarrassing start to my day.

Was there a moment on the porch with Wesley where I regretted my choice not to bring any makeup or hair tools?

Maybe.

But I'm past that now. What difference does it make if Wesley Warren sees me without mascara? I'm not trying to prove anything to him, and even if I were, the fact that he saw me jamming out in my pajamas to Christmas music all by myself has probably put me past redemption.

I reach the top of the stairs and flinch at the sight of the Santa mannequin. Gets me every time. Unlike last night when I fell asleep on the couch, laptop open, watching a Hallmark movie, tonight, I plan to sleep in a real bed.

There are two bedrooms upstairs, and I go for the first one. If I thought the living room area was full of elves, the bedroom takes things to a whole new level. In addition to five festive throw pillows with embroidered phrases like “Christmas begins in the heart,” a dozen plush elves of varying sizes and styles act as a welcoming committee to my bed.

Why do elves have such creepy, deer-in-the-headlights eyes? Why can't they look more like Buddy the Elf? Or, even better, Legolas?

I set my laptop down on the green and red quilt and start pulling the elves off one by one.

“Sorry, guys.” I set them on the dresser, which already boasts a large crocheted doily and six reindeer figurines. When I picture the people who decorated this cabin, my mind conjures a posse of twenty grandmas combining resources. It's the only explanation for the sheer volume of kitsch here.

I take the last elf and set him on the nightstand since there's no more room on the dresser. “It's nothing personal,” I explain. “You're cute, but not cute enough to share my bed.” Lies. They aren't cute. This one in particular is vintage-style with a porcelain face and taffeta clothes. With its sky-high eyebrows and one winking eye, it's one of the creepier ones.

I brush my teeth and change into my pajamas, then turn out the light and climb under the covers. The room even smells like a grandma, which is vaguely comforting. The blaze of outdoor lights and inflatables creeps through the edges of the curtain, illuminating the room and all the elves staring at me unblinkingly.

I shut my eyes. It truly never crossed my mind that a Christmas cabin could unsettle me, but here we are. My mind is conjuring terrifying visions of the Santa mannequin outside my door. Meanwhile, the elves in my room have lost all semblance of innocence.

It's impressive how many examples I can suddenly come up with of elves gone bad. *Lord of the Rings'* orcs, *Narnia's* elves serving the White Witch, Drow from *Dungeons and Dragons*, Kreature from *Harry Potter*.

And this is why I almost exclusively read romance. Stevie can say what she wants about my Regencies not being Christmassy, but at least they've never given me nightmares like these elves may.



When I wake in the morning, the elf on my bedside table has tipped over onto his back, forming a bridge between the nightstand and my bed. His one open eye—so open I worry for his ocular health—stares up at me, and I shudder before setting him face down on the table.

I'm determined not to spend an inordinate amount of time in my pajamas today. It has nothing to do with Wesley and everything to do with brain science. Dressing for productivity makes you act more productively, and I have a *lot* of books and movies to finish. And my accounting classes, of course, but most of what's in those is stuff I already know.

Wesley's comment yesterday about me making managing partner at Quillen kind of sent me in a spiral of life-plan questioning. I don't regret studying accounting, but sometimes I wish I got to do more than sit at a computer and make headway toward a future of carpal tunnel syndrome. Are there accounting jobs on yachts? It'd sure be great to look up from Quickbooks and see something prettier than a gray cubicle.

After a quick shower, I get dressed and head downstairs for some breakfast. My groceries here consist of whatever was on sale at Costco the day before I left, so the most important meal of the day ends up being plain Greek yogurt and pumpkin seed granola. The cupboards here weren't completely empty, though, and they seem to house a collection of whatever past guests bought and couldn't use—honey, hot chocolate, popcorn, a lifetime supply of cheap salt and pepper

shakers, and the like. I'm pleased as punch because, while I planned to get both popcorn and hot chocolate at Costco, neither was on sale, and it seemed irresponsible to spend twenty dollars on hot chocolate or to buy forty-four bags of popcorn.

There's a sudden knock on the door, and I freeze amidst my rifling through the cabinets. At home, if someone knocks on my door, I ignore it. Any half-decent person knows to text rather than show up at someone's house or—I shudder—call. It's only aggressive salesmen who ring doorbells and knock on doors at this point, and I am a major pushover, so I avoid them at all costs.

But I don't think salesmen are a fixture at Crystal Peaks, and texting isn't even possible here.

I glance down at what I'm wearing, double-checking that I did, in fact, put on semi-regular clothes. I didn't precisely pack in expectation of having company, though, so sweats will have to do. It's a step up from Long Johns. I think.

What if it's Wesley?

My pulse ticks up a notch, and I feel a twinge of anticipation.

"Don't be stupid," I mutter. I've always told myself I wouldn't go through life with a chip on my shoulder, that I wouldn't dwell on the things people said and did to me in the tumultuous years of our youth, but getting *excited* to see Wesley Warren goes well beyond forgiveness and crosses into pitiful territory.

"He called you Maggot, Maggie. People aren't excited to see maggots."

I also don't even know if it's him. I head for the window and use a finger to nudge the curtain to the side.

Yep, it's him, looking like a tall glass of water. Or ice, given the temperature outside.

His gaze flicks to me, and he waves.

I snap the curtain shut. Why, oh why, must I always make such a complete fool of myself? Why couldn't he pop into Quillen and see me all put together? My speed on the ten-key would amaze him.

Reluctantly, I open the door, and a burst of frigid air sweeps inside, making me involuntarily shudder.

"Hey," he says with a big smile.

"Hi." I infuse my tone with a heavy dose of *what are you doing here again?* "If you're here for the money, I still haven't made managing partner."

He laughs, and I'm grateful ten-year-old me was never subjected to the full dazzle of the grown-up Wesley Warren smile. The poor girl would have been blinded by it. Thankfully, I've also grown up and am entirely unaffected.

"Actually, I just came to check on you," he says.

I cock a brow. "Did Stevie put you up to this?"

He tips his head from side to side. "She may be *partially* to blame."

So, he knows Stevie's not a man now. "And what or who else gets the rest of the blame?"

"Me," he says. "I realized we know each other."

If I was a cat, my back would be arched and my hackles raised. "Really?"

"Yeah." He scans my face like he's trying to find traces of the me he used to know. There should be plenty there. I'm different, sure, but I'm not *that* different.

"From elementary and junior high." He puts a hand to his chest. "Wes Warren."

I furrow my brow like the name isn't ringing a bell. "Wes Warren. Wes Wa—oh! Yeah. I think I do remember you." Why haven't I been scouted by the best agents in the country for my acting skills?

The smirkiness to his smile might be a good indicator why. He sees right through me. Dang those perceptive and

delicious brown eyes. “You’re Maggie Jensen, right?”

Maggie. He didn’t call me Margot. Or Maggot, for that matter. I didn’t go by Maggie until after high school, so either he remembers my name from yesterday or . . . Stevie. “That’s me,” I say with a shoulder bounce.

“I *knew* I recognized you,” he says, smiling like we have all sorts of happy memories together. “I should’ve realized it was from school—Crystal Peaks seems to be a popular place for people from that area.”

“Really?” I had hoped I was venturing far enough to be entirely amongst strangers, but clearly that idea’s a bust. Maybe I should have realized that. There aren’t a ton of options in Southern California for a white Christmas.

“Yeah,” he says. “In fact . . . do you remember Brielle Blake?”

I suppress a scoff. Do I *remember* her? She was the Regina George of our school. She was the one who pointed out how fitting my nickname was because she thought my wavy hair resembled maggots. How could I ever forget her?

I frown again, narrowing my eyes like I’m having trouble picturing her. I put my hand to my shoulder level. “Short redhead?” Okay, so maybe I do have a chip on my shoulder. Just a little nick.

Wes’s mouth pulls up in a half-smile. He’s totally on to me. “Close,” he says. “Tall blonde. Anyway, she’s in Cabin 8.” He jabs his finger over his shoulder toward the cabin kitty-corner from mine. I can just see one edge of it through the snow-covered trees.

Oh, joy.

I force a smile. “It’s like a good ol’ Hillside reunion up here, isn’t it?” If ever I needed another reason to stay holed up in this cabin for the next two weeks, Wes just handed it to me on a platter.

A gust of wind blows the top layer of snow like I imagine happening in Siberia, and the enormous porch ornaments shift

dangerously. Wes whips around to steady them, then turns back to me.

“Listen, Wes,” I say, “You really don’t need to check on me. I’m totally fine here—capable adult and all that.” The poor cabin will be as cold as a refrigerator by the time I shut this door, but I can’t bring myself to invite him in.

“I have no doubt at all about that,” he says. “But, a word to the wise coming from someone with way more experience with this cabin than I ever wanted? Things tend to go wrong here. A lot. So, I may well be back.”

Things tend to go wrong here.

My mind shoots to Santa and my elf friends inside, wondering whether there have been any incidents of them coming to life à la *Toy Story*. But since I already have years of my childhood *and* a smashing performance of “All I Want for Christmas is You” flashing a big WEIRDO sign over my head, I’m not going to ask. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. There’s really no need to trouble you. You have a bunch of other more important things to do, I’m sure.”

The side of his mouth creeps up again, and that settles it: he’s not allowed to return here, no matter how dire circumstances are. That half-smile is dangerous.

“All right. Whatever you say.” He turns away but glances over his shoulder. “I’ll make sure not to expect any calls from you, then.”

I wave cheerily. “Sounds good.”

I shut the door with verve. I will absolutely not be calling reception, even if I have to singlehandedly fight off every last holiday creature in this resort.

CHAPTER 6

MAGGIE

It had to be done. After yet another near heart attack when I woke up in the night to use the bathroom, it was the only option.

I place the last—I sincerely hope—of Santa’s Haven’s many, many elf figurines on the floor in the corner of the living room, right in front of the Christmas tree. It’s fake. I checked. You’d never know it, though, because an ornament adorns and obscures every single branch.

There are fifty-two elves, all told, and, yes, their presence in the living room is overwhelming, but at least my bedroom is free of them. I tried to find a closet they could fit in, but the two options are both stuffed full of décor and linens and such. Tonight, I will sleep *very* well and not think even a little about how they might be conspiring together . . .

This is what comes of reading too much fiction: a ridiculously overactive imagination.

Despite that, I’m proud to check another goal off the list: one full day without any mishaps requiring intervention from Wesley Warren. True to my request, he didn’t show up at the door, either, which is exactly what I wanted and not at all why I’ve glanced toward it fifty times since I woke up this morning.

Now with night nearly here, there’s just one last thing to make the cabin purge complete.

I turn and look at the top of the stairs, where Santa stands, overlooking his kingdom. I love Santa Claus as much as the

next person—probably more, actually—but the whole giving, grandfatherly, jolly-old-man-with-a-belly-that-shakes-like-a-bowl-full-of-jelly persona is conspicuously absent when it's 2 a.m. and you run into him while zombying your way to the bathroom.

I head up the staircase and confront Santa head-on.

“Look, Nick, I'm really sorry about this.” I put a hand under each armpit to test his weight. “Oof.” Heavier than I thought, but not unmanageable. “I promise I'll put you back before I leave, okay?”

I wrap my arms around his large abdomen and lift, shuffling my way toward the stairs. I heft the platform he stands on over the edge of the top stair and make my way down carefully. The last thing I want is to have to call Wes to ask for help because I threw out my back doing this. How would I even explain what I was doing?

I grunt as we make our way down. “Maybe think about giving Dasher and Dancer the cookies this year.” There's a close call about midway down, but ultimately, Father Christmas and I manage the trek without mishap.

It's only when I've set him down amidst his minion elves that I realize he's plug-in-able. I'm slightly hesitant to do it, but curiosity overwhelms caution, and I pull the end of the cord to the closest socket and plug it in.

There's a split-second where Santa's hips and arms move to the beginning of a promisingly generic Christmas song, but it all stops as soon as it started.

The entire room goes dark.

“Whoa.” I look all around as though I'll find an answer to what just happened, but I think I already know.

I unplug Santa, hoping by some miracle the lights will come back on. They don't.

I get up and pick my way through the furniture to the light switches. Flipping them does nothing, not that I thought it would. Electric Santa must have overloaded the circuit, and now the breaker's tripped. Based on the way the blinding

lights from outside illuminate the edges of the red and green plaid curtains on all the windows, I haven't fixed the entire circuit board. Silver lining.

I glance at the black telephone sitting on the side table nearby.

Nope. Not calling reception.

It's not hard to flip a breaker. I just have to find the box. Shouldn't be too difficult. It's probably in the utility room.

It's not. And it *is* hard to find, largely because there's not a bare square foot of wall in this entire cabin. Using my phone flashlight, I check everywhere it could feasibly be, every closet and cupboard in the cabin, every unlikely nook and cranny, but alas. It's better hidden than the Ark of the Covenant in *Indiana Jones*.

I blow a breath through my lips as my flashlight illuminates the phone again.

Maybe I *should* call. It's not like it's a big deal. It's a resort issue, and they should fix it. All I have to do is ask where the breaker box is. But part of me really wants to be as capable as I assured Wes I would be.

I hesitate, staring at the phone.

Who says it'll be Wes who picks up, anyway? If he's assistant manager, he's not the only employee at Crystal Peaks. Maybe that grumpy old man will answer.

Knowing my luck, though, it'll be Wes.

Have I really checked thoroughly, though? I haven't looked outside. Maybe they keep the box out there so the resort employees can have access to it without having to disturb the guests?

It's worth a shot.

I pull on the only boots I brought. They're Ugg style but not Ugg brand because how can I help my clients make wise financial choices while paying hundreds of dollars myself for wannabe mukluks? How this type of boot gained notoriety for being winter footwear beats me. They're more like a winter

fashion statement, and that statement is “I will absorb every flake of snow on this mountain into my fake sheepskin lining if you dare trudge through the snow in me.”

But since it's these or my running shoes, I have no choice but to dare.

CHAPTER 7

WESLEY

I tighten up the screw on the leg of Cabin 8's porch table. No one ever uses it—there aren't even chairs out here anymore—but I got a call about an urgent maintenance issue here, so here I am at 8 o'clock in the evening. Heaven forbid this table not be in shipshape for . . . literally no reason at all.

“All done,” I say, pulling on the leg of the table to demonstrate its stability.

“You're amazing,” Brielle says as I stand up and glance over at Santa's Haven.

I haven't made a visit there today—I don't want to ignore what Maggie said about me not needing to come. I'd genuinely like to be her friend, but I can't blame her for not wanting that. Thanks to my having been such a jerkwad to her in my younger days, I don't feel like I can be too persistent.

Brielle chafes her arms and glances at my coat like she's hoping I'll offer it.

“You should get inside,” I say with as much casual chivalry and as little rudeness as possible. “It's cold out here.” I really didn't need supervision to tighten a screw anyway.

“We were just about to put on a movie. You should come watch.”

The amount of light coming from Santa's Haven suddenly diminishes significantly, and I narrow my eyes. There's no way Maggie could have turned off all those lights in one fell swoop.

“That’s really nice of you,” I say, “but I should go check on things at Santa’s Haven.”

“You think something’s wrong?” she asks, following my gaze.

“I do.” A man can hope. “Maybe a breaker or a fuse or something.” That place’s electrical circuits are operating at 99.9% capacity at night.

I haven’t told Brielle that Maggie’s staying there. I don’t think I will. Given some of her comments, Brielle doesn’t seem all that different from when we were younger, and I don’t know that I can trust her to be nice if she figures out who Maggie is.

“I’ll come with you,” Brielle says. “I could use some fresh air.” Given the chattering of her teeth while she says that, somehow I doubt it.

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” I say. “Don’t want your family to have to wait to start the movie.”

She waves the comment away with a hand, following me. “They’ll start without me. It’s no problem. Should we take the snowmobile?”

“No,” I say immediately. “It’s so close.” Says the man who rode it the twenty feet between reception and my cabin earlier today. I just don’t want to deal with Brielle’s arms wrapped around me—and definitely not if there’s any chance we’ll see Maggie.

I don’t want Brielle to come at all, but Bill’s words about being able to handle this sort of scenario have been haunting me, and I don’t know how to tell her not to come without being rude. I don’t think she’ll recognize Maggie, so at least that’s not a factor. Brielle and I begin our walk toward Santa’s Haven.

Just then, I catch a glimpse of Maggie going down the steps from the porch.

“Aw,” Brielle says, “that poor little grandma shouldn’t be going outside when it’s so dark and slippery.”

It looks like Maggie is wearing a bathrobe, but other than that, she doesn't look at all like a grandma. I'm tempted to tell Brielle that Maggie first described *her* as a "short redhead," but, again, I can't afford to jeopardize things with the Blakes, and I sense Brielle wouldn't love that description of herself. She likes to wear things that accentuate her long legs. Like short towels.

"Hey!" I call to Maggie before she can disappear around the side of the cabin. What's she doing?

Thigh-deep in snow, she stops and turns toward us as we get to the sidewalk that leads up to her cabin. Her eyes widen, shifting from me to Brielle and back.

"Everything okay?" I ask. "I saw the lights go off a few minutes ago."

"Yep!" She calls over, hiking her leg up to take her next step like she's doing high knees. She holds up her bathrobe like a queen might hold up her poofy skirts. "Totally fine!"

I suppress a smile and turn to Brielle. "I'm going to go check on her." Before she can decide whether to come along, I hop into the high snow, dodging the huge inflatables until I come up behind Maggie. She's looking up at the outer walls of the cabin.

"Looking for something?"

"What? No. Just . . . admiring the lights."

I smile. "Uh huh."

She wriggles under my gaze.

"Whatever you need, I can help you with it," I say.

She hesitates for a second, her eyes flitting back to Brielle. "Everything's fine. Really."

"You just thought a bathrobe and"—I crane my neck to peek into the deep holes where her feet are—"fluffy, calf-high house slippers were good gear for trekking through waist-deep snow to admire the lights?"

“This thing is a lot warmer than it looks,” she says, wrapping her robe more tightly around her. “Anyway, you probably shouldn’t leave your . . .” Her eyes skip to Brielle again, and she waves at us.

Was she about to say *date*?

Maggie waves with a polite smile and resumes her odyssey through the snow. I grab her arm. “Hey.”

She turns, her gaze fixing on mine.

“Please let me help.” It’s straight up begging. There’s no other way to describe it.

Her brows pull together. “I just need to know where the breaker box is.” Her gaze dips to my hand on her arm, and I let go immediately.

“An electrical problem. Sounds like a super serious issue.”

Her smile is half-amused, half-confused. It suits her. “Not really. Like I said, I just need to know where the breaker box is.”

“Hold on just a second.” I wait until she gives a reluctant nod, then I retrace my tracks back to Brielle.

“I’m going to have to stick around and help out,” I say, trying to sound disappointed. “Electrical issues.”

“Oh,” she says. “Okay.”

“Are you okay getting back to the cabin on your own?” It’s not really a question. More of a subtle invitation for her to head out.

“Um, yeah. You should come over once you’re done—the movie will still be going.”

I glance at my watch, not even noting the time. “I’m actually not allowed in the cabins after 9 p.m. unless it’s for a maintenance emergency.” I grimace, secretly blessing Bill’s strict employee handbook. “Crystal Peaks policy.”

She smiles and lifts a shoulder. “We’ll start earlier next time.”

Oh, boy. “Have a good night, Brielle.”

When I turn back to Maggie, she’s gone. I chuckle. Stubborn little thing. I probably should have told her the breaker box isn’t located outside, but I didn’t want her to go inside and lock me out with Brielle.

I sprint through the snow—a slow motion, high-knee sprint—and around the cabin until I find Maggie.

“Thought you said you’d hold on a sec,” I say, admiring the way the symphony of colors from the lights plays on the waves of the hair under her beanie.

“I did,” she says, continuing her surveyal of the cabin walls. “You took longer than one second.”

I chuckle as I take the last few elephant steps toward her. “Next time, I’ll be more precise in the contract terms.”

Her gaze lands on the gray metal box on the side of the cabin, and her mouth pulls into a victorious smile. She trudges over to it, peering around the side that houses the meter.

“You thinking about leaving accounting for a job reading electrical meters?” I ask. “Or do you just love numbers that much?”

She drops her hand from her attempts to pry the box open and turns on me with a frown. “Are the breakers not with the meter?”

I shake my head, enjoying myself too much, partially because I’m so relieved to have been given such an enjoyable out from the awkward invitation from Brielle. To be fair, there’s no way Maggie was going to find the breaker box without some guidance.

“Are you planning on telling me *where* the breaker box is?”

“I’ll do you one better—I’ll show you. Come on.” I jerk my head back the way we came.

She follows behind, each step making that familiar crunching sound I love so much. “You can just tell me, you know. I don’t want to interrupt your evening plans.” The slight

pause before the last two words has me glancing back at her. Does she really think she pulled me out of a date?

“You did me a favor.” I push the blow-up reindeer to make room for us to walk between it and the gingerbread man.

“What do you mean?”

We reach the stairs, and I wait to respond until I get to the top and can face Maggie. “I’ve been called to the Blakes’ cabin every day since they arrived for some maintenance issue or other. Want to know what tonight’s urgent problem was?”

She waits for me to continue.

“A loose screw on the porch table. That no one uses.”

“Ah. That kind of emergency.”

“Yeah.”

She grimaces with sympathy as she turns toward the front door. Definitely false sympathy. “Must be rough having beautiful women knocking down your door and making excuses to see you.”

“While *other* beautiful women refuse to even call for help when their electricity shuts off.”

She slows her reach for the doorknob.

Oops. I think I overstepped. I grab the doorknob and pull the door open for her. “You could’ve just called reception, you know. Bill would’ve radioed me to come help you.”

“I didn’t think it’d be necessary,” she says, passing by me more quickly than needed. “I wasn’t expecting that finding the breaker box would be a *National Treasure* situation.”

I chuckle as I pull out my phone and turn on the flashlight, leading the way to the short hallway where the maintenance room is located.

“I looked in there,” she says.

“Well, that was your first mistake.” I pass by the door and stop in front of a painting of the North Pole à la Thomas Kinkade. “Nothing is as it seems at Santa’s Haven.”

CHAPTER 8

MAGGIE

I can't help sending a glance at the mass of elves in the living room. With it being so dark inside, and given the way the flashlight is casting weird shadows over Wes's face, I officially have the creeps.

"Would you mind holding this for a second?" he asks, handing me his phone.

I go to take it, but he pulls it back. "Let me rephrase that. Would you mind holding this *until I'm ready to take it back*? I don't want you to drop it on the floor after exactly one second."

I smile. "Yes. I agree to the terms."

His amused gaze meets mine, and there's a little crackle of something between us. Something a lot like attraction—at least on my end. Probably just the embers of my childhood crush. Easy enough to stamp out.

I grab the phone, and he turns toward the painting, lifts the frame, and pulls it away from the wall, revealing a shiny, metal box behind. "Can't believe you didn't find this . . ." He winks at me as he sets down the painting.

"What in the world?"

"Same thing I say every time I come to this place." He opens the box, revealing two rows of black switches. "Apparently, when they built the cabin, the electrician put the box on this side of the wall instead of the utility room side. It just never got fixed." He puts his hand on the only switch that's flipped down and flips it back up.

The cabin fills with light, reminding me suddenly—and very unnecessarily, I might add—how beautiful Wesley Warren is from close up. I never doubted he would be a beautiful adult, but what I hadn't factored in was this mountain man stubble he's sporting. It draws attention to his mouth and jaw in a way that makes it a tiny bit hard to convince myself my attraction is fully in the past.

Which it is. What kind of idiot would let herself be attracted to someone who made fun of her when she was younger?

“Well, thank you,” I say, picking up the painting as he closes the electrical box.

“My pleasure. It's certainly not the first time a breaker has tripped, and it won't be the last. Like I said, things tend to go wrong here.”

Wrong. I'm familiar with wrong. The way I can't stop looking at Wes, for example. That's wrong. And how I kind of don't want him to leave. Which is why he needs to.

Urgently.

Wes and I aren't the same, and if I'm not careful, my heart will convince itself of our similarities—just like my heart is convinced that, if I lived in 1815, I'd be like one of the heroines in Georgette Heyer's romances, when in reality, I'd be scrubbing their chamber pots.

I'm pretty sure he called me beautiful a few minutes ago, but that's just the type of guy he is. He's a charmer. To him, flirting is like breathing. It's why he has women like Brielle Blake making up excuses to see him, whereas *I* had my first real boyfriend only last year—for a grand total of four weeks, complete with a Christmas breakup.

Yay.

The point is, these things don't come easily for me, but it seems like Wes Warren has had friendships and women and life in general all handed to him on a platter.

“Well,” I say, placing the picture on its hanger, “now that I know where the secret breaker box is, you won't have to worry

if I trip another circuit. *And*, I promise not to call you to tighten any screws.” I shift the picture until it’s straight, then turn to find him watching me.

“I wouldn’t mind if you did,” he says.

My heart starts tap dancing in my chest. He *cannot* say things like that to me. I look down to avoid those chocolatey eyes. My history with real chocolate is dangerous enough.

“Well, I won’t,” I say with a smile. “There’s got to be a screwdriver somewhere in this cabin, right? One with a candy cane handle or something?”

He laughs, and I turn away before the image is emblazoned on my mind forever.

Too late.

I lead the way toward the door, but when I get there, Wes isn’t following. He’s stopped short at the edge of the living room, wide-eyed.

I follow his gaze.

He folds his arms across his chest and brings a pensive finger to his lips. “Um . . . what?”

It was dark when we came in, so I had kind of forgotten what started this whole fiasco in the first place—my need to congregate all the elves and the life-size Santa in a less threatening part of the cabin.

How precisely do I explain this to him?

“Oh . . . yeah, that’s just . . .” Nope. I’ve got nothing. Any explanation is going to harm whatever sanity I might creditably claim at this point, which is already very little.

“You carried Santa all the way down here?”

“Every time I went upstairs, he caught me off guard,” I defend.

A look of comprehension dawns on his face as he looks over at the elves again. “Ahhh, okay. I get it now. You were scared of Santa and his elves.”

I scoff. “What? *No*. I’m not scared of Christmas elves or Santa Claus. That would be crazy.” Then again, so would be gathering all of these stuffed creatures for any other reason.

He shakes his head and walks over to the assembly of elves. “It really wouldn’t. This place has always given me the heebie-jeebies.”

“*Right?!?*” I clear my throat. “I mean, what? That’s weird. It’s completely cozy and magical and—”

He picks up one of the elves in the middle of the group. “Terrifying. Just look at this thing.” He turns it toward me, displaying the huge, haunting eyes.

“He’s . . . cute.” The last word sounds strangled, possibly because I can picture that elf strangling either one of us. For some reason, I feel the need to defend this place and its Christmassyness. Maybe because I need to believe it’s harmless to preserve my own sanity. How can I possibly stay here for another week and a half otherwise?

“Cute? No.” He looks at the elf again. “When you see this guy, you believe 100% that he knows if you’ve been bad or good.” He turns it back to me again. “Those eyes can see into your soul. And turn it black like his.” He puts it closer to my face, and I stumble backward to avoid it.

“*You better watch out,*” he sings, and I can’t help laughing as I cover my face and walk backwards. “Not so cute now, is it?” He tosses it with the others, then frowns. “I don’t know, Maggie. Having them all together might be worse than having them all over the house.”

He might be right, but I won’t admit that to him. I’ve posted a flag in the territory called Don’t Make Anything Easy on Wes. “It’s very festive.”

“Whereas the cabin was really hurting in that department before?” He looks around the room and shakes his head.

“You really don’t like this place, do you? What’ve you got against it?”

“How much time do you have?” He starts ticking things off on his fingers. “The constant replacing of bulbs, the wacky

electrical issues that come up from having every circuit at capacity, the sheer creepiness of a lot of the decorations, the quirky things the owners insist on, the weird people that book it.”

I’ve come a long way since junior high, but my cheeks will betray me until the day I die. They certainly are right now.

His gaze darts to me. “Not you. I didn’t mean you. You’re the first normal guest we’ve had in . . . ever.”

Nice attempted save. I smile, but those words—*the weird people that book it*—are on a loop in my head. He’s right. I *am* weird. Always have been. Probably always will be. I’ll be sixty-five, surrounded by cats and historical romances.

Wes, on the other hand, will probably look like George Clooney—and his wife will have the looks and resume of Amal Clooney. I move toward the front door.

“Thanks again for the help,” I say, opening the door and letting the cold air burst through.

“Yeah, of course.” A little bit of Wes’s charisma has slipped, and there’s the slightest *v* between his brows as he walks over. He stops in front of me, and I drop my gaze. I can feel him looking at me, though, waiting for me to meet his eyes.

I won’t. I can’t. I’ve got this knot in my throat that not even Popeye could untie. If I look at Wes, my eyes will start burning, and I absolutely cannot lose my cool in front of him. It’s the type of thing I’ve worked so hard to get past as an adult. I’m not the fragile kid I was when everyone called me Maggot and used the end of their pencils to flip my hair as they passed.

I’m an adult woman with a degree, a good job, and a lot of romances waiting to be read. The men in those never call me weird or liken me to fly larvae. They bow to women and rescue them from highwaymen and fight duels for their honor. They were nothing like Wes Warren.

“Let me know if you find any loose screws,” Wes says, his voice softer than usual. “Good night, Maggie.”

In a rush of delicious cologne, he sweeps past me and out into the blazing Christmas light display.

CHAPTER 9

WESLEY

“Slopes’ll be empty tomorrow,” Bill says as he comes into the front desk area.

I shut the account book as inconspicuously as I can and set it on the shelf under the counter. I’m not doing anything wrong looking at the financials of Crystal Peaks, but I don’t want Bill to feel like I’m judging how he’s handled things.

Though, to be honest, I *am* judging him a little. I’m no Dave Ramsey, but the records are a big, fat mess, and we’re just scraping by. His wife—may she rest in peace—had more of a head for business, and he’s been doing his best for the past five years without her.

“Why’s that?” I ask. Even when we get dumped on, there are always a few adventurous people wanting to take advantage of the fresh powder.

“Big windstorm coming our way. Big enough I need you to go warn the cabins.”

“Can’t we just call them?”

He shakes his head. “We need to do a physical check on each one to make sure there’s nothing that’s in danger—secure things down.”

I stare at him. “And what about Santa’s Haven?”

He grimaces. “The winds are supposed to be up to sixty miles per hour. The inflatables have to be deflated and stored. I’m not replacing any more of those.”

I'm only partly exasperated at the news, since it means I get to see Maggie. Not that I think she'll be excited to see *me* thanks to my stupid comment last night. I might as well have called her a complete freak. Seeing her face fall made me feel like a massive jerk. "When's the storm supposed to blow in?"

"It'll start in a couple of hours. Should be at its worst around nine tonight."

"We've got to get moving, then."

He nods, and we stare at each other, both thinking the same thing: who's going to do Cabin 8? Who's going to do Santa's Haven?

"I'll do one through five," Bill says, "you do six through ten?"

I give a scoffing laugh. "Gee, thanks, Bill. Like I don't spend enough time at eight as it is."

"Fine. I'll throw in eight with mine if you do Santa's Haven."

I smack my fist on the desk. "Done." I'm getting the better end of the deal, even with all the extra work. "Let's get to it."

I gather up my tools and pull on my winter gear. It's already breezy outside, and it's only going to get worse. Mounted atop my trusty motorized steed, I make quick stops at six, seven, and nine. At two of the three, no one answers. They're probably skiing. Given how much wind is rolling in, though, they'll be closing down the slopes soon here due to avalanche danger.

I do an inspection of the cabin exteriors, taking my hammer to a couple of loose boards the wind might catch and pull at, putting any chairs and tables on front and back porches in places they won't blow away or end up flying into a window.

Once that's done, I hop back on the snowmobile and make my way to Santa's Haven, suppressing a sigh at the sight of all the inflatables swaying in the gathering wind. It's ridiculous how much extra work we do for that cabin—definitely doesn't feel worth the extra money they pay.

I hop off the snowmobile and run to the side of the cabin where we keep the heavy-duty storage chest with storage bags. I have to use my arm to brush a couple feet of snow from the top of the chest. Ice has formed around the lid, so I grab my screwdriver to chip away at it until it finally budes.

With the bags in hand, I get to work, going around to each inflatable and flipping each switch until the entire front yard of Santa's Haven looks like a Christmas massacre. I pick up the limp head of the Frosty the Snowman inflatable. "Told you I'd get you someday."

"You really hate this place."

My head jerks up. Maggie's on the porch, looking around at the destruction.

"It's not what it looks like," I say, standing up straight and putting my hands up. I take a step backward. "It's for their own good."

Her mouth quirks up on one side, and I feel the twinge of victory. She *doesn't* hate me. Probably.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"Saving them from being blown to Colorado. We've got a windstorm coming in hot." I pause. "But actually really cold."

"Yeah, I can feel that." She chafes her arms, and a little gust sweeps at the lifeless edges of the inflatables, which are all staked down, thankfully. "Do you need some help?"

"Nah," I say, reaching for a couple of the closest inflatables as it happens again. One flaps up and smacks me in the face.

Awesome.

Maggie hurries down the stairs and comes to my aid, helping me fold up Frosty. "Maybe if you didn't talk about the cabin the way you do, it wouldn't treat you the way it does."

"Or maybe I talk about it the way I do *because* it treats me the way it does. Ever thought about that?"

She brings her side of the inflatable to me, then reaches for a bag.

“Not your first rodeo?” I ask. She seems to know what she’s doing.

“We had a couple we put up every year.” She opens the drawstring for me to set the inflatable inside. “So, this windstorm . . . how bad are we talking?”

“Intense,” I say, setting the bag down and moving to the next one. “They say to expect sixty miles per hour winds. If they’re right, it’ll be worse than anything I’ve had while I’ve been here.”

“Whoa.”

I glance at her as we pull out the stakes on the gingerbread man. Under her beanie, her hair is in two braids that reach her chest. Her cheeks and nose are pink, making her freckles look different than usual. I don’t have any freckles, nor have I met many people with them. Hers are cute.

“Yeah, we’re in for a night of howling wind and creaking wood,” I say, refocusing my efforts.

“I hate those sounds. Always terrified me when I was little.”

“Me too.” I suppress an involuntary shudder and set the inflatable inside the storage bag.

She smiles, and I’m momentarily distracted by her eyes. I knew they were dark brown, but the bright snow surrounding us reflects enough light to reveal a ring of gold just around the dark center.

“Did you climb in bed with your parents like I did with mine?”

It takes me a second to register what she asked. “What? Oh. No. They weren’t big on that sort of thing. They both worked long hours, and their sleep was sacred.”

We move to the next inflatable—Santa being chased up the tree by a dog. “And what about *your* sleep?”

I shrug, remembering more than a few nights where I stared at the ceiling, covers pulled up to my chin, listening to the howling. “I think they figured the only way for me to get over my fear was to face it head-on.”

We take opposite ends of the inflatable and pull it taut, then fold it. “Did it work?”

I smile. “You trying to get me to admit I’m scared of wind, Maggie?”

We walk toward each other, and she gives her folded ends to me, our fingers grazing in the process. “Are you?” She holds my gaze.

I hesitate for a second, trying to decide whether to be honest or keep my pride intact. I don’t like dwelling on unpleasant things, but if I want Maggie to feel safe with me despite what a jerk I was to her in the past, I have to be willing to give a little. “Maybe a little bit sometimes.”

Her gaze stays on me for another second, then she bends to pick up the bag. “Me too.”

I keep my eyes on her, wondering how she feels about being alone in the cabin with the big storm rolling in. Part of me wants to offer to stay with her, but the other part of me realizes that’s crazy and she’d never say yes.

I kind of want to apologize for what I said last night—not just for that, though. I want to apologize for what a punk I was to her, for how everyone treated her. But maybe she doesn’t want to talk about those days. Maybe she wants to move on. That, I can definitely understand.

A gust blows through, and we both scramble to keep the inflatable from becoming a parachute.

“Hey, is there any way I can call Stevie?” she asks. “I have a feeling she’ll be worrying about me. I guarantee she’s checked the forecast.”

“Of course. You can use the phone at reception.”

“Thanks. That’d be great.”

It takes another thirty minutes to finish the rest of the inflatables, but despite my suggestion that she let me finish up on my own, Maggie sticks through it. We set the bags of inflatables in the storage box and do a quick once-around of the cabin to check for any other problems. There's one gaping problem sitting on the roof—ten of them, actually. Santa's sled and his reindeer. They've been known to come loose even without massive windstorms. It's so common, I keep the resort's big ladder at Santa's Haven.

"Let's go make your call." I lead the way to the snowmobile and swing my leg over, then put a hand out.

She stays where she is, a few feet away. "Oh, I can just walk. Or drive my car."

"Don't be silly." I gesture to her to come. "It's way faster *and* more fun."

She rubs her lips together, hesitating.

"Are you scared?"

"What? No, I just . . ."

I raise my brows, waiting.

"Okay, fine." She doesn't take my hand, though, and I smile slightly, then drop it. She trudges over, and I scoot up on the seat, making more room for her behind me. She climbs on, and I watch out of the corner of my eye as she tries to decide what to do with her hands. The most obvious option is to hold onto *me*, but if she wouldn't take my hand to help her on, there's no way she's wrapping her arms around me.

"Um . . . where do I hold on?" she asks.

I look straight forward so she doesn't see my amused smile. "I'm probably your best bet."

There's a pause. "And the second best?"

I chuckle softly. "Grabbing the back of the seat."

She reaches behind her and curls her fingers around it.

"Probably should put your hood on," I say as I start up the engine. I wait until she's pulled her hood over her head before

giving the snowmobile any gas, turning us back toward reception. I can feel her weight shifting uncertainly behind me, trying to counter the force of the turn while keeping her seat.

“You good?” I ask as we straighten out. “You can always grab onto me if needed.”

“I should be good now.”

“Whatever you say,” I say under my breath. “Here we go.” Gently, I give it gas, and we pull forward. I don’t think she realizes what she’s in for.

The ground isn’t even, and that becomes abundantly clear very quickly. I’m not *trying* to make the ride bumpier, but I’m also not too eager to make it easy. That would mean going three miles per hour, and then we might as well walk. I told her I’d get her to reception faster, and I’m a man of my word.

I’m also a man who has a constant spray of windswept snow pelting his face. It’s . . . refreshing.

We go over a bigger bump, and Maggie’s arms snap around me, her head burrowing in my back.

“Are you using me as a human shield, Maggie?” I yell back to her, my mouth stretched in a full grin as I blink to see through the frigid air and snow. It’s a good thing I know this resort like the back of my hand; I can barely see.

“Maybe.” The word is muffled into my coat, but I can hear her smile despite that.

Satisfied she’s not going to fall off, I kick up our speed. Her grip tightens around me as we hit bump after bump, and with each one, she lets out a burst of laughter. I’m bummed we don’t have a mile to go on the snowmobile so I can hear it again and again.

But we’re nearing reception, so I slow down and kill the engine.

Maggie drops her arms.

“You survived,” I say as I turn to look at her. She hasn’t pulled back all the way yet, bringing our faces suddenly a lot

closer than I'd planned. I could count every one of her freckles if she'd let me. Her mouth is stretched in a contagious smile.

But she pulls back and brushes some errant, curly hair from her forehead. "Despite your best efforts?"

"Hey, I go a lot faster than that when I'm on here by myself."

"So, you were going easy on me?"

"If I'd gone any slower, we might have started going backwards." Am I taunting her to get her to ask me to go faster on the way back so she'll hold me even tighter and do more of those adorable laughs? Who's to say?

"Right," she says. "That was obvious from the ten times I almost flew off." She looks around and sighs. "It's kind of nice right here."

The side of the reception cabin shields us from the gathering wind, making a little peaceful pocket that I'm also reluctant to leave. There's always a big draft of freezing air at the door of reception.

But even if we can't feel the wind, we can hear it and see it blowing the top layer of snow, making the hills we went over one layer higher every couple minutes. I've still got to strap down Santa's sled and reindeer before the worst of it blows through.

"Brace yourself," I say as we get off.

As we hurry as fast as the deep snow will let us, I impulsively want to grab her hand. I don't, but I log away the feeling for inspection later. I haven't held someone's hand in . . . years. Haven't wanted to.

Bill is inside, and he looks up from the desk as we enter, breathing quickly. Walking through deep snow could be an Olympic sport. His brow furrows slightly at the sight of us.

"Hey, Bill," I say, eager to erase the hint of suspicion in his expression. "This is Maggie—our Santa's Haven guest. She wanted to call and let her friend know she's okay before the storm comes through, so I thought I'd give her a lift."

He gives a curt nod, and I shoot an amused smile at Maggie. His bedside manner could use a little work.

“Once you’ve taken her back,” Bill says, “can you stop by Cabin 8?”

My smile disintegrates faster than cotton candy. I stare at him, trying to gauge whether he’s joking. But Bill’s no stand-up comedian. “I thought *you* did 8.”

“I did. But there seems to be a—”

“Maintenance issue. Yeah. I’m sure there is.” I blow out a breath as I head behind the counter. “Can’t wait to see what it is this time.” I squeeze past Bill and pick up the sticky note with Stevie’s name on it. I dial the number and hand the phone over the counter to Maggie, then busy myself with looking through Cabin 8’s maintenance book while Bill disappears to the back.

Most of the maintenance logbooks only have a few pages filled in. This one is more than half-full, and a look at the dates of service have an extremely high correlation with the Blake family visit dates. In this case, correlation *does* equal causation.

“Hey, it’s me,” Maggie says, playing with the spiral cord. There’s a pause, and she chuckles. “Still alive and kicking. Just like I promised.” Pause. “Yeah, I figured you’d have seen the weather report. It’s just wind, though.” Her gaze darts to me for a split-second, but I’m trying to be busy.

I turn a page.

“Not at all. I’m making my way through my coursework and making a dent in my TBR and watchlist. On track to finish it all by the time I leave.” Pause. “No, he’s right here.”

I still. Do I look up and wave? Keep my eyes on the page like I didn’t hear?

“Why?” Maggie laughs. “You’re being ridiculous.” Pause. “Okay, fine. Here he is.”

I look up because pretending I didn’t hear is becoming unsustainable.

Maggie's holding out the phone to me. "She wants to talk to you."

I grab the receiver and hold it to my ear. "Hey, Stevie. How's it going?"

"Hey, Wes. I'm good. Thanks for bringing Maggie to call me. Though I wonder if you could give me more reassurance with this snowstorm. I've been worrying about avalanches and *Wizard of Oz* level winds."

"No tornadoes up here. Avalanches, yes, but we're far enough from the problem zones for that not to be a concern." I glance at Maggie, who mouths *thank you* to me.

I wink.

"That makes me feel a lot better," Stevie says. "Will you just keep an eye on her for me, though?"

"Will do." I'm not exactly sure what she's asking. During peak winds, it's not like I can hover outside Santa's Haven. I can give Maggie the number to my cabin if she needs help, though.

And if she calls me to come and sit out the windstorm with her, so be it.

CHAPTER 10

MAGGIE

Wes holds up two pairs of snow goggles as we stand inside the reception door. One pair is iridescent orange, red, and yellow, while the other is white. “Which ones do you want?”

I clench my teeth. “Neither?”

“You sure about that?” He grabs the door handle and pushes it open. The wind sweeps a blast of icy spray through the gap, and I grab the handle, which is covered by Wes’s hand, and pull the door closed again.

Wes just smiles.

“I’ll take the bug-eye ones,” I say, grabbing the white pair from him.

“Good choice.”

We pull them over our heads and secure them over our eyes, then look at each other. Wes reaches over and adjusts mine, a big smile on his face. It’s annoying he can still look as good as he does with a massive orange reflector covering half of his face.

“You look like Cyclops,” I say. What I keep to myself is that I’ve always had a massive crush on James Marsden in *X-Men*.

“And you look like Venom.”

I grimace. “Lovely.” I doubt Wes was ever attracted to Venom. It’s better than Maggot, I guess.

“Here,” he says, grabbing a scarf hanging next to the door. “You’re going to want this.” He wraps it around my neck and tucks it into the collar of my coat, bombarding me with the most amazing smell.

We head out into California’s version of Siberia, and I’m surprised how much the wind has picked up in the short time we’ve been at reception. As nice as it’d be to avoid having to wrap my arms around Wes again, truly, choosing walking over his snowmobile was now out the window. Both options include a certain amount of self-inflicted pain, but going on the snowmobile will be over a lot quicker—and won’t end with me lost in San Bernardino Forest.

I climb up behind Wes, but I don’t wrap my arms around him immediately. I grip the back of my seat while we reverse and pull around to face the right way. Maybe it’s stupid, but I really don’t want him to think I’m enjoying this. He has Brielle in Cabin 8 after him, and it’s highly likely there’s other female guests at Crystal Peaks who are *also* attracted to him. He probably hops from cabin to cabin, basking in the glory of being universally liked and attractive.

The last thing I want is for Wes to talk to those girls about the crazy lady in Santa’s Haven who sings to books and can’t keep her hands off him.

But I can only hold off so long without putting my life at risk. So once we get going faster, I hold on to Wes in the most lackluster way I’m capable of. I specifically don’t notice how firm his chest is or the smell of his shampoo or how his warmth makes it to me, even through his coat. I hate that I was half-tempted to pocket the mascara and lipstick I saw amongst the reception items or how I’m regretting not bringing any hair tools. It’s the first time in my life I’ve ever considered theft, and it’s all to impress a guy who associated—maybe still associates me—with something that feeds on rotting flesh.

It’s so windy, I don’t even try to keep my head up where I can see. Everything around is a blur of white, but the goggles at least keep away the icy snow darts the wind throws at us. I have no clue how Wes knows where he is or where he’s going, but he doesn’t waver, keeping a steady pace. I know when to

brace myself because I can feel his abs tense the second before we hit the small hills. They're like a personal warning system. A very strong, contoured one.

We finally slow and come to a stop, and I raise my head. It's strange seeing the cabin without any of its more conspicuous Christmas trappings.

"Thank you so much," I say as I dismount and pull off my goggles. I can feel the lines they've left around my eyes and on my forehead. I shield my face from a gust of wind and clench my teeth. "I'm sorry you have to trek back to reception again because of me."

He follows me off the snowmobile and pulls up his goggles. "I have one more thing I need to do here before I head back."

I stare at him. "In *this*?" I look around at the constant rush of snow blowing drifts against the trees and cabins.

He smiles at me as he sets my pair of goggles in the compartment under the seat. "Never a dull moment at Crystal Peaks—especially not when you've got Santa's reindeer to keep safe." He nods at the roof, where the sleigh and reindeer are perched on the ridge.

"Do you want some help?" I can't believe he really intends to climb on the roof during this wind.

"That's a really nice offer, but I'm not going to ask you to do that. Plus, I'm covered by our liability insurance. You aren't."

"Okay," I say, half-glad he's not expecting me to come on the roof with him. If anyone can keep their balance up there despite the wind and snow, it's Wes Warren. "Let me know if you change your mind. I'll just be inside."

"Thanks, Maggie. It should only take a few minutes—just have to tighten the wires and make sure the clips are all still in place." He looks up at the roof again, takes in a deep breath, then smiles at me. "Gotta go save Christmas. The happiness of all the children in the world is in my hands."

I laugh softly, but it gets drowned in a gust of wind as Wes heads for the back of the cabin. I make my way inside, pulling off my coat and then my boots. I'm still wearing Wes's scarf.

I glance at the window in the kitchen that looks over the back of the cabin where Wes is scaling the ladder. I can hear him, but I can't see him, so I sneak a sniff of the scarf.

I shut my eyes. Gosh, it smells good.

When I open my eyes, my gaze settles on the collection of elves. They're all staring at me. Every last one.

"What're *you* looking at?"

My hand lingers on the scarf for a second as I debate whether to pull it off. It's not that I want to keep wearing Wes's scarf. It's just kind of chilly in here right now. Seventy-three degrees can feel pretty cold.

Pretty soon, I hear footsteps on the roof. I can follow Wes's progress based on the thumps. I roll my shoulders, trying not to imagine the sound of the thuds turning into sliding or tumbling. I open up my laptop, determined to get some of my coursework done. I'm cruising through it a lot faster than I'd planned.

With every course I finish, I feel a little more uneasiness in the pit of my stomach. It's a building dread of going back to work once Christmas break is over. I don't think I'd realized how monotonous work had become until I took this vacation. And it won't just be monotonous when I get back—it'll be *busy* monotonous, which is the worst kind.

There's a big whoosh as a big gust blows against the cabin. I still as a muffled cry sounds, followed by sliding, then silence.

I shove my laptop aside, grab my boots, then hop to the back door as I tug them on. The door resists my efforts, and I shove it with my shoulder until it gives.

CHAPTER 11

WESLEY

I stay still, surrounded by a foot of powdery snow on all sides as I focus on the throbbing at the back of my head. I close my eyes against the bits of snow the wind is brushing over my face. If I stay here long enough, I'll become part of a snow drift.

Of course I was working on tightening the very last strap when that gust came through and threw me off balance.

A hand grasps my arm gently. "Wes, are you okay?" Maggie's voice is urgent, tight with worry.

"Yeah," I say, blinking until her face comes into view above me. Her brown eyes are wide, staring down at me. She's been pretty guarded around me, but there's none of that there now.

I wince as my head throbs again. "I just need a sec."

She ducks closer to me as the wind blows harder. I'm protected to a degree in my little Wes-shaped hole, but Maggie's not. The wind has intensified so she can barely keep her eyes open.

I put a hand to the back of my head to try to assess the damage.

"Your head's hurting?" she asks, her concern kicking up a notch. She's trying to be quiet while also making sure she can be heard above the wind.

"I hit it when I slipped," I say, feeling the sore spot. There's a palpable bump there.

“Do you think you could get up and come inside?”

“Thanks, but I’ll be fine,” I say, raising up on my elbow, then wincing at the pain.

“Wes,” she says. “You’re not fine. Come in the cabin where it’s not so windy.”

I’m programmed to insist—to pretend I’ve got this, but the thought of hopping on the snowmobile and pushing through this wind when my head feels this way? I’ll probably end up a hundred feet away in a new drift. “Okay.”

Her grasp on my arm becomes firm, and she pulls me up slowly. The wind pushes against me, and I’m already feeling a bit woozy. She wraps an arm around me, and we both hunch over as she guides us to the back door. It flies open with the wind, and I try to hurry in before the entire cabin fills with snow drifts.

Maggie pulls the door shut once we’re inside, and the howling becomes muffled. “Let’s get you to the couch,” she says, shepherding me over to it. Her touch is firm but gentle, and once we get there, she lets go of me slowly, watching me in case I start to sway.

I use the arm of the couch to stabilize myself while she hurries to rearrange the multitude of pillows. It’s the first time I’ve seen her without a hat since she got here. Her hair is long and wavy, full of frizz and texture. She glances at me and tucks it behind her ear.

That’s when I notice she’s still wearing my scarf.

“There,” she says, setting one last pillow against the armrest. “Let me help you.”

I could probably do it myself, but I don’t stop her. I learned from a pretty young age how to climb up on the counter to reach the medicine cabinet. I’d clean my scrapes, put some ointment on them, and bandage them up. Maybe I could just let someone take care of me for once.

“Let’s get your coat off,” she says once I’m seated. “It’s got snow in it.”

She's right. I hadn't even noticed the cold and wet pressing against my neck despite my scarf. It's wriggled its way between my gloves and wrists too.

She helps me pull my arms out of the coat, her gaze darting to my face every few seconds to gauge how I'm doing. My head is aching, but the feeling that's distracting me is the one in my chest. It's hard to describe—a general sense of well-being, I guess.

Satisfied I'm not about to pass out, she goes to hang the coat on the rack, then comes back over and unwinds my scarf from around my neck. She grabs a couple chunks of snow that had lodged under it, her fingers leaving a trail of warmth in their wake. Our eyes meet for a second, but hers quickly dart away again.

She gets up and goes to drape the scarf over one of the coat hooks, then pauses, her back to me. Her hand creeps up to her neck, and she sends a quick glance in my direction, then tugs on the scarf there.

She must've forgotten she was wearing it. Why does that disappoint me a little?

It makes sense. It's not like she's into me. Why would she be? I was a complete jerk to her when we were younger. She has every reason to be a jerk right back to me, but instead she's brought me in and taken care of me. Opposite of what I promised Stevie.

Generally, I like the feeling of being self-sufficient, of meeting my own needs and not needing anyone else. But as she comes back to the couch and helps me lie down, I'm second-guessing all of that. It feels nice to be taken care of.

Really nice.

“Do you want some hot chocolate or something?” she asks, grabbing one of the Christmas quilts in the basket next to the couch.

“That's okay,” I say, even though my mouth is watering at the thought.

Her eyes scan my face for a second, like she's trying to figure out what I really want. "I think it'd be good to warm you up. I'll have some too."

"Um, yeah. Okay. Thanks." I don't even know what to do with myself. At Crystal Peaks, I'm the one responsible for getting things done and making sure the guests are taken care of. No one ever does stuff for me.

She offers me a smile, then heads to the kitchen. My head isn't throbbing quite as badly, and I look around the room as much as I can without moving my head. I've been in Santa's Haven a lot, but never like this. Usually, I'm passing through the rooms quickly to get a job done and get out of the way of the guests.

It's a wild place, even without the disturbing elf reunion by the massively overdecorated tree. My gaze flits around and settles on a stack of books on a table by the fireplace. I squint, trying to read the titles. I finally catch sight of one: *Bath Tangle* by Georgette Heyer. My brows go up. I hadn't pegged Maggie as the type to go for that sort of book, but apparently, I don't know her very well.

"You're not allowed to fall asleep, okay?" Maggie calls from the kitchen.

"No need to worry about that," I say as my eyes settle on Santa and the collection of elves. "I'm pretty sure these elves are planning to finish me off the second I close my eyes."

She comes over, walking slowly with two mugs almost overflowing with hot chocolate. She's trying to suppress a smile with very little success. "They're just . . . concerned about you."

"Concerned about how to finish the job," I say, taking a mug from her carefully. "That's what I get for trying to save Christmas."

Maggie laughs as I take a sip and close my eyes, letting the warmth wash through my mouth. I freeze, my eyes darting to my mug, then to Maggie. What *is* this stuff? It's the most disgusting hot chocolate I've ever tasted. I didn't know that

hot chocolate could go rancid, but I would testify of the fact to a grand jury under penalty of perjury now.

I let it sit in my mouth for a second, my eyes watching Maggie as she sets her mug on the coffee table, then sits on the floor, her legs curled up under her.

But the stuff is just lingering in my mouth, seeping into every one of my tastebuds, so I force myself to swallow. Where did this woman learn to make hot chocolate? The water sanitation plant?

I look at the mug I'm holding—at the amount of hot chocolate I'll need to drink so I don't offend Maggie. She's been so nice to take care of me.

Or maybe not. Maybe I've got her all wrong and she's trying to poison me. This could all be revenge.

She looks up at me, and I force a smile.

"How're you feeling?" she asks.

Like I swallowed something radioactive. "A lot better," I say. I still have a dull headache, but I'm more worried about what the mug I'm holding is going to do to me.

Her gaze darts to it. "Is it chocolatey enough? I tried not to be stingy with the powder."

Is she talking about hot chocolate powder or arsenic powder? "Oh, it's definitely chocolatey enough." It hasn't escaped my notice that she hasn't drunk any of her hot chocolate yet. I stick out my mug toward her and smile. "Cheers."

She picks hers up and clanks it gently against mine, then we both raise them to our mouths. I keep my lips tight so that the liquid washes over my upper lip and right back into the mug. My eyes are on her the whole time. Is she pulling the same trick as I am?

She sets the mug down as she swallows.

Suddenly, her face screws up, and she starts sputtering and coughing so forcefully, I sit up to pat her back as she covers her mouth with her wrist.

“Oh my *gosh!*” she says between coughs as she stares at her mug. “That’s disgusting.”

Whew. Not poison, then.

Her gaze flies to me, her expression stricken. “I’m *so* sorry. I should have tasted it before giving it to you.”

“What do you mean? I think it’s great.” Perjury is my middle name.

“You’re joking,” she says, searching my face.

“Nope. It’s delicious.” The last word doesn’t come out as smoothly as I’d like, so I raise the mug to my lips and embrace another gulp of pure misery. “Mm,” I say, my cheeks full of death juice, resisting every effort of mine to swallow. I force it, determined that Maggie not feel bad.

But, as the Good Book says, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. As the hot chocolate makes its way down my throat, my body shudders violently, and hot chocolate spills over the edge of the mug before I can set it down.

Maggie pushes herself up and hurries over to me, taking the mug from my hands. “Stop drinking it!” She sets it down on the coffee table and takes a seat in front of me on the edge of the cushion.

“What *is* it?” I ask, wincing at the aftertaste and giving up on my well-intentioned plan to make her feel better.

“It said it was hot chocolate, I promise.”

“But where did you get it? You should sue.”

She lifts her shoulders. “I found it in the cupboard and assumed it had been left by the last guests. It wasn’t even opened, so I didn’t think to check the date. Here, let me get you some water.” She hurries to the kitchen, running on her toes like she’s trying to be quiet. Probably for my head.

“That or some mouth wash,” I call out as she grabs a bottle of water.

“I didn’t bring any,” she says apologetically as she makes her way back over, water in one hand, hot chocolate canister in

the other. “I think I saw some in the bathroom upstairs, though.”

I raise my brows as she hands me the water. I take it and the hot chocolate canister. “Really? After experiencing this hot chocolate that expired in”—I turn it until I find the date—“*January 1995*, you’re willing to put my life in the hands of some stranger’s mystery mouthwash?” She must really hate me.

She clenches her teeth. “Yeah, maybe not the best idea.” She sits down at my side again. “Are you okay?”

I nod, swallowing a few times to try to get rid of the stubborn remnants. “It’s distracted me from my head, so that’s good.”

She lets her face fall into her hands, and my conscience pinches me. She genuinely feels bad about the rancid hot cocoa.

I hesitate, then put a hand on her back. “It’s seriously not a big deal, Maggie. I really appreciate the gesture. It’s the thought that counts, right?”

She sits up and looks at me. “Wes, I basically poisoned you right after you got a concussion from falling off my roof.”

“It’s not even your roof, and I don’t have a concussion.” I use my arms to push myself so I’m sitting up straight, then hold out my hands, ignoring the little throbbing in the back of my head. “Look. Totally fine.”

She watches me carefully, her pretty eyes scanning my face. They’re not just pretty, though. They’re genuine and kind, the type you don’t see all that often and that make you wonder what your own eyes say. *Historically a jerk but trying to be better?* I bet mine say something like that.

“Thanks for helping me out,” I say. I’m not sure what I would have done if she hadn’t come out when she did.

“Yeah,” she says, her voice soft. “Of course.”

A wind gust blows against the windows, making the eerie sound I hate. I’m not really looking forward to going back to

my place and trying to sleep through the howling. I'd much rather stay here. With Maggie, I hadn't even noticed the wind until now.

A loud beep makes us both jump, and I grab the walkie-talkie attached to my pants as Bill's voice comes through.

"How's it coming?" he asks. "Thought you'd be done by now."

I hesitate for a second, trying to decide how much to tell Bill about my tumble off the roof. Walkie talkies aren't really meant for storytime, though, so I press down the transmit button and say, "Just finished up at Santa's Haven." I glance at Maggie. "I should probably get going." I throw the blanket off.

"Wait, what?" She stands to give me space.

I blink as the room spins, and she puts a steadying hand on my arm, looking at me through those wide brown eyes like I'm going to keel over any second.

"I'm good," I say as the room settles. "Just got up too fast."

She drops her hand and steps back to look at me. "You're not seriously considering driving the snowmobile back to reception in a crazy windstorm when you just got a concussion, are you?"

"It's not a concussion. And I don't have to drive back to reception. I just have to get to my place." Technically that's *past* reception, but Maggie doesn't need to know that. "I'll be fine."

"Just wait a while—at least until the wind has died down a little."

I hesitate. I know the Crystal Peaks terrain better than anyone, but when the wind kicks up like this, that terrain changes. Not to mention, I could barely see while driving us here, and the wind has only intensified since then.

"If you leave right now," she says, "I won't sleep at all tonight. I'll worry you got blown to the top of a black diamond

or you're experiencing the effects of hot chocolate poisoning in a snow drift somewhere."

I chuckle, but the more I think about it, the less I feel confident in my ability to make my way to my cabin when the wind is like this. Every few seconds, a blast of it hits the walls of the cabin and makes things creak and whine.

There's also the part of me that *wants* to stay. For once, Maggie doesn't seem anxious to get me to leave, and I'm reluctant to let that opportunity go to waste. I really like what I know of her.

"You're probably right," I say. "Plus, I've got some work to do here."

"Work?" she asks.

I nod and grab the hot chocolate canister. "Disposing of this, first of all. It's my responsibility to make sure the guests at Crystal Peaks are safe, and something tells me this isn't the only dangerous thing in those cupboards."

CHAPTER 12

MAGGIE

An hour later, the wind hasn't let up at all, but Wes and I have found a dozen items well past their expiration date.

"The crazy thing is," Wes says as he offers me a graham cracker that expired in 2012, "Santa's Haven wasn't even built when that hot chocolate expired." He takes a bite out of his graham cracker, and I follow suit.

I cringe as my teeth come down on stale cracker.

"Yeah," he says, seeing my expression. "I always prefer my graham crackers dipped." He grabs one of the mugs of cocoa that is not only rancid but now tepid, and he offers it to me.

I stare at him like he's a madman, and he grins. "Do you dare?"

I can't believe I'm doing a taste test of expired food with Wesley Warren during the most terrifying windstorm of my life. What even is life? And will this end in death?

Somehow, I can't say no to the challenge in his eyes, though. Maybe I'm eager for his approval or something. Whatever it is, I hold his gaze while I dip the graham cracker. His smile widens at my picking up the gauntlet, and he dips his cracker too.

"No spitting it out," he says. "Loser has to drink the rest of this mug."

“Whoa, whoa,” I say, miffed. “I did not agree to these terms.”

“One, two, three,” he says, ignoring me.

We both take a bite. I cover my mouth with a hand to keep everything in.

He turns away, bracing himself with a hand on the counter while he chews. I want nothing more than to grab the garbage can under the sink and spit everything into it, but I power through because I refuse to chug the rest of the room-temperature-cocoa.

Wes finally turns as we both swallow with effort.

“Ugh. Why did you make us do that?” he says in a strained voice.

“I need something to take that taste out of my mouth,” I say, desperate not to throw up in front of him. “Hurry!”

He searches the boxes of things we’ve tried thus far, most of which has been cereal way past its heyday. He settles on the most recently expired one: Cinnamon Toast Crunch, and I plunge my hand inside, pulling out a fistful of stale squares and shoving them into my mouth as Wes watches.

“What?” My voice is muffled by the massive load of cereal I stuffed it with.

Wes just watches me, the edge of his mouth creeping up.

I stop chewing, realizing how I must look: hair frizzy as a blow-dried poodle, face that hasn’t seen makeup in days, and mouth as full of musty cereal as a squirrel’s preparing for winter. All the while, Wes’s attractiveness multiplies by the minute. How do I get myself into these situations?

I try to chew in a slower, daintier way, but it only highlights the crunching and makes Wes smile bigger.

I cover my mouth with a hand. “Stop staring at me while I eat.”

“Sorry, what was that?” He grabs my hand and pulls it away from my mouth. I try to wrest my hand from his grasp,

but typing on a ten-key all day under fluorescent lights doesn't supply me with sufficient strength to present a real challenge to Wes Warren.

With my free hand, I grab more pieces of Cinnamon Toast Crunch and pelt them at him. He dodges my haphazard throws easily, keeping hold of my other hand. I grab more cereal and toss it at him. A couple hit him in the face, and one lands in his hair, while the rest fall to the floor.

I move to get more ammo, but he grabs my free hand. I struggle against his grasp, trying to simultaneously finish chewing and not laugh.

He keeps a tight hold on my hands, and the more I fight against it, the closer he pulls me, until our hands are the only thing between us. I've never been this close to Wes or his charming smile, and on some level, I'm angry at how well it holds up to closer inspection—and how much it makes *me* want to smile. But if I do that, Cinnamon Toast Crunch will come out of my mouth.

Maybe I should kiss the smile off his face instead.

Whoa, Nelly.

“Did you have something to say?” he asks, his dark eyes teasing me.

I chew furiously, shaking my head but promising vengeance with my eyes and keeping my gaze away from the dangerous territory of Wes's mouth.

But it's all dangerous because it all makes me want to kiss him.

Thankfully, I've got better control of myself than that. Logically, I realize Wes Warren probably has this sort of interaction with girls on the regular, which is why Brielle Blake is constantly inviting him over. She wouldn't do that without *some* indication from him that he welcomed the attention.

Aware that he's unlikely to let me go until I'm done chewing, I swallow the last bits of cereal.

“May I have my hands back?” I ask, trying to pull them away.

“Can I trust you not to throw cereal at my head?”

“Probably.”

He holds my gaze a little longer, then his eyes drop to my lips for a split-second. My heart stops. He releases me.

I take a step back where there’s more air to breathe and less Wes to resist. My gaze shifts to his hair, where one solitary piece of stale cereal has made its home. I don’t blame it. It looks silky enough to be a pillow—or soft enough for a girl to thread her fingers through.

Not me, obviously. A lot of other girls, though, I’m sure. Brielle, even, maybe.

I bend down to pick up the cereal on the floor, and Wes does the same. The piece of cereal falls out of his hair, mingling with the others.

“So,” he says, filling the silence and his palm with cereal bits, “what made you choose Crystal Peaks for Christmas?”

I shrug. “I wanted a really Christmassy Christmas. I googled ‘Christmas cabins,’ and this was one of the first results.”

“The possibility that there might be a cabin that’s *more* Christmassy than this is terrifying.”

“Hey! More Christmas isn’t a bad thing.” I nudge him with my elbow, and his eyes dart to me.

I freeze. Did I just do a flirt thing? My cheeks burn, and I return my focus to getting every last bit of Cinnamon Toast Crunch dust off of the floor.

“A creepy Santa isn’t great company though, you must admit. What made you decide to come alone?” he asks.

I rub my lips together, stalling for time. Trust Wes to ask the questions I don’t want to answer.

“Sorry, that’s none of my business,” he says. “It’s just, usually people like spending Christmas with family.”

“My family trades off every year. My married siblings are spending this Christmas with their in-laws, and my parents are in Bermuda.”

“So, you spent last Christmas together.”

“Um, no.” I look up and meet his gaze with a smile. The fact that I’m feeling reluctant to tell him I got dumped last Christmas because of what he’ll think of me tells me there’s only one thing to do. “I spent it with my ex-boyfriend’s family.”

“Oh.”

“And then he dumped me.”

His eyebrows shoot up. I scan my memories for any other mortifying bits of my past I can offer up while I’m throwing myself under the bus.

“On Christmas Day?” he asks.

“Yep.” *I’m just that desirable.*

“While you were staying with his family?”

I offer a smiling grimace.

“What a—” He stops himself. “Why would he do that? It’s the first rule of human decency. Don’t break up with people on holidays and birthdays.”

“I don’t know . . . I’ve wondered how I would’ve felt if he’d waited until after, knowing he had been dragging it out just for the sake of Christmas.” I wrinkle my nose as I grab the last of the cereal bits. “Don’t know how much better that would’ve been. His family barely celebrates the holiday, so he probably didn’t factor the Christmas Day element into his breakup decision.”

“You don’t have to be Cindy Lou Who to know you don’t dump someone on Christmas.” We both stand and brush the cereal into the garbage can.

I can’t decide if Wes is so fixated on Rich out of a genuine abhorrence for such a deed or if he’s secretly wondering what’s wrong with me that a guy could so easily do that.

“Anyway,” I continue, “since the whole situation kind of sucked, I decided I wouldn’t let anything or anyone ruin this Christmas. The only way I could really be sure of that was to do it alone. Hence Santa’s Haven.”

He folds his arms across his chest and stares at me. “And now here I am, invading your perfect Christmas.”

I don’t respond right away, pretending to brush more crumbs off of my hands and into the garbage. Wes *has* kind of invaded this whole vacation. But I don’t mind it, and that’s a large-ish problem.

“I don’t think it can be called invading when I’m the one who brought you in here.”

“Only because you’re a decent person. Then I force you to eat and drink terrible things.” He smiles wryly. “I can only imagine what you’ll say about this Christmas next year.”

I laugh as I close the cereal box. “I promise you, it’s not anywhere in the same realm as last year. I’ve actually really enjoyed my time here.” Morally gray elves notwithstanding.

“I’m glad to hear that.” The way he smiles at me makes my heart race the same way it used to in elementary school. I’d see him walk through the cafeteria doors, wondering how close he’d sit to me.

Never close.

“What about you?” I ask, eager to change the subject and my heart rate. “Will you go home for Christmas?” I’m asking because I’m polite, not because I’m curious whether he’ll be around.

“Crystal Peaks *is* home.”

I raise my brows, and he smiles.

“Like you, I had one too many Christmases ruined and prefer doing my own thing now. And, hey, I always get a white Christmas here.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

I have so many questions I want to ask but am too afraid to. For some reason, I've had it in my head that Wes has a perfect life, that everything comes easily to him. It always did back in school. He was never without his posse of friends, and he got good grades, was great at sports, always had girls to flirt with. He was almost too good to be true.

But obviously, not everything is perfect, or he wouldn't be spending Christmas alone.

"Maggie?"

"Mmhmm?" I meet his gaze.

His face searches mine, and his finger taps nervously on the counter.

Immediately, I'm nervous too.

"Maybe you don't want to talk about this, which I totally understand, but I feel like I need to say it at least."

I swallow, my mouth going suddenly dry.

"I was a jerk to you when we were younger. A really big jerk." He punctuates each word for emphasis. "I was insecure and desperate to have people like me, and I let it make me say and do things I've regretted for a long time. I just want to make sure you know there was nothing at all wrong with you—it was the rest of us who had issues." His eyes stare intently into mine. "I'm just . . . *really* sorry."

I look away, blinking quickly. I need an industrial fan to dry out my eyes, and I need it five seconds ago. No one has ever apologized to me for how they treated me when we were younger, and even though I've convinced myself for years that I don't need that apology, my stinging eyes say otherwise.

Wes grabs my hand, and I bat my eyes furiously, trying to keep the tears from spilling onto my cheeks. He squeezes my hand, his brows furrowed deeply. "I'm sorry," he says, his voice barely a whisper.

I look at him, forcing my lips into a smile, but it trembles like Jell-O. "It's okay."

"It's not."

“Despite what it may look like”—I point to my watery eyes which, miraculously, have yet to let out any tears—“I moved past all of that a long time ago.”

He nods, and I wonder if I should pull my hand away. One of us will have to at some point, and I think I’d rather be first.

I tug gently on it, and he lets it drop with the slightest pinch of his brows.

“Friends, then?” he asks. The uncertainty in his eyes makes me wish I hadn’t pulled my hand away after all.

I nod, and my lips cooperate more readily this time. “Friends.”

A little of the trouble in his eyes dissipates. “Even after the taste test?”

I can’t stop a laugh. “Let’s just say the friendship is on thin ice.” Not really. It’s amazing how enjoyable it was to eat old, disgusting food with Wes. That’s not normal, right?

“Noted,” he says. “Though, to be fair, you were the one who started it by making the hot chocolate.”

“I thought you said you appreciated the gesture.”

“Oh, I did. And I had a blast doing the taste test with you. So maybe I’m secretly grateful for the cocoa after all.”

My heartbeat speeds. Wes enjoyed the taste test as much as I did? It’s hard to believe. Maybe I’m not as different from young Margot as I thought with my self-doubt..

Not that his enjoying it means anything. He’s just the type of person who has a good time no matter what he’s doing. It’s what makes him so charming and easy to be around. It’s also possible his head injury is affecting him.

Stop putting yourself down, Maggie. He had fun with you because you’re a fun person.

“I’m glad we’re friends,” he says.

“Me too,” I say, and it’s so true, it scares me.

He looks at me another second. “This might be a weird question, but . . . can I hug you?”

He may as well have asked me if he can spend the night, the way my pulse barrels forward at full speed. But it’s just a hug. I’ve hugged perfect strangers before. This is closure for his apology, and I want him to know I don’t hold the past against him.

I nod, and he takes a step toward me and wraps me in his arms.

Oh dear.

This doesn’t feel at all like hugging a perfect stranger. Those embraces are quick, short, polite. There’s no emotion involved.

This one lasts, Wes’s head against mine and our arms wrapped around each other.

This *feels*. Period.

And while I want Wes to know I don’t hold the past against him, I don’t want to feel anything more than reconciliation. Anything more will lead me down a road with a doubtless dead-end. I came here to have an enjoyable Christmas by myself, not to catch feelings for Wesley Warren. Again.

I pull back. “Sounds like the wind has died down.” When in doubt, revert to talking about the weather, right?

What I say is true, though. The powerful gusts that have shaken the house haven’t made an appearance for a while now, and even though I can still hear some howling, it’s calmed significantly.

If it’s safe for him to go, I need Wes gone. The longer he stays, the longer I *want* him to stay.

“Yeah,” he says. “I guess it has.” Is that reluctance in his voice?

I take another step back. More distance is better. Probably should fold my arms for good measure. “How’s your head?”

He puts a hand to the back, patting gently. “Swollen, but I feel pretty good.” He looks at me for a second. “I should probably head out while it’s calmer. It may pick up again.”

I nod, even though what I really want to say is *don’t go yet*.

CHAPTER 13

WESLEY

I stare at the dark, pitched ceiling in my room—the only bedroom in my cabin. The wind has picked up again, and the window next to my bed gives me a front row seat to howling. I don't think the wind speeds are as high or the gusts as strong as they were earlier, but now I don't have Maggie to distract me.

I turn on my side, away from the window, thinking of my time at Santa's Haven with her. A lot happened, and I can't stop thinking about it—about the tears in her eyes when I said sorry, about the way she forgave me so easily, about how it felt to hold her.

It's been a long time since I've held anyone like that—or since anyone's held *me* like that. I'm hoping that's the only reason why it felt so good and that it's not because I'm feeling something more for Maggie.

I mean, it's hard not to like her. She's nice, she's fun, and every time I'm with her, I just feel *good*. I only left because I got the sense she was ready for me to. She wants to spend Christmas alone—she made that clear—while, for the first time in years, I'm wondering what it would be like *not* to.

But I can't cross that line with Maggie. Bill takes the resort policies seriously, and I have to as well. This is my future we're talking about. I love Crystal Peaks, and I really think I could make the place shine if given the opportunity. I'm not giving Bill any reason to look beyond me for a replacement.



My muscles relax as I step into reception where it's warm. The windstorm brought in air straight from the Arctic. The snow we got a few days ago is now crunchy rather than soft, and the resort is covered with drifts that creep up the north sides of each cabin.

Bill is nowhere to be seen, and after pulling off my scarf and gloves, I head to the back room, fully anticipating I'll find him snoozing in his chair.

Instead, he's leaning forward, peering at a paper in front of him with bushy brows pulled together tightly.

"Some storm, eh?" I say.

He only grunts. It's his response of choice. It's what makes Bill Bill.

"What're you looking at?"

He leans back, blowing a breath through his lips. "Trying to get things in order for taxes."

I clench my teeth. Last year, the amount Crystal Peaks ended up owing was a huge blow. "Need any help?"

"Not unless you know how to fill out these forms."

I come up behind him and look over his shoulder at all the different boxes and tax lingo on the IRS form. We had hired someone to do this work in years past, but he quit in June.

A thought occurs to me. "Can I take a closer look at that?"

Bill leans back in his chair and puts out his hands. "Be my guest. I've been working on it for an hour already."

I grab the paper and scan its contents.

"Actually," Bill says, "I have a more urgent job for you before you work on that. Cabin 8."

I suppress the impulse to hang my head. I need to ooze capability to Bill. I must be unflappable, even in the face of

whatever bogus reason Brielle's come up with to get me there today.

"Got a call half an hour ago," Bill says. "Seems the wind wreaked a bit of havoc there. Had a tree fall over and one of the branches cracked a window. They say there's a draft coming through now."

Okay, that actually doesn't sound like a bogus reason. I've wronged Brielle. Or maybe I've underestimated her and she pushed the tree over herself.

"What do you need me to do? Go tape up the window?"

He shakes his head. "I need you to drive down into the city and buy a replacement."

The city. I haven't been there in a while. I get my groceries at the country market in the nearest resort town a few miles away.

"The window measurements should be in the filing cabinet," Bill says.

"I'm on it," I say with a quick salute.

I grab the file and write down the measurements on a sticky note, then grab my keys. It'll be freezing between reception and my car, but once I get down the mountain, I'll be in sunny skies and sixty-five degrees. I forgo my coat and gloves.

My gaze lands on the tax form, and I hesitate. Part of me wants to take it to Maggie and ask if she'd be willing to look it over, but I'd like to be there if she agrees to. That way, maybe I can learn enough that I'll be in a better position when I take over.

If. If I take over.

I could ask her if she wants to come with me into town. Over an hour with her in the car on the way there *and* back sounds better than driving by myself. A lot better.

But Maggie came to Crystal Peaks to experience a white Christmas. Heading down into San Bernardino doesn't really fit in with that quest. Besides, it seems a bit overeager given

that we just agreed to be friends last night, so I leave the tax form where it is and head on my journey to the city.



I tap my thumb on the bar of the flat-bed cart. Apparently, Home Depot management in San Bernardino thinks people just pause all DIY projects in the few days before Christmas. There's only one employee working the cash registers and one self-checkout kiosk working. I wouldn't normally mind except that every minute I spend here makes it less likely I'll have time to check with Maggie about the tax form. I still have to install the window once I get back to Crystal Peaks.

The guy behind me lets out an impatient breath, but the woman running the checkout counter doesn't seem to notice. She's too busy smiling and chatting with the customer she's helping. I give her props for embracing the holiday spirit, though. She's dressed like Mrs. Claus, complete with wire-frame glasses perched near the bottom of her nose. To her credit, every customer is cheerful when they leave.

My turn finally comes up, and I offer her a quick smile.

Her eyes wrinkle as she grins at me. "Good day, fine sir."

"Good day," I say. I've never said those words before, and I'll probably never say them again. I glance at her name tag, which, sure enough, says *Mrs. Claus*.

She scans the window barcode and tells me the total. I swipe my card, and there's a sudden *poof* sound. Fake snow puffs into the air and falls around us.

"Well, would you look at that?" says Mrs. Claus. "It's your lucky day, sir. You just won a prize."

My brows shoot up. "Really?"

She nods. "You must be on the nice list." She winks, then reaches down under the register and pulls out a plastic package, then hands it to me.

I take it and read the label: inflatable queen-size bed. I was expecting a candy cane or something, and to be honest, I would probably have preferred one of those. I give her a grimacing smile and hold it up. “Thanks. That’s . . . really nice.”

She targets me with her wrinkly-eyed, benevolent smile and hands me the receipt. “I have a feeling you’ll be wanting one of those.” She indicates the inflatable bed.

I have no idea how to take that—it feels potentially ominous.

Weirdest Home Depot ever.

With another thank you, I toss the mattress on top of the window and head for the exit. It’s three o’clock, and I’ve got an hour and a half drive ahead of me. Maybe I can stop by Santa’s Haven for a few minutes before I head to the Blakes’ cabin to install the window. It’s not the first time I’ve had to install one, so I know what I’m doing. I’m also genuinely concerned Brielle is going to ask me to stay and play cards with her family or something. I can only refuse so many times before it starts to become rude. Bill makes it sound so easy to walk the line between keeping a proper distance and not offending the family, but I’m assistant manager at a mountain resort, not a tightrope walker.

I park my truck once I reach the resort, run in to reception and grab the tax documents, then hop back in the car and drive up the road toward Santa’s Haven. But it’s not meant to be.

Brielle waves me down from the porch of Cabin 8, and I reluctantly slow.

“There you are,” she says with a smile, coming down the steps and craning her neck to see into the truck bed. “And you’ve got the window. It’s getting ridiculously cold in my room, and I was starting to worry you wouldn’t be back in time to install it tonight.”

The broken window is in her room. Awesome.

Brielle heads to open the door of the truck bed. “My mom is almost done with the homemade chicken noodle soup. She

figured we'd be freezing after we finish with the window."

"Oh, that's nice of her," I say, reaching to pull the window toward me. "But you know, I can handle the installation just fine. I've done it before, and, like you said, it'll be cold."

"But it'll go a lot faster with two people," she says, grabbing one side of the window and lifting. "And I'd love to learn how to do it. You never know when those kinds of skills will come in handy." She smiles widely at me, and I try to return one of my own.

I send a longing look toward Santa's Haven as we carry the window inside, resigning myself to a night with the Blakes.

CHAPTER 14

MAGGIE

After lunch, I put both hands on the back of the chair at the kitchen table and shake it. “Totally unstable.” It’s amazing how many screws need tightening at Santa’s Haven.

If I was Brielle, I’d stalk right over to the phone and call reception, demanding Wes come tighten every last one in the cabin. But I’m not Brielle, and I can’t be calling on Wes for silly tasks like that. I specifically promised him I wouldn’t.

Even if *he* specifically said to let him know if I found any loose screws.

Well, I’m the loose screw. It’s me.

It’s pitiful I’m considering calling Wes after less than twenty-four hours without seeing him. What happened to my ultra-Christmassy, radically-solitary holiday vacation?

I head to the couch and take a seat, grabbing one of the books in my stack. I’ve finished all of my accounting courses way ahead of schedule, so I can devote myself fully to my stack of unread books and list of unwatched movies. By myself.

Just like I wanted.

Aware I need all the help I can get to focus, I choose one of my favorite Heyer books—*Devil’s Cub*. In my dreams, I’m as gutsy and daring as the heroine, Mary Challoner. I just shoot less people.

I've gotten through a chapter when there's a knock on the door. I stare for a second, annoyed to find my heart racing. Flipping the blanket off of my lap, I set my book aside and try not to hurry to the door. An easy, loungy pace will be totally sufficient.

Taking in a breath to calm my nerves, I pull open the door. When my gaze meets nothing but the snow-capped trees beyond my porch, I drop my gaze and find one of the large ornaments rolling precariously around my doorway.

Awesome. I answered the door to the knock of a Christmas decoration.

I roll it back to the pedestal it sits on and force my lips into a smile. It's really nice to have a day to myself. There are no distractions—no intoxicating cologne, no glinting smiles or teasing eyes, no one taking hold of my hand or hugging me. It's just me, my books and movies, and my flock of elves.

I love it so much. Even this frigid air. It might make *some* people wish they had someone to snuggle up to, but nope, not me.

I slam the door shut behind me, and one of the elves falls over.

"Sorry," I mutter, avoiding the eyes of all the others. Even Santa's twinkling eyes seem to be judging me.

I make it two pages into the next chapter before clapping the book shut and grabbing the remote. Maybe I'm more in the mood for a movie. I've been looking at enough small text for today.

But not even Hallmark heartthrob Jesse Metcalfe can keep my attention right now. I'm plain old restless. Maybe I'm getting cabin fever.

"I should call Stevie," I say aloud. "She's probably wondering how I'm doing after the storm."

I shut my laptop and stand.

"I know what you're thinking," I say, giving the elf assembly a quick glance. "But it's not about Wes. It's not nice

to make friends worry, and I told Stevie I'd call her."

I pull on my boots, coat, and hat, but I hesitate as my eyes land on Wes's scarf. I should probably take it back to him while I'm at reception. It's the decent thing to do.

"See?" I say to the jury of elves surveying me. "Two completely legitimate reasons to go to reception." I suppress the impulse to bring Wes's scarf to my nose and breathe in, but even wrapping it around my neck, his scent infiltrates the air around me.

I inhale slightly. Gosh, he smells good.

I glare at my audience. "What do you want me to do? Plug my nose?" I throw the end of the scarf around my neck and head for the door, chin held high. Brielle would probably spritz the scarf with a bit of her perfume so that Wes is enveloped in a blanket of it when he next wears it, but I don't even consider doing that. I didn't bring any perfume.

The air is biting and the snow crunchy, which is actually a big plus. It's much easier to walk on top of snow drifts than to have your feet sink three feet with every step. There's still a breeze, and I pull the scarf up over my mouth and nose to protect my face.

Good heavens. Did he get his cologne straight from Cupid? I need to get rid of this scarf as soon as possible.

It takes me a good ten minutes to walk to the reception cabin, and I pull the scarf off before heading through the door. The bell jangles as I push it open, and Bill looks up from the desk. There's no sign of Wes in the room.

Just a casual observation.

"Can I help you?" Bill asks in a way that tells me he's not anxious to do anything of the sort.

"Um, yes. I was just wondering if I could use your phone by chance? I have a friend back home who was worried about the—"

"Go ahead," he says, pointing me toward the phone.

“Thanks,” I say, squeezing past him in the small space behind the counter.

I dial up Stevie, and she answers after the second ring.

“You’re alive!” she says.

“Should I be offended by how little you believe in my survival skills?”

“No, it’s not that at all. I’ve been keeping track of the forecast there, and that wind looked intense. Plus, it’s eighteen degrees there today. Can that temperature actually sustain human life?”

“It’s the mountains, Stevie, not Jupiter. It’s cold, but I’m fine.”

“Is Wes with you?”

I glance at Bill, whose attention is on some sort of logbook in front of him.

“No,” I say.

“Have you seen much of him?”

“A bit here and there,” I say noncommittally, thinking of our taste test last night. And our hug. I fiddle with the scarf in my hands.

“What’s he like now? I tried to stalk him online after talking to him the other day, but the man hasn’t posted on social media for, like, years.”

I glance at Bill again. I know he can’t actually hear what Stevie’s saying, but I still feel self-conscious.

“Is he as attractive as we all thought he was back in the day? And, more importantly, is he as nice as he sounds? I was surprised he didn’t sound like a jerk, because he definitely had a phase.”

“Yeah, I remember it,” I say wryly.

“Right,” Stevie says with a note of apology. “But he’s not like that anymore, is he? He was really nice when I asked him to kind of keep an eye on you.”

My cheeks go red. “You really didn’t have to do that. I’m totally fine. Promise.”

“So, you’re really going to stay there through Christmas?”

“Yeah, of course. I booked a full two weeks.”

“I know. I just thought maybe you’d reconsider—especially when the offer of spending Christmas with Troy and me is on the table.” Her tone of voice is a blatant wink. There’s a little bark in the background. “*And Mochi*. Just know the offer is open and will stay open, even if it’s 4 a.m. Christmas morning, okay? We’d love to have you anytime. Or maybe Wes needs someone to hang out with.”

I clear my throat loudly, still worried Bill can somehow hear this conversation. “I don’t want to tie up the reception phone line,” I say significantly, “so I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

She laughs but doesn’t resist when I say goodbye.

Bill glances at me as I hang up.

“Thank you,” I say. “I really appreciate you letting me use the phone.”

“You’re welcome,” he says, returning to his work.

This is my chance to ask if Wes is around, but I’m too much of a pansy. Maybe if I hang out a few minutes longer, he’ll come through the door. And maybe then he’ll insist on giving me a ride back to my cabin on his snowmobile.

STOP IT NOW.

I feel weird coming to use the phone and then leaving immediately, though, so I decide to browse the offerings in the shelves around the room. There are chips and candy bars and toilet paper and matches—a random assortment of items people end up needing but don’t want to drive to the nearest town for.

My eyes settle on the tiny section devoted to feminine care, including a few makeup products, combs, and brushes.

I hesitate for a second, then grab a tube of mascara, some eyeliner, a bottle of concealer I hope will match my current vampire skin tone, and some hairspray.

I take it all to the counter and set it there. Bill looks up at me, then drops his gaze to the products. His gaze travels back to me again, and my cheeks warm as he looks at me through those trifocals. One lens correction helps him see far, one helps him see near, one helps him see what's inside my brain.

He rings me up, and his walkie talkie beeps just as he's scanning the last item.

"Finished the install at Cabin 8," Wes's voice says through the static, making my heart skip. "I'm staying for dinner. Unless you need me there."

Cabin 8. That's Brielle Blake's cabin. And he's eating dinner there.

Bill points to the green numbers on the screen showing me my total, then raises the walkie talkie to his mouth. "Stay as long as you want. It's quiet here."

There's a pause as I fumble for my debit card. Why do I care if Wes is having dinner with Brielle and her family? What's it to me?

He asked if we could be friends; he didn't ask for my hand in marriage.

Even then, if I wasn't worried Bill would lose his mind, I might be tempted to tell him never mind on these purchases.

"Ten-four," says Wes, and Bill hooks the walkie talkie onto his belt again.

I take in a deep breath as I wait for the card machine to process my transaction. I need to get it together. Have I learned nothing since my childhood? Am I still this easily taken in by a pair of pretty eyes and a nice smile?

Bill bags my purchase and hands it to me.

I take it and lift my chin. The stuff inside isn't for Wes. It's for *me*. I like to feel put together, even if it's just to watch

sappy Hallmark movies and read about swoony heroes in breeches, top boots, and waistcoats.

I'm going to finish out this vacation strong, and I'm going to be happy doing it, dang it!

"Merry Christmas, sir," I say.

His brows pull together, as though I've taken him off guard. He gives me a nod, looking at me through his lenses. "Merry Christmas, young lady."



Despite the furnace working constantly, Santa's Haven is distinctly chilly the next morning. Icicles hang wherever they can squeeze in between the lights strung across the roof and gables.

I stare up at the ceiling for a few minutes, trying to decide how to approach the day. Last night, I admittedly felt a bit down, but I'm not letting things get to me today. Part of that is because I recognize there's nothing *to* get to me. I'm making a mountain out of a molehill, and it's probably because I'm bored. Normally, I spend my working hours wishing I could be home reading, but now that I have all the time in the world to do just that, I find I can only do it for a couple hours at a time.

This is probably why Stevie was worried when I said I'd be coming here alone for two weeks. If anyone knows what it's like to spend a lot of time alone, it's her. She spent the better part of a year like that while she waited for her divorce to be finalized. I should have listened to her.

But I'm determined to make the best of things. I have every reason to be happy. How many people get to spend the greatest part of the year in a cabin oozing this much Christmas cheer?

I've been too hard on the elves. They're not creepy. They just can't contain their excitement, which is why their eyes look like they're about to pop out of their faces. A very normal reaction to the most wonderful time of the year.

As for Wes? We're friends. The type of friends that will probably never see each other again once I leave Santa's Haven in eight days. Which is totally fine.

I plaster a smile on my face, blast a Christmas playlist, and head upstairs to take a shower, singing along with Bing Crosby as I turn the water on and brush out my hair, giving the water time to warm up while feeling lucky I get to experience a white Christmas for the first time. I shed my clothes, pull up on the nozzle to make the water come out of the showerhead, then tug back the candy cane covered shower curtain and hop in.

I shriek as the freezing water sprays my body like a thousand arrows made of icicles. I reach for the nozzle, screaming again as the water hits my face and chest. Once it's off, I yank the shower curtain back and reach for the towel, my teeth chattering.

Making sure the nozzle is down so I don't get doused again, I turn on the water until it can't go farther past the little "h" for hot. And then I wait, checking periodically for the temperature to change. It's shocking the water is in a liquid state in the first place, given how cold it is.

After three minutes of running, it's every bit as cold as when I first got in.

I turn it off and let my head drop back. No hot water.

Ugh.

Why me? Why now?



My hand hovers over the black plastic of the telephone receiver, but it's already been two hours since my attempted shower, and the water is still frigid. I never really thought it would warm up, but there was that little sliver of hope I wouldn't have to call reception.

I'm being ridiculous about things. I know that. It should be the easiest thing in the world to call and say, "Hey, friend. My

water is being piped in straight from Antarctica. Any way you could come fix it?" Who cares if he's *also* friends with Brielle? Or more than that? It's none of my business.

I snatch the receiver and press zero before I can persuade myself against it. Maybe I'll get lucky and Bill will answer.

"Ho ho ho," Wes's voice says. "What's up, Maggie?"

My luck is out. But somehow also feels like it's *in* based on the little flip my heart does.

"Hey," I say. "It's just me, calling with my daily maintenance issue."

He chuckles. "Hit me with today's installment, then. What are we working with? Infestation of ants? Flying cockroaches? Elf uprising?"

"Thankfully not. It's just my water. It's not heating up."

"Ah. I was wondering if we'd have at least this issue. The wind and cold are kind of a recipe for pilot light issues. I can come over right away."

I hesitate while my heart does gymnastics that'd make Simone Biles drool. All they do is make *me* worried.

"I feel bad always making you do this sort of stuff," I say. "Is Bill available to do it?"

"Bill?" Wes laughs. "Yeah, I don't think you want him fixing things there, Maggie. I mean, he probably could, but not only is he rusty on this kind of stuff, he doesn't have the temperament for it."

I clench my teeth. I believe him. Bill seems like the type of man who might have a stress-induced hernia when he's angry. I don't want that on my conscience.

"I could do it," I say. "You could just explain it to me over the phone if it isn't too complicated."

There's a short silence. "Maggie, is there a reason you don't want my help?"

"What? No." My face could heat the water right now, but I can't very well say *I'm concerned that I'm going to end this*

Christmas just like I ended the last one: wanting someone who doesn't want me. “I just feel like I've been bothering you a lot.”

“If that's seriously your concern, forget about it. I'll be there in five. I have a question I want to ask you anyway.”

A question. That sounds ominous. Or completely benign. Either way.

I've made things weird enough already, so I just say, “Sounds good,” hang up the receiver, and hurry to the bag of makeup I bought from Bill yesterday.

CHAPTER 15

WESLEY

I pull the papers from the snowmobile's storage compartment, shut it, then shuffle them on the seat. Why am I so nervous?

Probably because I don't think I was wrong about Maggie not really wanting me to come over, and I wish I understood why. She seemed sincere about the whole friends thing the other night, but maybe she spoke too soon. Maybe she's been remembering all the stupid things I said and did back in our school days.

I wouldn't blame her. But I want her to know I'm sincere and that I'm not that guy anymore.

Will I also tell her I've been thinking about her an unhealthy amount since I last saw her? Definitely not.

I head up the porch stairs and brush a quick hand through my hair before knocking on the door. I can hear the muffled sound of music inside, and I'm tempted to check if there are any gaps in the blinds so I can see whether Maggie's dancing, but the song turns off, and then the door opens.

"Hey," I say.

Maggie smiles back at me, and I blink.

She looks . . . different, but I'm not sure why. My eyes drop to the scarf around her neck. My scarf. I like the look of it on her, and my mind wants to read something into the fact that she's wearing it when I know for a fact she has her own.

She follows the direction of my gaze, and her eyes widen momentarily as she grasps at the scarf and tugs it off like it's a boa constrictor instead of a piece of fabric. "I meant to give it back to you."

"No, no," I say, putting my hands up. "It's no big deal."

She hands it to me just as her body convulses with a shiver.

I smile, thread the scarf through my fingers, and step toward her, wrapping it around her neck again. "Keep it. It looks better on you anyway."

She looks up at me, her gaze tentative and almost questioning as I arrange the end of the scarf. Her eyes are such a dark brown, it's hard to see where her iris ends and her pupil begins, and I find myself absorbed in the task for a few seconds.

Until she hides them with her lashes and looks down.

I drop my hand and step back. "Should we take a look at the water situation?"

She nods and steps aside to welcome me in, and that's when I realize part of what's different about her—her hair is slicked back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck.

My gaze lands on the couch where Maggie took care of me after my fall. Just the memory of it is enough to make me feel something again. Maybe it was the contrast of being with Maggie and then spending the night listening to the wind howl by myself in my tiny cabin, but I *really* liked being with her. Not just being taken care of, though, that was definitely nice. Being around Maggie makes me . . . happy.

I set the tax papers face down on the coffee table and make my way toward the kitchen. "Not to cast doubt on your lived experience," I say, "but I have to check the water myself. I've had guests who insisted their hot water wasn't working, but when I got to their cabin, they were turning the wrong faucet."

"Wow. How did these people manage to book a vacation rental if they've gotten this far in life without learning which faucet is hot water?"

“These are the questions that haunt me, Maggie.”

“Well, if you’re going to check the water, you should do it the right way.” She leans her hip against the counter as I turn on the hot faucet.

“Oh yeah? And what way is that?”

“The way I did it this morning. Hop in the shower before checking the water temperature.”

I cringe and suck a breath through clenched teeth. “Yikes.”

“I know. I’m still recovering. Hence the scarf.” The way she looks at me makes it seem almost like she’s watching to see my reaction. Is it too much to believe she’s wearing my scarf for a totally different reason but doesn’t want me to know it?

Probably.

I let the water run and turn to rest against the counter so we’re facing each other. “Are you regretting the choice to come to Santa’s Haven yet?”

“What? No. I mean, yeah, it hasn’t gone exactly like I saw it going in my head, but . . .”

I wait for her to go on.

She shrugs. “When does anything ever go the way we plan?”

“True.” I didn’t plan on feeling the way I’m starting to feel about Maggie.

“If things got bad, I’d take up Stevie on her offer to spend Christmas with them, but we’re not there yet.”

“Well, I hope it doesn’t come to that.” It won’t. Not if I have anything to say about it. I turn to check the water and turn off the faucet. “Still ice cold.”

“You don’t want to hop in the shower and make sure?”

I dry my freezing hands on the Rudolph towel hanging on a hook next to the sink. “That’s a really enticing offer, Maggie, but I think I’ll take your word for it.”

She shrugs a shoulder. “Okay. If being thorough isn’t really your thing . . .”

I press my cold knuckles to her cheek, and she swats my hand away, jumping back. Impulse tells me to pull her right back again, but I refrain. “I’m going to check the water heater. I’m assuming it’s the pilot light. If so, I can fix it. If it’s something more complicated, we’ll have to call someone in from San Bernardino.”

She follows me toward the utility closet. “You think they could get someone out here so close to Christmas?”

Kneeling down, I adjust the gas valve, then pull the screwdriver from my pocket and work on removing the screws from the access panel. “Good question. I’m not sure, but hopefully we won’t need to find out.” Or maybe we will, and maybe it’ll mean this cabin is unfit for human habitation and I’ll have to offer her mine.

Nope, Wes. We’re entering weird territory now.

I set the panel cover aside and peer inside. “Yep. The light is out.” Not disappointed at all. Nope.

“And you can fix that easily?”

“I mean, don’t underestimate the skill required to do this”—I press down the pilot valve—”and this”—I pull the lighter from my pocket and stick it in the access point.

The pilot ignites with blue fire, and I turn to look at Maggie, who’s smiling down at me. “That *does* look really complicated.”

“You have no idea.” The water heater starts to hum, and I stand up and brush off my knees.

“Thanks for doing that,” Maggie says, moving out of the doorway. “At risk to life and limb, no less.”

“I’m glad you appreciate the hazards of my job.”

“You *did* fall off the roof the other day. How’s your head, by the way?”

I press my fingers to the bump there as we head back to the living room. “Fine. My pride is the only thing still recovering.”

“I’m sure you fell with grace and poise. It’s a miracle you stayed up there as long as you did. It was torture in here for me, wondering when the worst would happen.”

I smile slightly. She was worried about me. I don’t really have anyone worrying about me at this point in my life, and it’s weird. Good weird.

“You said you had a question for me?”

“Oh yeah.” I grab the papers from the coffee table and face her. Suddenly, I feel really presumptuous for thinking I could ask her to do this. I mean, this is her job, right? She deserves to be paid for her trouble. Maybe I can get Bill on board with that, but I need to see whether she has any interest first. “At the risk of telling you more than you ever wanted to know about this place, Crystal Peaks is kind of . . . struggling at the moment.”

“Struggling?”

“Financially.”

“Oh,” she says. “I had no idea. I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks. I’m hoping we can turn things around. No offense to Bill, but he’s not exactly Fortune 500 material. He loves Crystal Peaks, but he doesn’t have a lot of patience for all the things it takes to make it really profitable.”

She nods, but I can tell she’s wondering where I’m going with this.

“Anyway, he’s been working on tax stuff—end of year and all that—and he’s worried we’re going to get saddled with a huge IRS bill like we did last year. He also has no idea how to fill out the forms because we hired someone to do it in the past.”

Her eyes drop to the papers in my hands. “Are those tax forms?”

I nod. “And look, Maggie, I know you’re on vacation right now, and it’s three days until Christmas, and I definitely don’t expect you to—”

“Can I see them?” She’s got a hungry look in her eyes. Definitely not what I was expecting, but I guess she *is* an accountant. Maybe tax forms are like catnip for them.

“Um, yeah,” I say. “Are you sure, though?”

Eyes fixed on me, she reaches over and gently but firmly pulls on the papers. Mouth spreading into a grin, I provide some resistance, forcing her to try harder. She does, and I let the papers slip from my grasp.

She immediately takes them to the couch and starts poring over them, and I sit beside her, watching her with amusement.

“You really like your job, I take it?”

“No,” she says. “I mean, yes. Parts of it. Tax season is crazy, and it lasts so much of the year. I’d probably love it if there weren’t so many clients. It’s hard to be as thorough and detailed as I like to be when we’re moving through so much, you know?” Her eyes never leave the papers, but she frowns. “You’re being taxed as an LLC?”

“Uh . . .”

She glances up at me with a smile. “You have no idea. I get it. That’s normal.” Her gaze returns to the paper, and she runs a finger along the boxes. “I’d think it would make more sense to be taxed as an S-Corp.”

“Yeah, that was my thought too . . .” It wasn’t. I’ve never even heard of an S-Corp.

She shoots me a quick, knowing smile, her eyes twinkling in a way that reminds me of the night sky. “We’re on the same page, then. Who was this guy you said did your taxes before?” Her brows are furrowed as she turns to the next page of last year’s tax return.

“Some friend of Bill’s, I think. Why?”

“Just curious. It’s hard to tell with just this—I’d need more detailed records to be sure, but I have questions.” She looks at

me, an expectant light in those beautiful eyes.

“You want the detailed records?”

She nods fervently. “I mean, *if* you want that level of help. If it’s just a matter of filling out this year’s forms, I can definitely guide you through that. It wouldn’t take too long, provided Bill has the numbers we need. That would have to wait until end of year, though, since the numbers won’t be final yet.”

“But you’ll be gone by then.” Even as I say it, it hits me. It’s not that long until she leaves. Will I see her again? It seems like a lot to hope she’ll be back at Santa’s Haven next year. And, even then, that feels like a long time from now.

Her face falls, and she sits back. “Right. I hadn’t thought about that.” She lets out a sigh. “And honestly, right when I start back up at work, tax season begins, full-tilt.”

I hesitate. Bill really didn’t ask for help with anything but filling out the forms, but Crystal Peaks *needs* the help. Not to mention, I’d love to learn more about this sort of stuff. Anything that can give me a leg up on turning things around here.

Maggie’s willing to go through last year’s records to see anything that could be adjusted, which is an incredibly nice offer. Maybe doing that with her would help me avoid future mistakes. But equally enticing—no, *more* enticing, even—than the help with finances is the prospect of spending time with Maggie.

“This is your Christmas vacation. You shouldn’t be spending it looking over Crystal Peaks’ taxes.”

She laughs. “Are you kidding? Forensic accounting is my favorite.”

“Really? *Forensic accounting* does sound cool, I admit.”

“Right? With all the hit forensic shows out there, it seems like a missed opportunity not to have a forensic accounting one.”

“Mmhmm,” I say, trying not to smile. “Total goldmine, I’m sure.” I search her face and turn more fully toward her. “If you’re serious and are really willing to go through things with me, I’d appreciate it so much. I don’t know anything about this stuff, but if I’m going to be managing Crystal Peaks, I really should. It’d be great to see how you work.”

Her brows shoot up. “Managing Crystal Peaks?”

I cross my fingers. “I’m hoping to take over when Bill retires next year.”

“Wes, that’s amazing! You’d be so good at it. And yes, I’m more than happy to help you. I already finished all my continuing education courses, and, as much as I love reading and watching movies, I think I underestimated the amount of time I’d have.”

My gaze flits to the stack of books on the table by the couch, and I smile. “*Bath Tangle* not holding your interest?”

Her eyes widen, and her cheeks turn beet-red. “Okay, that title is *not* what it sounds like.”

“Uh-huh.” I wink at her.

“Seriously. It’s Bath as in the city in England. Not like a . . . bathtub.” She hurries over and grabs the book, bringing it back and showing me the cover. “See? That’s the Bath skyline. And the ‘tangle’ part is just about the love triangle, not a tangle of . . . bodies.”

Doing everything I can not to laugh, I take the book, check out the very ’70s cover, then flip it over to read the description. It doesn’t sound too bad, honestly. And definitely doesn’t read like the description of a hot and heavy romance.

“I’ve actually never read a romance,” I say, flipping through the pages.

“Really? Well, it doesn’t get better than Georgette Heyer, in my opinion.”

I meet her gaze. “Yeah? What do you love about her?”

She shrugs, her gaze fixed on the book. “She’s super witty, and she makes the time period come alive. Plus, she has a

really light touch—you won't get any of the super sappy stuff with her. She makes me laugh out loud, and I love her heroines."

"Why's that?" It sounds like I'm interrogating her, but I'm just so curious about Maggie. What makes her tick? She's so sweet, but every now and then, I get a little taste of sass.

She takes the book from my hands and fixes a bent corner. "I like how strong the heroines are. They always know just what to say, and they can hold their own, even in a society stacked against them."

I scan her face. In a lot of ways, Maggie's had things stacked against her, and I bet there've been plenty of times she wished she'd had a great comeback for some of the things people said to her. People like me.

And despite it all, she's grown into this kind and lovely person I want to spend more and more time with, the more I get to know her.

She looks up and smiles. "Anyway, they're good books, not just good romances."

"Could I borrow this one?"

A flicker of hesitation lights her eyes.

"You shouldn't have made such a convincing argument for Mrs. Higher's writing."

"*Hay-er*," she corrects with a smile. She looks at me for a second, then hands me the book.

I smile and tap it lightly on my palm. "When do you want to go over the finances?"

"Whenever works for you. You're the one with a work schedule to keep up on."

"How about after I finish tonight? I mean, I'm kind of always on call, but that's what the walkie-talkie's for. I can come back around dinnertime, check the pilot light to make sure it's still going strong, and we can work on the tax stuff—I'll gather up the documents from last year."

Did that sound like me trying to ask her on a date without actually asking her on a date? I don't think forensic accounting is generally date-night material, and maybe that's why I feel like I'm not crossing any lines. My feelings for Maggie are irrelevant. This is business, and having dinner together is only logical. Humans have to eat. Bill, of all people, knows that.

"Yeah, that sounds good," Maggie says. "Though, I only really have frozen stuff from Costco for dinner."

"I'll take care of dinner. Not that I have anything against Costco. But providing the food is the least I can do to repay you."

"It's really not a big deal," she says, looking away with a hint of pink in her cheeks.

"To me it is," I say. "So, I'll see you later, then?"

"Yep. I'll just be . . . here."

Half an hour later, I'm already checking my watch, wondering when it'll be time to whip up some dinner.

CHAPTER 16

MAGGIE

“**M**y sweet Westley.”

That dang phrase from *The Princess Bride* has been going through my head all day. It’s so problematic, combining the word *my* with *Wesley*. And what about *sweet*? Wes wasn’t particularly sweet when he sniggered as people like Brielle called me Maggot.

True, I’ve forgiven him, but what am I supposed to do here? I need ammo to defend myself against him, and every single bullet is in the past. Where else am I supposed to reach to prevent these feelings?

Why couldn’t he call me Maggot again or flick my frizzy hair with a pencil? Instead, he has to be all charming and helpful and fall off my roof so I have no choice but to take him in.

When four o’clock rolls around, and I’ve finished an entire book and watched a Hallmark Christmas movie, I scrub off my makeup to spite myself. And after I shower—in my delightfully warm shower—I purposely don’t even brush through my hair. I’ll regret it badly tomorrow, but I’m proving something to myself here.

I stare at myself in the mirror—the frizzy hair, the freckles I tried to get rid of with lemon juice in junior high, the unruly brows. If I had a spare pair of braces, I’d clip those suckers on my teeth. Maybe then I’d stop hoping Wes would see me the way I want him to see me.

“Something is seriously wrong with you,” I say to myself.

I didn't even want Wes to come over earlier, but somehow, I ended up agreeing to essentially give him an intro course in accounting? Maybe I should cancel, tell him I'm not allowed to give tax advice to people who aren't clients of Quillen. It's not true, but it's certainly not out of the realm of possibility.

I square myself with a hard glance in the mirror. "Get it together, Maggie. He's just another client."

One with a smile that could make Wednesday Addams swoon, says the devil on my shoulder.

"As long as it's her and not me swooning, we're good."

There's a knock on the door, and my pulse revs. I force a natural pace as I make my way downstairs to answer.

"Hey," Wes says, holding a cooler with a big stack of papers on top.

"Come in." I open the door wider, and he passes through. I plug my airway for a few seconds. Measures must be taken, no matter how juvenile they might seem.

He sets his load on the coffee table, then takes the cooler to the kitchen. "I probably should have asked if you like chicken fettuccine alfredo." He unzips the cooler, and steam rises, along with a scent only eclipsed in allure by his cologne.

"I'm actually vegan," I say. "And gluten- and dairy-free."

His head whips up, his expression crestfallen.

"I'm totally kidding," I say, coming over and letting myself be embraced by the smell of delicious carbs and fat. "Who doesn't like fettuccine alfredo?"

"People who are vegan, gluten-free, and dairy-free." He side-eyes me, but a smile tugs at his lips.

I shake my head as I peer into the cooler. "They still find ways to imitate it. Oh my gosh, it looks and smells delicious."

He smiles, apparently satisfied. "After that taste test the other night, I figured I owed you."

I waft some of the scent toward my nostrils. "Absolutely you did. And this will do very nicely."

“I’m glad you think so.” He reaches in and pulls out the aluminum container. “Let’s hope it tastes as good as it smells.”

I soon discover that it does.

“Does your cabin have a fully stocked kitchen or something?” I ask as we eat plates full of Americanized Italian goodness at the table. “I can’t imagine making something like this here.”

“That’s because all you have is expired ingredients.”

“And a freezer full of Costco items.”

“Right. Can’t forget that.” He cuts up some chicken and shrugs. “When I first came here, I ate a lot of easy, pre-prepared stuff. But that gets old really quick, so I started making weekly trips to the grocery store in the town a few miles away. Good food works its wonders: I’m a lot happier now.”

“Me too,” I say as Wes serves me another helping.

It sure would’ve been nice if he had totally botched this meal. Overcooked the pasta, had the lid come off the salt as he was pouring it in, made a clumpy sauce. Why does he have to do everything well?

We spend dinner catching up on the past decade of our lives, talking jobs, hobbies, and family. From what I gather, Wes barely talks to his parents. All my theories about everything coming easily to him are cracking at the foundation. I had it hard as a kid at school, but he had it hard at home. I prefer what I went through.

After dinner, we get going on the real reason he’s here: taxes. Wes takes out a small, lined notepad and a pair of glasses.

“I know,” he says as I watch him unfold them. “What am I? Sixty? But they really help me.”

Yes, they do. Studious Wes has an allure that Normal Wes lacks entirely as he nods his head and jots down terms and definitions while I talk. As anticipated, he’s quick to grasp the concepts and ask thoughtful questions as we look through

documents and discuss the different amounts their (terrible) accountant plugged into the tax forms.

The more I see, the more I'm convinced the man had no clue what he was doing.

After a while, Wes sits back and puts both hands behind his head, looking at the spread of papers all over the coffee table while I try not to admire his well-formed arms. "Sheesh. There's so much to know."

I smile sympathetically, but inside, for the first time tonight, I feel accomplished—like maybe Wes isn't better at *everything* than I am. "That's why I have a job."

"And you're clearly very good at it. Do I dare ask how much you think Bill's friend cost us in taxes?"

I clench my teeth and try to smile.

He shuts his eyes and pulls off his glasses, letting his head tip back and rest on the back of the couch. "I knew that guy was no good. That's what you get when you hire friends for cheap."

"Friends like me?"

"What? No. You clearly know what you're doing."

"I do. And the good news is it can be different for the resort going forward. You'll pay way less in taxes and keep a lot more profit if you make the changes we've talked about—especially changing your tax election." I flip through the forms in my hand. "And even for this year's return, there are things you can do to save and prevent a nasty bill. I've already seen a number of tweaks you could make."

He sits forward, resting his knees on his elbows. "You do this stuff all day?"

"Not *just* this. I work on accounts payable and receivable, payroll, financial planning. That sort of stuff."

"But you enjoy it?"

I tip my head from side to side. "Some of it. I don't love sitting at a desk all day every day, and tax season is pretty

stressful, but I do love numbers and helping people navigate the tax code and save money. I guess my job is kind of the opposite of yours in a lot of ways—you're not at a desk very much, are you?"

He shakes his head. "I'm not good at sitting still very long. I like the variety here—every day is a little different, and with the seasons, it changes even more."

"Like I said, opposite of my job. It could be a hurricane outside and I'd never know."

He tips his head from side to side. "I think you'd know."

"What I *do* know is that John in the cubicle across from mine eats tuna with relish for lunch every single day and that he's terrible at Tetris, particularly given how often he plays it."

Wes smiles and shifts toward me. "So, Santa's Haven is a pretty big departure from the normal for you."

I glance around at the cabin—the Christmas colors and patterns, the weird elves and jolly Santa, and finally back to Wes. "You could say that, yeah." Wes is just as big a departure as the rest. I don't spend much time with people of the opposite sex. Besides Tuna John.

"Well, I'm really glad you came," he says.

I suck in a breath. He's just saying that because I've given him hope for the financial future of Crystal Peaks.

He stands up and puts out his hand. "Come on. We deserve a break after all that work."

I hesitate, then take his hand, ignoring the zing that travels from there straight to my heart. It's been too long since I dated. Not that this is a date. I mean, yeah, he made dinner, but he was clear that it was just a thank you for my help. Plus, he had dinner with the Blakes last night. This must be what he does with guests.

"What sort of break?" I ask, trying not to notice how he's still got my hand in his. Do I pull it away? I don't want to. Which means I should. But I don't.

He shrugs and turns to look around. His elbow brushes the Christmas tree, and an ornament tumbles onto the floor.

“Whoops.” He drops my hand, grabs the ornament, and tries to identify where it fits.

“Maybe leave it off,” I say, tilting my head to look at the tree. “I don’t think that thing is hurting for decorations.”

“You’re telling *me*. Care for some Christmas tree with your ornaments?”

“I know. I kind of hate it.”

He raises his brows at me. “Does this mean you’re coming around and admitting this place is just way too much and also vaguely creepy?”

“Nope.” It *is* all of the above, though.

He sighs and turns back to the tree, still searching for where the stray ornament came from.

“Do I think it could do with a tad less decoration?” I ask. “Yes, but I’d rather have an overdecorated tree than no tree at all.”

His head whips around to me, his eyes alight. “*That’s* what we should do.”

I raise my brows, not understanding. “What?”

“Undecorate it.”

I stare.

“Not entirely,” he explains. “Just until it’s . . . normal.”

I look at the tree, with every accessible inch covered in ornaments and garlands and light strings. It’s completely garish. “Are we allowed to do that?”

“The family that owns this place has strict contract terms about the decoration—”

“You mean all of this wasn’t *your* idea?” I say, feigning surprise.

“I know. Shocking, isn’t it?” He looks around us. “But there’s nothing stopping us from a temporary change, as long

as we put it all back.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Will we remember where to put everything?” I can’t deny I like the idea of spending time with Wes putting everything back in place before I leave.

“Well enough to pass it off, yeah. What do you say?”

I can’t help a little chuckle. All of this is a perfect demonstration of how messed up my life is, how totally opposite of what it should be. I’ve watched a lot of Hallmark movies, and one thing you can almost always count on is that the couple will decorate a Christmas tree during the movie. They’ll also often drink hot cocoa. And the happy climax where they get together? It almost always happens on Christmas.

But me? I got dumped last Christmas. This year, I almost poisoned Wes *and myself* with a revolting batch of rancid cocoa, and now I’m about to undecorate a tree with him. I don’t even want to know what’s next.

This is clearly the universe’s way of telling me that I’m not Hallmark romance material.

Maybe it’s because Wes is bored to death with all the tax stuff we’ve been doing, but he looks way too excited at the prospect of removing ornaments from the tree. I can’t say no to that face. If he asked to pelt me with those ornaments, I’d probably say yes just to spend more time with him.

“Sure,” I say with a shrug. “Let’s do it.”

One by one, we untangle and remove kitschy ornaments from fake tree branches, taking the opportunity to admire—and laugh at—each one.

“I’m so confused,” I say as I untangle a wire candy cane from a miniature felt Christmas sweater ornament. “Did they go to the thrift store and purchase every ornament they had on hand?”

Wes has to intervene and assist, and our fingers brush and tangle almost as much as the ornaments. “That’s probably best-case scenario. I’m telling you, these people are strange.”

“Eclectic.”

“Strange,” he insists. “Trust me on this. You haven’t met them. But seeing all of those”—he nods at the elves watching our every move—“should be evidence enough.”

I can’t really argue with that, and based on the way he’s looking at me, Wes knows it.

His walkie-talkie beeps, and Bill’s voice comes through. “What’s your twenty?”

Wes brings it to his mouth and presses the button. “Been working on those tax documents.”

I pretend not to listen, busying myself with choosing the next ornament to be taken from the tree. This highly disturbing Santa mermaid ornament is top of the list.

“It’ll have to wait,” Bill says. “When it rains it pours. We’ve got a situation at Cabin 8, a pilot light out at Cabin 2, and a lost key at Cabin 4. I’ll handle four. You take the others.”

Wes opens his mouth to respond, then clamps it shut. “Ten-four,” he says into the mic. He lets out a big sigh and looks at me. “Unfortunately, duty calls.”

I offer a smile. Is he really sad about it, though? A guy who doesn’t want to go to Brielle’s cabin wouldn’t have had dinner with her, would he? I’m pretty certain that’s not part of his job description. Did he make her the same thing he made me?

“I think we’ve made some drastic improvements, though,” he says, surveying the tree. “I wish I could stay to see it through.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine,” I say, waving away his wish, like I have no feelings whatsoever about him leaving. I’m not bummed or jealous or anything. I turn back to my task. “Screws must be tightened, right?”

He chuckles, and I can feel his eyes on me, so I try to look extra nonchalant as I untangle another candy cane ornament.

“Maybe I’ll stay just a few more minutes,” he says.

I set it with the pile and turn to face him. “You really don’t have to, Wes. I can finish up this *very* important task. Don’t want to keep Cabin 8 waiting.” *Don’t want to keep Brielle waiting* is what I mean, but it would’ve come out sounding as salty as the Dead Sea, so I refrain.

Go, me.

There’s a short silence. “There’s nothing going on between Brielle and me, Maggie. If that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Even if there is, it’s none of my business,” I say with a smile Jolly Old Saint Nick would be proud of.

“But there’s not,” Wes says. “I’m not allowed to cross the line of professionalism with the guests.” The flicker of intensity in the way he looks at me could be interpreted as either *So don’t get any ideas about why I’m here* or *I’d cross that line with you, but I’m not allowed*.

It’s also possible that it means, *Company policy is the only reason I’m not dating Brielle*. Clearly, I’m not fluent in intensity flickers.

Whatever it means, the takeaway is clear: Wes and I are just friends. Like we already established. There’s nothing going on between us, and there *won’t* be anything in the future, either.

He stays to help with a few more ornaments, then says he should go—and says it so reluctantly, I’m tempted to believe him. He puts on his coat and scarf, and I put a hand to the one I’m still wearing.

How did I let myself get to this place so quickly? Where I want to be around him constantly? Maybe Stevie was right and the loneliness is getting to me more than I thought. I’m disappointed in myself, though. I want to believe my heart is adequately protected against invaders, with high, stone walls and archers ready to take down anyone who dares to force entry.

But in reality, the walls are more like a knee-high, white picket fence with a gate and a broken latch. *Don’t even bother wiping your feet*, says the doormat on my porch.

Wes turns to me, and his brows pull together. “Are you okay?”

I smile. “Yep. A-okay.” I give a thumbs-up.

He chuckles, but his brows stay knit. His beautiful, brown eyes scan my face. “Is it okay if I come tomorrow to work on the tax stuff more?”

More work. It’s all business. But even then, I want to say yes. I’m embarrassed by myself. I did tell him I’d help him, though. And I do love all those numbers.

“Yeah, of course,” I say.

He smiles and gives the scarf I’m wearing a little tug. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

And then he leaves. To Brielle’s.

CHAPTER 17

WESLEY

Getting a call to Cabin 8 isn't ever the best part of my day. But when it takes me away from Maggie? No thank you.

I considered going to Cabin 2 first until I realized it would be nice to have an excuse to leave after I fix whatever supposedly needs fixing at Cabin 8. Mr. Blake answers the door, offering me a friendly smile and a handshake. He's a very successful businessman, but he's on vacation, so he's wearing a cashmere sweater and dark denim. The Rolex on his wrist doesn't lie, though.

Brielle pops up behind his shoulder and smiles at me. "I'm so glad you're here. We've been freaking out."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Uh-oh. What's up?"

Her dad smiles and pats Brielle on the shoulder. "I'll leave Brielle to tell you about it."

Oh, goody.

He makes his way to where his wife is rolling out dough in the kitchen. It doesn't look like anyone is *freaking out*, but maybe this is how the ultra-wealthy do it.

"So, what's going on?" I ask.

Brielle widens her eyes, as if to say *how much time do you have?* "There's an animal that's kind of . . . stalking us."

I blink. "Oh." That wasn't what I was expecting. "What kind of animal?"

“I’m not sure. It always comes when it’s dark, but it’s been scratching at night and screeching sometimes. It was here like fifteen minutes ago.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll take a look outside and see what I find.” This is actually best-case scenario. It means Brielle will let me do my job instead of cozying up to me while I tighten the joints on the toilet connections.

“I’ll show you where it was.” She grabs her coat from the rack near the door and slips her arms in before I can come up with a reason for her to stay inside. She pulls her coat tightly around her and smiles. “Okay, ready to go.”

I lead the way to the porch stairs and pull out my flashlight with Brielle right behind me. I’m not sure how much I believe her about this supposed animal. It’s probably just a hungry squirrel. If it even exists.

There’s a little rustling somewhere in the nearby trees, and Brielle grabs my arm and sidles up close to me as some snow falls from a few branches.

“Just snow settling,” I say, hoping she’ll let my arm go now that she knows it’s not a bear coming to eat her.

She doesn’t.

I scan the area with my flashlight, keeping my arm loose so I don’t give Brielle the wrong idea. I’m very much an unwilling shield.

It occurs to me that if Maggie were here right now, I’d probably be teasing her and playing into her fears just to get her to hold onto me more tightly. And she’d probably do anything to avoid that.

Instinctively, I glance back toward Santa’s Haven, but the view is blocked by trees.

“There,” Brielle says, pointing to a place by the back door. “It was right there.”

Then why didn’t we go out that door in the first place?

I shine the flashlight all around. “Well, there’s nothing here now.” And I doubt there ever was. I extract my arm from hers

on the pretense of needing it to put my flashlight away. “If you have any issues again, just call the front desk, and Bill or I will come take a look.”

“I hope it’s you,” Brielle says.

I try for a smile. “Hopefully, there won’t *be* any more issues.”

“Right,” Brielle says, tucking her hair behind her ear. “I feel bad bringing you here for nothing. Come inside and have some warm cookies and milk. My mom has been making ginger snaps.”

Good grief. Is the woman on vacation or The Great British Bake-Off? She’s constantly cooking and baking.

“That’s a really nice offer,” I say, “but I’ve got an extinguished pilot light at Cabin 2 I’ve got to get to right now.”

Brielle nods. “Okay. Maybe another night.”

“Yeah.” Not likely. Dinner with the Blakes was plenty to make it clear there’s nothing there for me. No feelings for Brielle. She’s a nice girl and all that, but I definitely don’t see her as anything more.

“What are your plans on Christmas Eve?” she asks. “You can’t possibly be working, right?”

I’m not. Bill told me I could have Christmas Eve and Christmas Day off. Not that I really need them. “No, not working, but I have plans.” Plans to hang out in my cabin and not spend it with the Blakes.

My mind hops to Maggie, who will *also* be alone. Think she’d want to do taxes on Christmas Eve? Is *doing taxes* also a euphemism for cuddling on the couch and sharing a Christmas kiss? Speaking of which, how is there no mistletoe at Santa’s Haven? Seems like a huge oversight—something that should definitely be in the contract terms of a place like that.

Brielle looks at me thoughtfully. “Wes, it seems like you put me off whenever I ask you to hang out.” She lifts a shoulder. “If it’s not obvious, I like you.”

It *is* obvious. And very uncomfortable. I can't keep going on like this, trying to walk this line. I'd hoped my response to her flirting and hinting was enough, but apparently, not. I'll have to be clearer. Thankfully, there's a way to do that while also letting her down easy.

"Listen, Brielle. I like you . . . but I can't. I'm not allowed to date guests. It's against Crystal Peaks policy."

"Oh." She rubs her lips together and nods. "Okay, yeah. I get it."

I give a little smiling grimace. "Hopefully, you can sleep easy tonight knowing there are no wild animals knocking at your door."

She gives a polite chuckle, and I go to open the back door for her.

"Shortcut," I say. It also happens to let me walk back to my snowmobile without her hanging on my arm. Two birds, one stone.

The pilot light fix is quick and easy at Cabin 2—and far less enjoyable than the one at Santa's Haven the other day—and I glance at my watch afterward.

10:04 p.m. Dang. I was hoping it might not be too late to sneak back to Maggie's in case she's still working on that tree. But I do have a little shred of pride left. I can wait for tomorrow.

Tonight, I'll dive into *Bath Tangle*.



A lot of people know that the shortest day of the year is December 21st: winter solstice. What most people don't know is that the *longest* day of the year is today, December 23rd: the day I have to wait to see Maggie until I'm done with work.

I spend the morning doing cleanup in the parking lot, which has gotten pretty messy since the snow and windstorms.

There are some spots where the asphalt has cracked. They'll have to be fixed in the spring, but for now I try to break up the ice and toss it so it doesn't melt and freeze again and again.

When I get back to reception, it's paperwork and administrative work. I don't mind it normally, just as long as it's not *all* I do.

And as long as it's not keeping me from seeing Maggie. I cannot. stop. thinking about her.

"You said you were working on taxes last night?" Bill asks once I gather up the papers and tap them on the desk.

"Yeah, Maggie—the guest at Santa's Haven—is an accountant, so she knows a ton about taxes. I think her recommendations will really help us, Bill."

Bill wipes the bridge of his nose, then replaces his glasses. "I'm glad to hear that. We can use all the help we can get."

"Agreed." I pause. "I was wondering if you'd be opposed to me going there now to get a little more done on that. She's only here a few more days, and tomorrow is Christmas Eve, so I don't want to bother her then." I do, though. I genuinely do.

Well, not *bother*, no, but be with her, yes.

"I need you to chop some wood before you do anything else. That cold front really made a dent in our supply."

I suppress a sigh. I actually like chopping wood, especially because it means I get to ride out to our chopping spot. It's one of the prettiest places within striking distance of the resort, in my opinion.

But right now, that's what's standing between me and spending time with Maggie. I think I get what they say about men having one-track minds. Mine is a straight shot, short track to Maggie the last few days. And right now, there's a bunch of uncut wood in the middle of that track.

Unless . . .

"I'm on it." I gather up my gear, and my eyes flit to Bill, who's munching on Pringles while he looks over occupancy rates for the year. I do feel a bit guilty making it sound like my

only motivation for going to Santa's Haven is to help Crystal Peaks. Should I tell him how I feel about Maggie? That I'm falling for one of the guests, and it's not Brielle?

But what would I even say? It's not like anything's happening. I don't even know how Maggie feels. She can be a bit hot and cold. Or warm and lukewarm. Sometimes I think she feels the same things I feel, while other times, I feel like I must have been crazy to make that assumption.

I don't want to cause issues or worry Bill for no reason at all.

"See you tomorrow?" I say, bracing myself in case he has any last-minute tasks to saddle me with. Particularly ones involving Cabin 8.

He shakes his head without looking up, and I beat it before he can change his mind. I grab the hatchet from the back of the reception cabin and take it with me to the snowmobile. It's low on gas, so I fill it up with what's left in the canister, then attach the cargo rack and some bungee cords.

I hop on and start up the engine, feeling a bit jittery. What I'm about to do is risky, but if Maggie says yes, it'll be worth it.

If she says no . . . I'll have some extra *oomph* to offer in my wood chopping.

It's warmed up six or seven degrees in the past day, which makes it feel almost pleasant as I take my usual route to Santa's Haven. I park the snowmobile on the side of the cabin and head up the stairs, refusing to let myself overthink this.

I rap on the door firmly, and before long, Maggie opens up.

"Hey," she says a bit breathlessly.

"Hi," I say, unable to stop smiling at the sight of her. She's wearing my scarf.

"Are you off work already?"

"Not technically," I say. "I have to go chop some wood—our supply is low—and I wondered if you'd want to come."

Her eyes widen. “Chop wood?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t make you chop the wood. I promise I’m not trying to get free labor from you—or at least not any more than I already am with the whole tax thing, but . . .” Wow, do I ever stop talking? Nope, still going. “It’s in a really pretty spot, and I thought maybe you’d like to get out for a bit and see a little more of what these mountains have to offer. *If* you want. Just figured I’d stop by on my way. No pressure at all if you have other stuff you’re busy with or just aren’t really feeling up to it.” At some point, I have to run out of words, right?

Maggie’s smiling, like it hasn’t escaped her notice how blabbery I am right now. “I’d love to.”

I let out a shaky sigh of relief. “Awesome. You should bundle up.” She turns to grab her coat and gloves. “It’s not as cold as it was the other day, but it’s still chilly, and you can always take *off* any extra clothes.”

I clench my eyes shut. Am I really suggesting Maggie take off clothes? She doesn’t seem to notice, though, and within a few minutes, she’s got on every warm thing she owns. And my scarf.

She follows me to the snowmobile, and I scoot up as far as I can on the seat so there’s plenty of room for her. Will she try to hold onto the seat again?

Nope. Her arms wrap around me as I turn on the engine—and some engine in my body turns on simultaneously. Impulse tells me to lean into her, but sanity overrules. Maggie has no choice but to hold onto me, and it’s not fair or wise to assume there’s something else behind it.

“It’s about a ten-minute ride,” I say over the engine noise. “You ready?”

Her chin is on my shoulder, and she nods.

We cruise through the snow, putting the white rooftops of Crystal Peaks farther and farther behind us. I take us along the edge of a big grove of tall pines, stretching up into a cloudy sky, while Maggie’s arms stay securely around me, her face

against my back. Every now and then, she pulls back and looks around, asking a question here and there.

I slow down as we reach what I've been waiting for—a little depression in the terrain ahead. It's a big pond, completely frozen over, with a spread of forest behind.

“Wow,” Maggie says.

I smile, glad she appreciates it like I hoped she would.

At a slower pace, I take us around the edge of the pond toward the place Crystal Peaks has a permit for cutting trees. It's a little spot at the edge of the forest, where trees grow thickly enough that the ground beneath is only covered in a couple inches of snow.

The snowmobile rolls to a stop, and I kill the engine but don't move. I let Maggie be the first. I don't want her to let go of me.

“This is incredible,” she says with awe, and her grip loosens slowly.

I nod and look around, my eyes fixing on the pond. “Usually, the middle of the pond isn't frozen, but it's been cold enough recently, I guess.”

Using me for leverage, Maggie gets off the snowmobile, and I follow as she makes her way to the edge of the pond.

“I've never seen anything like this,” she says with awe. “I mean, not in real life.”

“Movies and pictures don't really do it justice, do they?”

She shakes her head, then gingerly sets a foot toward the edge of the pond, where the ice starts. “Is it really frozen? Like, safe to walk on?”

“Definitely,” I say. “Especially out here at the edges. See?” I step onto the ice and put my hands out to show how safe I am. I stomp my heel into the ice for good measure. “Frozen solid. Elsa approved. Come see for yourself.” I put out a hand.

She rubs her lips, looking hesitant but so very tempted as she stares at the ice under my feet like it might crack and cave

in any second. Her gaze flicks up to me, and I keep my hand where it is. She finally takes it and, in her fuzzy boots, sneaks a foot out onto the ice, putting some weight on it and watching for any signs of cracking.

“I’m not going to let you fall in, Maggie,” I say with amusement.

“This isn’t some elaborate plot to get rid of me, then?” she asks as she puts her second foot on the ice.

Her hand grasps mine more tightly, and I resist the urge to pull her toward me where I can better keep her safe. “I thought *you* were the criminal mastermind between us.”

She laughs, confused. “What?”

“That whole hot chocolate thing? I thought maybe you were getting revenge on me. For the past.”

Her mouth twists to the side. “Okay, fair enough. That stuff *was* really gross. But it was an honest mistake.”

I take a couple steps back, and she follows, gaining more confidence with each one.

She wobbles as one of her feet slides, and I grab her by the waist to keep her up. I have promises to keep. And I’m not complaining about it.

“You good?” I ask.

She holds my gaze while she finds her equilibrium. “I think I’m good.”

Reluctantly, I let go of her. “Any minute, you’ll be ready to try a triple axel.”

She raises her brows at me, then slides forward on one foot, sweeping an arm in front of her slowly enough that it doesn’t make her lose balance.

“Ten out of ten,” I say, looking duly impressed.

“Your turn.”

“Challenge accepted.” I put a bit more distance between us, spread my feet, then carefully turn on one foot.

She offers a golf clap. “Very . . . controlled.”

I laugh as she reaches out to stabilize me. “Slow. Just call it slow. But hey, I think we’re ready for the Olympics.”

“They won’t know what hit them,” she agrees.

I reach for her hand and raise it above her head, twirling her around slowly. I can’t get myself to stay away from her, and so far, she doesn’t seem to mind.

She finishes her twirl, then raises our hands above my head as best she can. “Want to try? The men never get to do the twirling.”

“Right? *Thank you.*” She’s shorter than me, so I have to duck a little bit to clear our arms. It’s an awkward feat, and my weight shifts dangerously, then so does hers.

It’s no use. My feet scramble to keep me up. Maggie tries to save me, but I’m a crab in a bucket, and I pull her down with me.

“Oof,” I grunt, cringing as my hip, elbow, and shoulder throb. “Are you okay?”

Next to me, Maggie laughs. Stares up at the sky and laughs like an adorable crazy person. She’s never looked more beautiful than she does right now, surrounded by my favorite place in wintertime. The landscape is a blank slate of white snow and ice, and Maggie is the colorful paint, stealing the show. I want to go up on my elbow, lean over her, and kiss those smiling lips.

She looks over at me, and there’s a flicker in her smile, like she realizes I’m not thinking about the Olympics or our spectacular fall anymore. Her gaze fixes on mine, but she rubs her lips together, like she knows I’m thinking about them. Not just them, though. I’m thinking about her and how, for the first time in years, I want to put myself out there and give things a chance with someone.

She turns her head away and smiles up at the sky. “I guess this is why men don’t twirl.”

I let out a soft sigh, accepting that, at least right now, she doesn't want me to kiss her. "Style points are definitely ten out of ten, though."

"Oh, absolutely."

There's silence as we stare up at the clouds. "We should probably chop the wood," I finally say.

She starts getting up, and I grab her arm to keep her steady. "Thanks. But you meant *you* should probably chop the wood, right? Me trying would be a safety hazard."

I take the hand she offers and use my other one to push me up from the ice. I face her once I'm up, taking a second before I respond. "I think you underestimate yourself."

Her eyes search mine like she's trying to understand whether I'm saying more than I seem to be. She gives a light laugh. "We'll see if you think that in ten minutes."

Half an hour later, we have wind-burned cheeks and a cargo rack full of wood—partially chopped by Maggie—and bungee cords to hold it down. Maggie holds onto me tightly on our way back to Crystal Peaks as the day gives way to twilight. Maybe I'm feeling what I want to feel, but the way she holds onto me this time feels . . . different. She keeps so still, too, like her mind is working on something.

We drop the wood at the pile behind reception, then make our way to Santa's Haven, where we're buried in tax filings and paperwork for a good two hours. If I'd realized talking taxes could be so enjoyable, I'd have dropped Turbo Tax a lot sooner and hired Maggie.

We break up work with dinner: potstickers from her Costco freezer stash.

She yawns a couple of times when it gets close to ten o'clock, and I ignore it because I don't want to leave yet. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and the next day is Christmas, which means I don't have an excuse to see her. I may be desperate, but I'm not about to ask Maggie to do taxes on the biggest holidays of the year.

But when she yawns multiple times in the space of a few minutes, my sense of chivalry finally overpowers my selfishness.

“I thought this stuff was like catnip for you,” I say as she covers her mouth yet again.

She laughs into her hand. “It is. I don’t know why I keep yawning.”

“Hear me out on this, but maybe you’re tired?” I shrug like it’s a crazy idea. “And I’m keeping you up working on your vacation.”

“I don’t mind it at all.”

The irrepressible desire to yawn attacks *me*, and I give in reluctantly.

She smiles. “But *you’re* tired. It’s normal. You don’t have the stamina for this stuff that I do.”

“Pssst. That yawn was entirely your fault.” I stand up. “But tomorrow is Christmas Eve. I don’t want to keep you up too late.” I put out a hand because, at this point, I can’t let Maggie do anything on her own that I could possibly help her with.

She lets out a sigh and accepts my help.

I grab my coat, gloves, and hat by the door, extra reluctant to leave this warmth and contentment for the freezing night air.

“So,” she says as I finish gearing up.

“So,” I say, facing her. Now that she’s right in front of me, I’m finding it harder than ever to be okay with not seeing her for two days. It sounds dramatic. And it is. But Maggie won’t be here forever. She won’t be here much longer at all, actually, and that realization is making me anxious. And a bit daring. “Can I come by and say hi sometime tomorrow?”

“And finish up the tax stuff?”

I hesitate. I *could* use that excuse. But that’s all it is. A lame excuse to spend time with her.

It's time to be brave. If I don't do it now, I won't have the chance until a couple days before Maggie leaves, and then I'll just be hitting myself. I shake my head. "Just to come be with you." Why does it feel like I just handed her my actual heart?

She swallows, then nods. "I'd like that."

I can't stop my mouth from stretching into a stupid grin. Maggie would like to see *me* on Christmas Eve. And this isn't fraternizing. It's just two friends getting together so they're not alone all of Christmas Eve. "Okay, then."

"Okay."

Still grinning like a fool, I open the door and step out onto the porch. I turn toward her and take a couple steps back. "I'll see you tomorrow, then." My heel hits one of the ornaments, and I swing around to stop it from coming off its stand. I've transformed into a gangly teenager. Can't wait for my voice to crack.

Maggie's trying not to smile. "See you tomorrow, Wes."

I head down the porch stairs and glance back at her in the doorway, where she waves to me.

I wave right back, bidding farewell to both Maggie and any last shred of chill I had.

CHAPTER 18

MAGGIE

look at the clock on the wall. The hour hand is pointing to Prancer, which means it's almost three o'clock.

I force my eyes back to my movie, determined not to look at the clock again until it's over. It's the montage of Christmas moments right now—throwing snowballs at each other, walking through a Christmas market, choosing a tree—which means I'm about halfway through. The dreaded breakup still lies in wait.

Come by and say hi.

That's what Wes asked if he could do. I've spent most of Christmas Eve wondering what it means. Will he come sit on the couch for a few minutes like a carpet salesman, then say bye? Is he going to knock on my door, say hi, then leave? Will he throw a snowball at my window from the snowmobile, wave, and zoom off?

I also have no idea what time to expect this mystery visit.

I keep myself busy with books and movies all day, but there's a problem—they're all romances, and, whatever the hero looks like, in my head, I'm picturing Wes.

Not just Wes. Wes and me.

I don't know what to think of things right now. Yesterday afternoon and evening were the most fun I've had in a long time, and maybe I'm crazy, but I thought Wes was having a good time too. And then he asked if he could come say hi today, and I just . . .

I'm in such big trouble.

And the worst part? I like it. I'm a troublemaker. A trouble-lover.

But why? Wes told me very clearly that he can't date his guests. So, what exactly am I doing? Or expecting, for that matter?

There's a knock on the door, and I jolt, accidentally tearing a page in my book.

I suck in a breath and try to smooth over the rip. "So sorry!" I whisper to the book as I shut it and head for the door, my heart in my throat. It might not be Wes. Maybe it's Bill. Or Brielle, telling me to back off.

I open the door, and Wes smiles back at me. "Happy Christmas Eve, Maggie." He pulls me into a hug, and it takes me by surprise enough that it's a second before I return it.

"Happy Christmas Eve," I say into a haze of cologne. I shut my eyes and let myself bask in being held by Wes Warren like this. I don't really know what he wants with me, but I just want to imagine for a second that this hug means something more to him.

We pull apart simultaneously, and I hesitate, unsure if he's accomplished what he came to do.

He's silent too, looking at me with a glint in his eyes. "You going to invite me in, or—"

"Come in, come in," I say, hopping out of the way like a deer about to get hit in the road. I don't want any obstacles between Wes and coming inside.

"Thanks," he says. "You sure I'm not interrupting anything?"

"Ha!" I cover my outburst with a hand, and his eyebrows go up. I clear my throat. "No, um, I've just been relaxing, you know? Enjoying"—I put out a showy hand, and it stops on the elves—"the ambiance."

"Is it just me, or do they get creepier and creepier? Oh." He pulls something out of his back pocket. "I finished." He

hands me *Bath Tangle*.

I accept it absently, staring at him. “You . . . finished?”

He nods. “I finished it in two days. That Ivo has quite the temper.” His brows pull together. “Is that what women really want in a man?”

I drop my eyes to the book because I can’t look at Wes while telling him what I want in a man. “I think women just want a man who will fight for them.”

The silence lasts long enough that I finally have to look up at him. The way he’s looking at me makes my heart race.

He finally nods. “I’ve been thinking about what you said about the heroines. And for the record? I like you the way you are.”

My breathing stills, but he doesn’t stop looking at me in that way that lights a fire inside me.

“There are a lot of ways to be strong, Maggie. Don’t fall for thinking otherwise.”

I attempt a nod, but it’s feeble. I’ve never thought of myself as strong, but as soon as he says the words, I know he’s right. Strong doesn’t have to mean loud or stubborn. Maybe it can also mean showing up at school day after day despite the teasing, or being kind when you haven’t had much kindness shown to you.

Wes glances over at the TV. “What’re you watching?”

“Nothing,” I hurry to say. “Just a romance.”

He goes over and plops down on the couch. “*Just* a romance?”

I shut my eyes. I do that. I try to downplay the things about me that are weird or that I worry show weakness. “You’re right. I meant to say, it’s a romance.” I smile to sell it.

“Come on.” He makes a fist and shakes it in the air. “With more gusto!”

“It’s a romance!” I shout.

“There we go.” He moves a couple pillows, keeping his eyes fixed on the screen intently. “Have I missed too much already, or can I hop in right now and not be too lost?”

I look at him for a second, warmth washing through me. He’s so different from what I remember. I had just given him the most perfect ammunition possible to make fun of me, and not only did he not take it, he insisted I own it. And now he wants in on my cheesy Christmas movie.

“We can rewind a bit,” I say, taking the seat next to him. It’s a bold move for me, but he doesn’t bat an eye, grabbing the remote and putting the movie back fifteen minutes.

He’s not a quiet movie watcher. He has a lot of questions about what’s happened before now—to the point that I end up rewinding it to the beginning. I don’t mind keeping him here a bit longer.

“I feel like we need some popcorn,” he says when we reach the point I had gotten to when he arrived. “Do they have any? Is it expired?”

“They *do* have some, but I don’t know the expiration.”

“On it,” he says, popping to his feet. He moves to head to the kitchen, stops, and turns back toward me, putting out a hand. “Popping popcorn is a joint effort.”

“Between you and the microwave?” But I take his hand anyway. Of course I do. I may be strong, but I’m not *that* strong.

“If it’s disgusting, I don’t want it to be all my fault.”

I show him which cupboard the popcorn is in, and he brings it down for us to inspect together. Our arms are pressed against each other, and our heads are close. I saw the expiration date ten seconds ago, but I pretend to search for it like he is.

He points to the date. “Doesn’t expire until February.” He puts up his hand for a high-five, and I smack mine against his. He grips my hand with his fingers and lets them fall together between us. And they just sit there.

Oh my gosh is he holding my—

He drops my hand to open the packaging, then slips the popcorn into the microwave and presses all the necessary buttons. All while my heart does an Olympic floor routine.

The microwave starts humming, and he turns toward me, crossing his arms over his chest and smiling.

“What?” I say, suddenly self-conscious.

He shrugs, still looking at me. “Nothing.”

I brush at the place next to my mouth. “Do I have something on my face?”

He chuckles and pulls my hand down. “Relax. You don’t have anything on your face. I just”—he shrugs again—“like looking at you.”

Relax, he says, and then he says something like that? I don’t even know what to do with myself.

“And being with you,” he adds.

I’m so awkward. I don’t know how to respond to him—or how much to read into what he’s saying. I’m not exactly advanced when it comes to flirting, so I don’t even know how to recognize it a lot of the time, which makes me feel weird and vulnerable.

Why can’t I just be more like a Heyer heroine? A Heyeroine.

Maybe I can. At least in my own way.

I blow a breath through my lips, gathering my courage. “I’m not really good at this sort of thing, Wes, so I’m just going to ask. Are you flirting with me?”

He blinks a couple of times. I’ve taken him off his guard. And also shot dead any little sparks that might have been between us.

He laughs nervously. “Um, yeah, I am. Or, I guess so, depending on what you mean by flirting.”

I stare at him, unsure how to respond to that.

Welp, now that I've killed the chemistry, I may as well make sure it's not just playing dead. "What do *you* mean?" Does he mean he's just having a good time, so he hopes I'm not reading into it? Or the opposite?

He fixes his gaze on me like he's trying to figure out what to say.

And me? I'm trying to act like the answer he gives is a matter of passing curiosity rather than the one thing I absolutely need to know or I will spontaneously combust any second.

"*Flirting* doesn't really feel like the right word," he says, "and I don't want to give you the wrong idea—"

"Yeah, no, of course," I hurry to say, wanting to crawl under a snowdrift and let the elements consume me. "You have rules about this sort of stuff, I know—not to say I really thought you meant anything by what you said because it was more of a—"

He grabs my hands. "Maggie. Slow down. I don't think you're understanding. Probably because I'm not explaining very well." He takes in a big breath, then stills. His brows knit. "Do you smell that?"

I sniff, and my eyes go wide. "The popcorn."

"Shoot." He pushes the button to open the door, and a bit of steam—nope, it's smoke—comes out. He waves it aside, then reaches in and pinches the end of the bag between his finger and thumb, pulling it out of the microwave. "Can you grab the door? There's no saving this. Gotta get this bad boy outside."

I rush to the back door and fumble with the lock for a second before pushing it open to a rush of cold, night air. Wes squeezes beside me and drops the bag onto the snow just outside the door, then pulls the door shut.

"Whew," he says.

"You're very . . . fast-thinking."

“That stuff can stink up a house for *days*.” He sniffs and lets out a sound of annoyance. “It already smells in here.”

He’s right. The scent of burnt popcorn hovers around us, pungent and pervasive.

“You mind if I open the door for a bit?” he asks.

I shake my head. My cheeks are still hot with embarrassment, so they could use the chill. I should probably go stick my head in the snow, but I’m too curious to see whether Wes will continue our conversation to abandon ship right now.

Wes props the door open with a piece from the chopped wood pile out back, then brushes off his hands.

“Here,” he says, guiding me with a hand on my back. “Let’s get away from the cold. We’ll just leave it open a few minutes.”

I try to walk at a pace that’s not so slow he has to force me forward but not so fast I don’t get to feel his hand on the small of my back.

“So,” he says as we sit back down on the couch. “No popcorn, I guess.”

“I have a bunch more stuff in the freezer,” I say. “I was just planning on doing some orange chicken or something. We have to eat *something*. I mean, if you want. You probably have better stuff at your cabin you were planning to eat.”

“Christmas goose,” he says.

“Wow, really?”

“No. I’m really low on groceries right now, actually. Orange chicken sounds amazing.”

I can’t stop a smile. He’s staying for dinner. “Do you want to make it now or after the movie?”

He narrows his eyes pensively. “After.”

I grab the remote and press play. Apparently, we aren’t resurrecting the whole flirting discussion right now. Or possibly ever. Maybe he’s glad he doesn’t have to spell it out

for me. But then, why is he even here? The way he looks at me sometimes makes me think it's not just to pass the time.

The air in the cabin gets cooler by the minute, and after a few, Wes scoots over on the couch and grabs a blanket. When he scoots back, it's closer than we were before. He lays the throw—with an enormous, jolly Santa face pattern—over us. I force myself not to glance at the back door, which is still open.

But I'm not sly enough for Wes.

“Can you still smell it?” he asks. “I can still smell it.”

“Yeah,” I lie. “I can a little.” The only thing I can smell right now is Wes. I'm not watching the movie because my brain is entirely caught up with the feel of his hand next to mine. I'm afraid if I move, it'll alert him how close we are, and he'll change positions.

This isn't normal, right? Tricking someone into being close to you?

Definitely not normal. Or healthy.

His hand slips over mine, and he threads his fingers through the space between my fingers.

I stare straight forward. It's been so long since I've been in this situation. I've only ever had one boyfriend before this, and the memories of how it all started are hazy—probably overshadowed by the way things ended.

After a few seconds, Wes lets go, wraps his arm around me, then reaches for my hand again. My heart has never beat this fast in its twenty-seven years of existence. Impulse is telling me to snuggle into Wes's shoulder instead of sitting like a robot.

So, I do, and his arm tightens around me, like he wants to keep me as close as I'll let him.

What is even happening, right now? I don't know, and I don't know how much I care. I'm in heaven.

A little scratching in the direction of the kitchen perks my ears up. It stops for a second, only to start again.

“You okay?” Wes asks.

“Do you hear that?”

Wes pauses the movie, and we both listen.

“Is it a branch or something?” I ask.

“It’s not windy tonight,” he says, pulling the blanket aside.

I let go of his hand and stand up after him, secretly vowing to take revenge on whatever has had the gall to pull us out of that bliss.

We walk toward the kitchen side by side, and the scratching stops. We pause and look at each other, both frowning. We keep going, the air getting colder the closer we get to the open door.

We get to the threshold of the kitchen, and I grab Wes’s arm, my eyes wide.

There’s a raccoon in the kitchen.

Wes starts when he catches sight of it, then takes a slow step back, pulling me along with him just as another raccoon appears in the doorway, munching on burned popcorn.

“Oh my gosh,” I whisper, resisting Wes’s pull as I admire the adorable creature eating a blackened popcorn kernel. “That is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Are you crazy?” Wes whisper-shouts. “They’re evil.”

“What?” I look at him. “They’re so not. Haven’t you ever watched TikTok?”

He snorts softly and lets go of my arm, keeping his eyes on both animals. “Maggie, they’re aggressive and disease-ridden.”

I take a couple slow steps toward the kitchen. The raccoon in the kitchen pauses its opening of the drawers, watching me with curiosity. “They watch movies and snuggle with you and are *so* smart.” I smile and talk to the one looking at me. “Hey, little guy. Or little lady. Aren’t you just the cutest—”

Two fiendish shrieks fill the kitchen, and I double back into Wes's arms.

His breathy laugh tickles my ear as we both keep our eyes on the raccoons. "What were you saying?"

I try to calm my breathing. "How do we get rid of them?" I whisper urgently, holding onto Wes's arms that are wrapped around my stomach.

There's nothing but silence from him behind me.

"Wes?" I turn my head to look at him.

He shuts his eyes. "I hate raccoons. So much." He lets out a big breath and fixes his gaze determinedly on the animals. "It's fine. I'll be fine. I can do hard things." He lets go of me and reaches for the blanket we were using. He waves the enormous Santa face like a bullfighter, getting closer to the kitchen.

"Make some noise," he calls to me over his shoulder.

"Uhh." I hesitate, unsure what exactly to do. Scream? Sing?

I hurry over to my phone on the coffee table. With shaking fingers, I navigate to my music and tap the first song on my Christmas playlist, then turn up the volume all the way and set it down on the table.

The opening measures of *All I Want for Christmas is You* fill the cabin as Wes continues his bullfighting techniques.

Unsure what to do with this strange assault, the raccoons hesitate, then scurry out the back door. Protected by the Santa blanket in front of him, Wes rushes over, grabs the doorknob, and slams it shut, hopping backward as fast as he can.

After a pause, he turns to me with a huge smile and says something I can't hear.

"What?" Mariah Carey drowns my voice out, and I grab my phone and stop the music.

"We did it," he says, tossing the blanket toward the couch.

"We did!" I put up my hand for a high-five.

He smiles, but instead of high-fiving me, he sets his hand against mine and locks our fingers together. His gaze turns more intent as he looks down at me. “I *really* like you, Maggie.”

I swallow under the full force of his beautiful eyes. “You do?” I eke out.

“Yeah. I do. I thought it was obvious.”

I shake my head.

He looks down at our clasped hands. “Is that why you asked if I was flirting with you?”

“I thought maybe you were just being nice to me because you had a guilty conscience. Or that you were just having fun. Passing the time.”

He looks up at me and frowns, his thumb stroking mine. “I *am* having fun, Maggie. This is the best Christmas Eve I’ve had in a really long time. Maybe ever.”

I take in a shaky breath, having a hard time believing what I’m hearing.

“But it’s not just about me,” he says. “I told you I was just going to stop by and say hi, and now I’m kind of commandeering your holiday—burning your popcorn and letting in raccoons.”

We both smile.

“So, tell me honestly, Maggie. Do you want me to go?”

CHAPTER 19

WESLEY

I wait for the verdict, for Maggie to tell me what she wants. I don't want to go back to my cabin—at all—but I only want to be here if she really wants me here.

“I want you to stay.”

I search her eyes. Maggie's such a kind person, she'd probably say that just to protect my feelings, even if she really wanted me gone. “Do you really mean that? Or are you saying it because you're too nice to tell me the truth?”

She smiles and reaches a hand to my hair. It's a small gesture, but the way it reassures me is anything but that.

I can't help myself. I wrap my arm around her waist and look down into her brown eyes. She puts her palms on my chest and lifts up on her toes, bringing her mouth to my ear. “I just don't want to be left with the raccoons.”

My mouth pulls into a wide grin, and I shut my eyes, letting my lips brush her ear. Her body trembles, belying her words, and I pull her flush against me. I let my lips trail from her ear across her cheek. I stop at the corner of her mouth, and we stay like that for a few seconds, breathing each other in.

Her lips shift and brush across mine, exploring the surface and leaving a tingling in their wake. I wait until I can't handle it any longer, taking her lips with mine. The way she responds, her hands sliding up and around my neck, her head tilting to meet my mouth more fully, tells me she was ready and waiting.

I've only had ten days to get to know Maggie, but something inside me, something deep inside, tells me that right now, I'm holding the exact person I've been needing my whole life.

It's terrifying and exhilarating all at once, and in my anxiousness, I kiss her harder, reassured when she meets the shift willingly, threading her hands into my hair and holding me to her.

She pulls back just enough that our noses touch, and I lift my chin, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"Wes?" she whispers as we rest our foreheads together.

"Mmhmm?"

There's a short silence, and I pull back to look at her, sensing something's wrong.

She drops her gaze, but her arms are still around my neck, making me hope it's not something serious.

"I'm nothing special, Wes," she says, meeting my eye again. "I haven't changed that much since you knew me before. I may not have braces anymore, and I may have grown up a little bit, but I'm still . . . Maggot Jensen. And you're still Wesley Warren. Completely out of my league."

"You're kidding, right?" I play with one of her curls, then tuck it behind her ear. It pops right back out. "It's always been the other way around, Maggie. You're out of *my* league."

She shakes her head and tips her chin down, and I take it and nudge it back up until she's looking at me. "I'm not just saying that, Maggie. I've regretted the type of person I was back then for a really long time." I search her eyes. They're so dark, but they hold so much light. "I wish I'd gotten to know you then. Maybe things could've been different—for both of us. You were exactly the type of person I needed in my life. You still are."

She looks at me for a second, then presses her lips to mine. It's different this time, our kiss. It's soft and gentle, full of the sort of tenderness neither of us had when we were young and both needed so desperately.

We break apart, and she shivers. I pull her into me, resting my chin on her head and rubbing my hands up and down her back to warm her. “Should we go finish our movie?”

She nods, moving both of our heads up and down. I let go and grab her hand, leading us back to the couch.

“We might have to rewind it a bit,” I admit as we snuggle up again. “I wasn’t really watching. I was kind of distracted trying to figure out when I could hold your hand. And kiss you.”

“Me too,” she says, her expression half-guilty, half-mischievous.

“The answer is anytime you want,” I say, giving her my hand. She takes it, then leans over and kisses me on the lips. We linger there for a few seconds, then Maggie turns her head, looking over at the elves, who are watching us with a disturbing level of intensity.

We both laugh and look away, and I reach for a pillow and chuck it at them, knocking a few over.

Maggie grabs the remote and rewinds about ten minutes, then looks at me questioningly.

“More,” I say.

She goes back twenty minutes.

“More,” I repeat.

Her eyebrows go up.

I laugh. “I mean, if we’re being technical, I’ve been thinking about holding your hand and kissing you for a few days.” I wish I could go back that far and relive all of this. Time feels so short.

She snuggles into me, and a sense of well-being fills me as we start the movie up again. For a long time now, I’ve thought this sort of thing wasn’t in the cards for me, that it would be easier to just forego romantic relationships than risk being rejected the way I felt I was by my parents—or ending up like them.

But Maggie's worth that risk to me. There's not an unkind bone in her body. She makes me want to be better and dream bigger. And kiss her more.

We finish the movie and make the promised orange chicken. It's not a traditional Christmas Eve, but I wasn't lying when I said it's the best one I can remember.

"Did you know raccoons can open doors?" she asks as we take our plates to the sink.

"Geez, Maggie," I say. "I don't need to know that type of information. I'm already terrified of the things." I guess Brielle *wasn't* lying the other night when she said there were wild animals at their cabin. I feel kind of bad now.

"Yeah, me too. All their skills were really cute on TikTok, but now that I've seen them in the wild, I'm worried they'll come back for more tonight."

I glance at her, trying to judge how serious she is, then pull her up against me. "Need me to stand watch?"

She smiles and puts her hands up on my chest, looking up at me. "Your matador skills *were* pretty impressive."

"I'm not sure whether it was me or the gigantic Santa face that did the trick."

"Or Mariah Carey." She chews hesitantly on her lip. "Want to watch another movie or something?"

"I thought you'd never ask." I will take as much time as Maggie will give me tonight.

We snuggle up on the couch, and my mind is only half on the movie. The rest of it is on Maggie and how good I feel when I'm with her. I know I have a conversation with Bill ahead, and it might not be pretty, but I don't even care right now.

As the movie wraps up, I try to settle a debate in my mind: how extra it is to ask if Maggie wants to watch a third movie. The answer is clear. It's extra extra.

"Hey, are you really worried about the raccoons?" I ask.

“A little,” she admits. “But I’ll be fine. I’ve got all these guys here to protect me.” She gestures to the elves.

I clench my teeth. “Yikes.” I hesitate for a second. “Do you want me to stay? I will.” I’ve embraced the extra extra.

She doesn’t answer right away. “If you stay, I don’t think I’d be able to sleep anyway.”

“I wouldn’t bother you. I promise.”

“It’s not that. I’m just too worked up emotionally to relax that much.”

I play with the nearest curl hanging over her shoulder, not sure if that’s a compliment or not. “Worked up in a good way?”

“The best way.”

I smile and sigh. I want to stay here with Maggie, but it’s selfish to do it, knowing she won’t be able to sleep. “I should go, then. You need sleep.” I start untangling myself from the pretzel we’ve made, but she stops me with a hand on my arm.

She looks up at me. “Stay. Just a little longer.”

The edge of my lip crawls up. I settle back in, and half an hour later, Maggie’s fallen asleep on me.



If I thought leaving in the morning would be any easier than leaving last night, I was dead wrong.

We stand in the open doorway, holding hands and saying bye five times before I actually leave. I’m sure my hair is mussed and my eyes are sleepy, but I don’t care, and Maggie doesn’t seem to either.

When the door finally shuts behind me, I look around me for a few seconds, wondering if it’s the fact that it’s Christmas Day, or what’s going on with Maggie and me, or if Crystal Peaks really *does* look more beautiful than ever.

The snowy lawn of Santa's Haven is strangely bare, and I tap a thumb on my pants before making a choice. It takes half an hour for me to set up the inflatables again, and I try to use the time to plan what I'll say to Bill. I'm not exactly sure how things will work with Maggie and me—she's leaving soon, and we don't live all that close—but I know I want to give it a shot. I just hope Bill will understand.

When I get to Frosty, I tweak his nose. "You're not so bad after all, you know that?"

I hop on my snowmobile and head for reception, a bit of nervous energy making my stomach feel strange.

I push the door open and yell, "Merry Christma—" I grow still on the doorstep.

Brielle and her dad are inside, talking to Bill, who's behind the counter. All three of them turn to look at me, and I have the distinct feeling I was the subject of their conversation. Did the raccoons head for Cabin 8 after they stopped at Santa's Haven? Maybe I worked night patrol on the wrong cabin.

Mr. Blake's gaze goes to my hair, and I smash it down with a hand.

"I expect more professionalism from this resort than this." He jabs his pointer finger at me.

"Wesley," Bill says. He doesn't sound happy. He never does, but right now he sounds particularly serious. "Where have you been?"

I glance at Brielle, wondering if there's a connection between the question and the strange fact that she and her dad are spending Christmas morning at reception.

"We came by your cabin to bring some homemade muffins," she says. "You weren't there, so we drove around for a few minutes looking for you. We saw you holding hands with the girl at the end cabin."

"Looking as though you'd spent the night," Mr. Blake adds, staring at me with hard eyes. He turns to Bill. "Understand this, Bill. I cannot support an institution I can't confidently vouch for."

“Whoa whoa,” I say, putting up my hands. “I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves here. Yes, I was at Santa’s Haven. Maggie”—I clear my throat—“Miss Jensen had a run-in with some raccoons, and I stayed to ensure there were no further problems.”

Brielle’s gaze is intent on me. I don’t think she believes me, but honestly? I don’t care. It’s so uncool of Mr. Blake to hang his influence over Bill’s head based on something Bill had no control over. And I’m not stupid enough to think this is really about him worrying about Crystal Peaks’ reputation.

“Can I talk to you for a minute, Bill?” I ask.

He looks at Mr. Blake, whose lips press together. “I trust you to handle this,” Mr. Blake says.

“Of course,” Bill replies.

“Merry Christmas,” I say as they make their way to the door, unable to sap my voice of all its irony. Brielle shoots me a hard glance just before the door closes.

I let out a huge breath. “Bill, let me explain.”

“I think you’d better,” he says. “Tell me honestly, Wesley. Is there something going on between you and the guest in Santa’s Haven?”

This wasn’t how I had envisioned this conversation, but that’s out of my control now. Thanks to the Blakes. “That’s exactly what I came here to talk to you about. I didn’t want to jump the gun before I knew if there *was* something going on, since nothing had really happened, and I wasn’t sure how Maggie felt.”

“So, there *is* something.”

I nod. “It’s not just a fling, though, Bill. I would never do that to you or to Crystal Peaks. I really like Maggie.”

He pins me with a hard gaze, unmoved by my juvenile declaration. “So, you lied to Mr. Blake?”

“No. I set a boundary. It’s none of Mr. Blake’s business who I choose to spend time with.”

“It is when it can compromise the resort’s business.”

I scoff. “Oh, come on, Bill. You know that’s not what he’s worried about. He just doesn’t like that I rejected his daughter.”

“Either way, he’s not happy, Wesley. And when Mr. Blake isn’t happy . . .”

Both of us are quiet.

“You can’t let the man terrorize the resort and hang his power over your head.”

“I don’t have a choice. Do you want to take over a place drowning in financial difficulties? One that has no way for the guests to reach us because Mr. Blake refuses to let us use the road?”

“No, I don’t. But I also don’t want to manage a place that’s not really mine to manage because Mr. Blake is pulling all the strings.”

His jaw clenches and unclenches as he looks at me. “Are you sure you want to put everything at risk for a girl you hardly know?”

I hold his gaze. It’s a big question for a relationship—can I even call it that?—in its infancy. I love Crystal Peaks, and I want to take over here more than anything. But I can’t give up things with Maggie, either. I need to see things through, or I’ll regret it for the rest of my life. “*Am* I putting everything at risk?”

It’s silent as we look at one another. At the end of the day, it’s Bill’s decision to make. He gets to choose his replacement.

“I’ve worked hard here, Bill, and you know better than anyone how much I care about this place. I’ve been working with Maggie on how to maximize our profits and maybe even expand. But if you really think I’d jeopardize that for a fling, or if you have someone else you think would do a better job than me . . .” I lift my shoulders. “Then, you’ll do what you have to do. Merry Christmas, Bill.”

I turn and push through the door, then head for my cabin.

CHAPTER 20

MAGGIE

Wes and I agreed to both shower and get ready, then meet up at his cabin in two hours. Since I had finished both tasks within half an hour of him leaving, I thought I'd channel my inner Betty Crocker and see if there were enough ingredients to bake something to take with me.

I rifle through the cupboards, remembering our taste test night with a smile. That was a fun night. But nothing compares to last night. Nothing could possibly top it. It's all downhill from here, and I don't even care.

My stomach has been host to a kaleidoscope of butterflies all morning. Are there some too-good-to-be-true feelings niggling beneath the surface? Of course there are. But I'm not doing them the favor of paying them any attention.

I've got butter and eggs, and there are some chocolate chips that are still good. If I can find some oats and borrow a glass of milk, I could potentially whip up some cookies. I hum *Jingle Bell Rock* as I search one of the lower cabinets. In the back, I find a bag of oats, but I'm not terribly hopeful they're still good. I can't find the expiration date on the packaging, though, so I open it.

I gasp and draw back slightly. Maggots. There are maggots squirming around inside.

I step away, my eyes glazing over.

It's not a big deal, right? This cabin is full of expired food, and that's a breeding ground for maggots. It's not something I

should be reading into. I don't believe in messages from the universe.

But still, the word bounces around my head, bringing back all sorts of memories I don't want to relive.

And I don't have to.

I grab the container and toss it into the garbage can.

I let out a big breath. No cookies, then. That's fine. I'll just take the bag of treats I bought at Costco.

Maybe there's something else I can do for Wes, though
....

When the two hours pass—okay, maybe I'm a *little* early—I put on my winter gear, inhaling Wes's scarf without a hint of self-consciousness for the first time, and head outside, a bag of treats in one hand, a bunch of papers in the other.

The crisp air brings a smile to my face. This is my first white Christmas, and I have to say, it has exceeded expectations so far. Granted, I could be walking through a dump and still be pretty happy given my destination.

The snow crunching under my cheap boots makes me happier than ever, and I resume my humming as I follow the road that leads past all the cabins. My steps slow and my humming gets quieter as I spot Brielle and her parents loading up their Land Rover with ski gear. They must be heading for the slopes.

I try to keep the crunching of my footsteps to a minimum, but Brielle turns as I get nearer, doing a double take.

I smile and wave, not knowing what else to do.

"Hey," she says, setting her skis in the back and heading over to me. "Maggie, right?"

My heartbeat kicks into gear. I was pretty sure she hadn't recognized me when she last saw me. Did Wes tell her about me? "Yeah. And you're Brielle, aren't you?"

Her mouth stretches into a smile, showing her Colgate perfect teeth. "Wow. You haven't changed a bit." She reaches

for my hair, tugging on one of my curls.

I suppress the impulse to slap her hand away. “Neither have you.” I try to say it kindly, but I don’t mean it that way, so it comes out ambiguous.

“When did you stop going by Margot?” she asks.

I shrug. “After high school.”

“Aw. That’s too bad. I really like the name Margot.”

She liked how easily it lent itself to the nickname Maggot.

“It’s fun to have this little reunion,” she says. “Seeing you, and then Wes, of course. Have you seen much of him?”

I hesitate a few seconds. Part of me wishes I could tell her that not only have I seen him, but we spent Christmas Eve together, including a whole lot of kissing. But I don’t. I don’t want to be to Brielle what she used to be to me.

“Yeah, I’ve seen him a fair amount.”

She snaps. “Right. When I saw him this morning, he told me you’d had some raccoons at your cabin or something?”

My stomach clenches. She saw Wes this morning?

She laughs, showing that overbright smile again. “He said you were pretty scared, so he had to stay the night. I don’t blame you. Those things are totally freaky.”

I try for a laugh. “Yeah. They really are.”

She tilts her head to the side, looking at me like I’m an object of pity. “I think both of us feel really bad for all those things we said to you in the past.” She gives a little sympathetic grimace. “He definitely looks like a man with a guilty conscience.”

I have no idea what to say. It’s been long enough since I dealt with someone like Brielle that I don’t know how to take what she’s saying. “Well, I should go. Merry Christmas, Brielle.”

“Merry Christmas, Margot.”

I keep walking on the road, but once I'm out of eyeshot, I take a hard left, traipse through the snow, and take the untrodden route behind the cabins toward Santa's Haven, my boots full of snow by the time I get there.

I kick them off on the porch and head inside, my feet wet and frozen through my socks.

I shut the door with my back and lean against it, breathing in. I just need a minute.

So he had to stay the night. That's what Brielle said. Did Wes really say that?

My heart doesn't want to believe it, but maybe she's right. What if he's only spending time with me because he feels guilty? What if it's pity he feels, not anything even close to resembling love? What if I've unwittingly gotten myself into the same situation as last year—rejection on Christmas Day?

I clench my eyes shut. I'm spiraling, and I have to stop it. So what if I saw some maggots this morning? So what if Brielle made me feel like I'm back in junior high again?

I'm not.

Impulse is telling me to run—to go home and get myself out of this situation before I get hurt again. If Wes doesn't want anything real with me, maybe I can play things off the same way. I just take last night for what it was—a nice night of snuggling—and move on.

I open my eyes and look around the cabin, this place I've called home for the past ten days. It's weird and kitschy and vaguely creepy, but I've also had some great memories here. My gaze lands on the book Wes brought back. The one he actually read.

He wouldn't do that if he wasn't at least somewhat serious about how he feels for me. Right?

I should just ask him. Be brave like I was last night when I asked if he was flirting with me. I don't think I can handle trying to read signals and put two-and-two together on my own. I'm an accountant, yes, and I'm good at math, but this sort of math is out of my wheelhouse.

I square my shoulders. I'm just going to talk to Wes.

Easy peasy.

Which is why I'm not shaking like a leaf when I put on my soggy boots and head back outside.



I push the door to reception open, and the bell jingles to notify Bill of my arrival. He looks up, and his gaze settles on me.

Whoa. The other times I came, he hardly even acknowledged me. Now he's staring at me over the top of his glasses like if he looks long enough, he might just figure out the mysteries of the universe.

"Hi," I say, stepping inside. "I know it's Christmas, and you're probably not working today, but I wanted to bring you this."

He doesn't say anything, but I walk up to the counter and set the papers on it. "Wes and I have been working on those. I finished up the rest of it today and, unless this month is significantly worse than the rest of the year, which I doubt, I think you'll be really happy with the results."

He frowns and pulls the papers toward him, his eyes running over the lines as he flips through the pages. He glances up at me. "You did this?"

"Wes and I did. Anyway, Merry Christmas, Bill." I wave and head out the door.

I haven't been to Wes's cabin, but it's unmistakable—the little A-frame just behind reception.

I take in a big breath and trudge toward it, wondering if I'll ever have feeling in my feet again. These boots are the worst.

I knock determinedly on the door, unsure if I should be channeling my inner Heyeroiner—ready to whip up some pithy, scathing comebacks if Brielle is right about Wes—or if I should act like nothing's happened.

The door opens, and Wes stands there, wearing a cable-knit sweater with a collared shirt underneath. Never has Christmas looked so good.

“Finally,” he says, pulling me into a hug so that the bag of candy is trapped between us.

My last hour of turmoil melts—like the chocolate between us will if we stay like this any longer—and I relax into his arms. We sit there as the seconds pass, and his arms tighten around me. It’s a different feeling than last night—more poignant, and I almost ask him what’s up.

“You going to invite me inside?” I mumble into his shoulder.

He chuckles and lets go, pulling me in and shutting the door behind me. It’s a studio cabin, decorated neatly but sparingly—the opposite of Santa’s Haven. I almost forgot what a normal room and empty wall space look like.

I feel Wes’s gaze on me and look at him. “What?” He’s acting differently, but I can’t put my hand on why. Or why it’s not scaring me.

“I’m just really happy to see you. I was a little worried you wouldn’t come.”

“Yeah, about that . . . sorry I’m late. I . . .”

“You what?”

“I was actually going to be early, but I ran into Brielle on the way.”

“Oh.” He searches my face, and his brows pull together. “Did something happen?”

I tip my head from side to side. “I think I was already in my head a little—I wanted to make some cookies for you and found maggots in the box of oats. So, when Brielle came to talk to me and said . . .” I let out a breath. I feel stupid being so affected by it.

Wes takes my hand. “What did she say?”

“She said she’d seen you this morning and that you’d mentioned you had to spend the night with me because I was afraid of raccoons.”

Wes shakes his head and looks away. “I’ll be honest. I’m disappointed in her. But I should’ve expected she’d pull something like that given her actions this morning.”

“What did she do?” My own interaction with her shifts to the background, overshadowed by sudden concern for Wes.

Wes plays with my hand. “After I left your place, Brielle and her dad were at reception. They narc’d on us—they saw me leaving your cabin, and since I had used the resort policy about guest interactions to let her down easy the other night . . .” Wes grimaces. “Anyway, her dad was spewing some nonsense about not supporting an institution that operates like that. Guess he thought whatever was happening between us was . . . sketchy.” He shrugs. “Bill wasn’t too happy.”

“Oh my gosh, Wes. He didn’t fire you, did he?”

He shakes his head. “Not yet at least. But I’m not so sure I’ll be taking over for him, either. Only time will tell.” It’s silent as he keeps threading his fingers through and back out of mine, his gaze on them.

“Wes, I’m *so* sorry. Let me go talk to Bill and try to set things right.”

He shakes his head and smiles at me. “There’s nothing to set right, Maggie. It’s not like this is a habit of mine—falling for guests. And it’s none of Mr. Blake’s business who I date.”

Falling for guests. Hearing him say it like that—it’s not like he said he loves me, but falling for someone feels more serious than a crush, and that can’t help but make me feel good.

Except that I’m still worried I’ve messed everything up for Wes. No wonder Bill was looking at me so weirdly when I stopped in.

“Wes, I’ll never forgive myself if you don’t get the promotion because of me.”

“If I don’t get it, it’s not because of you. I’ve worked hard here, Maggie. I’ve given it everything I’ve got, and if something like this makes Bill not want to give the job to me?” He lifts his shoulders. “He would’ve found some other excuse. Capiche?” He holds my gaze until I nod.

He takes my cheeks between his hands and presses a kiss to my lips, keeping them against his until my shoulders relax. When we pull apart, I rest my head on his shoulder, and he rubs his hands up and down my back.

“I almost left,” I say, feeling a strange need to confess my moment of weakness.

His hands pause.

I pull back and look at him. “It felt too much like a repeat of last Christmas. Like I was going to get my heart broken.”

He looks at me intently. “You know what would have happened if you *had* left?”

I shake my head.

“I’d have come after you, Maggie. Just like if you left right now, I’d come after you and try to convince you to stay.” He holds my gaze. “If you want me to, I’ll fight for you, Maggie. I’ll even wear a waistcoat and breeches if it’ll help my chances.”

I laugh and lower my gaze like it will stop my heart fluttering so much not to look directly at him.

“But,” he says, slipping his fingers through mine again and pulling me toward him, “I’d rather you stayed here so I can spend more time with you. And I’d rather wear this warm sweater instead of a waistcoat if that’s okay with you.”

Unable to stop from smiling, I meet his gaze and nod. “Fine. Keep the sweater.” It looks dang good on him. “Though, I must say, I think you’d pull off a waistcoat and breeches *very* well.”

One of his brows quirks. “Yeah?” He dips his head, and I go up on my toes for a—

There's a knock at the door, and we pull apart and look at each other, frowning.

“Hold that thought,” he says, letting go of me and heading for the door. He opens it, and Bill looks back at us from the doorstep.

CHAPTER 21

WESLEY

“Wesley,” Bill says, giving me a curt nod.

“Hey, Bill.” I keep my tone even, but Bill never comes to my cabin. He walkie-talkies me and tells me to come to reception if he really needs to talk to me.

There’s an uncomfortable silence as I wait for him to tell me what he wants.

“I can go,” Maggie says, trying to brush past me.

I put out an arm to block her path. “There’s no need for that. Do you want to come in, Bill?”

He nods. “I’d appreciate that.”

I grab Maggie’s hand and move us to the side so Bill can pass through.

“Wes,” Maggie whispers to me.

“It’s okay,” I whisper back. “He already knows, so there’s nothing to hide.”

“I just don’t want to be in the way.”

I give her a quick kiss on the lips. “Never.”

We turn to Bill, who’s watching us with an impassive expression. “I won’t keep you. I know it’s Christmas. I just wanted to clear a few things up so this morning won’t cloud your holiday.”

I put out a hand, inviting him to take a seat on my one couch, which he accepts. Maggie and I take a seat on the stone hearth across from it.

Bill meets my gaze. “I want to apologize for what happened earlier, Wesley. I thought about what you said, and you’re right. You’ve proven your dedication to Crystal Peaks, and I shouldn’t have called that into question.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

“I want to offer you my position, Wesley. Officially.”

I stare at him, taken off guard. I didn’t know whether he had come to apologize or to tell me he’d lost his trust in me, but I didn’t expect this. Maggie squeezes my hand, and I glance over at her, grinning from ear to ear.

“I hope to get things squared away so I can leave by mid-February if possible. There’s a complex I’ve had my eye on in the valley, and a condo has come on the market there.”

I sit up straighter. Mid-February is sooner than I had expected. A lot sooner. “I’m sure we can get things in order by then.”

Bill nods, and his gaze flits to Maggie. “I hoped you might be willing to help us meet that deadline, Miss Jensen.”

Her brows go up, and he nods.

“I know you have a job in Los Angeles, but”—he picks up the papers in his lap—“we could use someone like you if you have some extra time and could use the extra money. I’d pay you fairly if you could come up on, say, Saturdays. Or even every other Saturday.”

I look at Maggie eagerly.

She blinks. “I’d be glad to help.” She glances at me. “If Wes is okay with it . . .”

I let out an incredulous, breathy chuckle. “Okay with it? It’s the best idea I’ve heard in a long time.”

Maggie smiles broadly and nods, turning back to Bill. “Then I’m in.”

“Don’t you want to hear what he’s willing to pay you?” I ask, even though I’m flattered she’s jumping the gun like this.

“Oh,” she says awkwardly. “Yeah.” She clears her throat and straightens. “What I meant was, I’ll be happy to take a look at your proposal, sir.”

Even Bill can’t stop a little trembling at the side of his mouth. “Let’s go over it tomorrow, then.” He rises to a stand. “Well, that’s settled, then. Oh, and don’t worry about Mr. Blake, Wesley. I’ll talk to him.”

We walk Bill to the door, our hands taking turns squeezing each other with pent-up excitement.

“Merry Christmas, you two,” Bill says as he steps outside.

“Merry Christmas, Bill.”

“Merry Christmas to you too.” Maggie waves at his back as he walks away toward reception.

We turn to each other once we’re back inside, and there’s a palpable excitement between us. I wasn’t exactly sure how we’d work being able to see each other once Maggie leaves in a few days.

“You sure you want to be doing accounting six days of the week?” I ask.

“If it means I get to be with you? Absolutely I do.”

I rub one of her curls between my fingers and smile. “Good answer. Does that mean you’ll drive up Friday after work and stay until Sunday afternoon?”

“Does that mean you *want* me to?”

I shake my head, and her eyes widen slightly. Before her cheeks can start going red, I use my finger to push her chin up and let my lips brush against hers. “If I had it my way, you’d be here Monday through Sunday. But I’ll take whatever I can get.”

Her lips smile beneath mine, and I press a kiss to them.

“There’s just one problem,” she says, pulling back. “Where will I stay? Much as I love Santa’s Haven, I doubt it’s vacant

every weekend.”

“It’s not. For reasons I’ll never fully understand.” I still as a thought occurs to me. “Stand right there.”

She gives me a funny look but obediently stands in place as I hurry over to the closet and grab something inside, smiling to myself. I head back to Maggie and take her by the hand. She follows me until I stop just shy of my bed.

“Right there.” I point to the bed. “You’ll stay right there.”

“This is *your* bed, Wes. And it’s a twin.”

“It’ll be *your* bed. On the weekends at least. This”—I pull out the package from behind my back—“will be my bed.”

She tilts her head to read the words on the package. “An air mattress?”

“Mrs. Claus gave it to me at Home Depot. She said she thought I’d be needing it. I pegged her as a crazy old woman, but . . . somehow, she knew. That, or they overbought and needed get rid of their stock.”

She scrunches her nose. “Let’s go with the first option—magic of Christmas and all that.”

I chuckle and toss the air mattress onto the bed. Taking Maggie by the hand, I twirl her around, then pull her into me. “So, to answer your question,” I say, bringing my mouth just shy of hers, “you’ll be staying right where you belong. With me.”

Her lips graze across mine, and she sighs contentedly. “Good answer.”

EPILOGUE

MAGGIE

“**T**he cleaners are done at Santa’s Haven, right?” I call as I pull a sweater over my head. It snags on my wedding ring. It’s only been a month, and I’m still getting used to it.

“Wes?” I call again, but there’s no response from downstairs.

I was a little nervous about living in the top of the reception cabin, but it’s actually been nice. There are no goodbye kisses at the door as Wes goes off to work for the day. Both of us just work downstairs.

He’s the head manager at Crystal Peaks now, and I’m the accountant. That’s my official title, at least. In reality, my duties are a mixed bag of keeping the accounts nice and tidy, helping guests, and even some maintenance work. I love how varied my days are now. Most of all, I love that I see Wes throughout those days.

“Wes!” I put in my earrings and head down the stairs to look for him. This booking was last-minute, and we barely had time to get cleaners in.

Using the railing, I swing myself around the corner, only to run into a disturbing face.

“Ahh!” I double back, my hand over my thudding heart. My breath quickly steadies as I recognize my attacker. I shake my head and smile reluctantly at the life-size, though not life-threatening, Santa Claus.

“Freaking Wes.” It’s not the first time this sort of thing has happened. He loves putting elves from Santa’s Haven where I least expect them. Santa was bound to make his appearance. His antics certainly keeps things exciting.

My gaze lands on something in Santa’s hand, and I grab the paper.

“Your carriage awaits behind the premises.”

I try to suppress a smile. Wes has read a few of my Heyer novels now, and he loves to whip out his Regency lingo, which is really just him sounding incredibly stilted and using words he doesn’t know the meaning of.

I grab my coat and gloves, turn the sign on the door to “Be back soon,” and head out the back. I pause on the threshold as my hand flies to my mouth.

“Oh. My. Gosh.” I say behind it.

Decked out in a full-on Regency getup—breeches and top boots, waistcoat, tailcoat, and top hat—Wes stands next to his snowmobile, which is puffing exhaust into the December air.

He smiles at me and puts out a hand toward me. “Allow me, fair maiden.”

I laugh and walk over to take his hand. “*Fair maiden* has more of a Middle Ages feel, but—”

His raised brow silences me.

I pull a pretend zipper across my lips as he helps me onto the snowmobile, then gets up behind me.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“‘Tis a most confidential matter, my lady. If I communicated such to you, I would be quite obliged to make an end of your existence.”

“Mmhmm. Okay.”

He leans forward so his cheek rests against my head, then grabs the handle bars and moves us forward.

“We have one stop to make,” he says in my ear, dropping his attempted Regency speak.

A couple minutes later, we pull up beside Santa’s Haven. After almost a year working at Crystal Peaks, I understand now why Wes dislikes it so much. It’s the one cabin we can expect to be on our schedule almost every day.

I frown. “Ugh. Cleaners left the lights on.”

The front door opens, and I blink as Stevie and Troy step outside, their dog Mochi not far behind.

I look at Wes, who just smiles at me as he puts a finger in his cravat and tugs it away from his neck a bit.

“Surprise!” Stevie says, coming down the stairs as Wes helps me dismount.

“What are you doing here?” I say, pulling her into a hug.

“We couldn’t resist secretly booking it after hearing about your experience here, Mags. So far, it’s living up to expectations.” She wrinkles her nose, then pulls me into a hug. “Those elves are so incredibly eerie, and they’re everywhere.”

Troy gives me a hug, then clasps Wes’s hand before pulling him into a hug as well. We’ve gone on lots of double dates with him and Stevie—a kid from the nearest resort town likes the extra money he gets for looking after reception while we’re gone—and Wes and Troy have gotten really close.

“We just wanted to come make sure everything’s okay so far,” Wes says. “And it sounds like it is.”

“Definitely,” Troy says. “But to be honest, I’m a little disappointed.”

“Oh?” I say.

“Didn’t you say something about a life-size Santa Claus?” Troy asks.

“Wes over here”—I turn to my husband, pinning him with an unamused expression—“decided to surprise me with it at our cabin today. He’ll return it in a couple hours, though.”

Wes grins, remorseless. “Well, we have somewhere to be —”

“I can see that,” Stevie says, taking in his clothing.

“—but we’ll come by later on, if that’s okay.” He puts out his bent arm toward me. “My lady?”

I take it with a badly suppressed smile. “See you later, guys.”

We hop back on our trusty steed, and Wes guides us through the snow-covered landscape. I remember Wes telling me how much he loves the seasons at Crystal Peaks, and after seeing the mountains shift and change through the months, I totally understand what he means now.

I still don’t know the area as well as Wes, though, and it’s not until a familiar scene rises ahead that I realize our destination: the pond.

We’ve had less snow so far this year, but the cold has it frozen over again.

Wes helps me off the snowmobile, then opens the back compartment and pulls out two thermoses.

“Your heated chocolate elixir, my lady,” he says, handing me one with a ridiculous bow.

I incline my head in a formal gesture completely foreign to me. “Thank you, my lord.”

He lets out an exasperated sound. “Can I just talk normal? This is really hard.”

I laugh as I let the warmth of the thermos seep through my gloves. “Yes. You can talk normal.” I put my mouth to the cup, then pause. “This cocoa isn’t from Santa’s Haven, right?”

“Sadly, no. I had the cleaners throw that out months ago. Felt like a liability.” He sets his thermos down in the snow, then reaches into the compartment and pulls out two pairs of ice skates. “I thought we could do things properly this year.”

Letting my eyes take in the pretty white leather, I nod eagerly. I throw my arms around him. Lucky for both of us,

my thermos has a lid. I move to pull away, but Wes keeps me there, and I surrender willingly.

“This year with you has been the best year of my life, Maggie,” he whispers in my ear. “By a landslide.”

I smile into his sweater. “Me too.”

He pulls back and brushes the hair away from my face, looking down at me tenderly. “I love you, Maggie.”

I meet his gaze, a mischievous tilt to my smile. “I loved you first.”

“Oh, it’s a competition, is it?”

“It definitely is.”

“Well, then.” He steps away from me and rubs his gloved hands together. “Let’s settle this on the rink, shall we?”

I start removing my boots—real, bona fide snow boots Wes got me a couple months ago. “If you skate anything like you did last year, you might as well spare yourself the trouble.”

He stares me down, then runs over and tackles me into the snow. He presses a kiss into my laughing lips and delaying our ice-skating competition for some time.

Last year, all I wanted was to be left to enjoy Christmas by myself. That didn’t happen, and I’m so glad because it means that this year, I’ve got Wes. And he really *is* all I want and need. Even with his terrible Regency accent.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Whitney Award-winning Martha Keyes was born, raised, and educated in Utah—a home she loves dearly but also dearly loves to escape to travel the world. She received a BA in French Studies and a Master of Public Health, both from Brigham Young University.

Her route to becoming an author was full of twists and turns, but she's finally settled into something she loves. Research, daydreaming, and snacking have become full-time jobs, and she couldn't be happier about it. When she isn't writing, she is honing her photography skills, looking for travel deals, and spending time with her family. She lives with her husband and twin boys in Utah.

