

DATING A DENVER DRAGON NOVELLA

The Hart of Christmas



LATISHA SEXTON

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To my husband, who always pushes me to go after my dreams and always makes me laugh.



One

Millie Jane

When I pictured myself at twenty-five, I imagined performing on stage to the roar of the audience. My adoring fans. I imagined being in a serious relationship with the love of my life, just waiting for him to pop the question. Or maybe we'd already be engaged and planning our destination wedding.

But none of that happened. Instead, I'm in my little red Corvette making the turn into the sleepy town of Hartburg, Kentucky, with my tail between my legs. Figuratively speaking, of course. I don't actually have a tail.

I wish I were coming home on better terms because I do love this place. It's nestled between the Appalachian mountains, and if I had arrived a few weeks earlier, I could have seen the array of colors as the leaves changed. Bright oranges, reds, and yellows usually cover the hills like a warm, cozy quilt.

But the sad, lifeless trees bear a startling resemblance to my own empty heart.

Logically, I know in a few months the trees will bloom again and I should take it as a sign that my life will turn around, too. But right now, I'm wallowing in my sorrows and failures.

The only one who knows I'm coming home is my best friend, Beth Cantrell. She's letting me crash at her place while I gather the nerve to tell Gram that I couldn't make it. That I wasn't able to carry on her legacy.

Tears burn the backs of my eyes as I pull into the holler where Beth lives. It's another benefit of staying with her. There are no neighbors for almost two miles on either side—the Mullins at the head of the holler and the Browns at the very end with Beth and her husband, Thomas, in the middle. Beth and Thomas are on their babymoon for the next two weeks, so I can tuck myself away in their secluded home and lick my wounds in peace. Again, figuratively speaking, of course.

Maybe by the time they get back, I'll be feeling brave enough to face Gram. Just the thought of seeing the disappointment in her eyes makes a lump form in my throat. I shake it off as I turn into Beth's driveway.

Dusk is settling and I smile at the Christmas lights strung around the roof and porch. It looks beautiful, but I also wonder why Beth bothers since hardly anyone ever sees them. Plus ... why did she leave the Christmas lights on while they're gone?

I frown. Maybe they have one of those automatic timers for the lights? Beth probably did it to cheer me up. A smile forms on my lips. That definitely sounds like her.

Grabbing my purse, duffel bag, and guitar case, I trudge up the steps and pull out the key Beth had given me when we met up in Nashville last week. I can still see the sympathy in her eyes when she offered for me to stay in her home.

My throat tightens. Ugh. I am not going to cry. No, sir. I am strong. I will bounce right back after a couple weeks of eating junk food and watching reality shows.

Exhaustion wraps around me as I unlock the door. The December air is freezing and I wouldn't be surprised if it snows tonight. I am so looking forward to relaxing in Beth's hot tub once I get settled in. She promised me that I could make myself at home and even said she'd stocked the pantries and fridge for me.

Warmth fills my heart at the thought. Besides Gram, Beth is the only other person in the world who truly cares about my interests and struggles. I mean, my parents love me, sure. But they've always been ... disconnected. They prefer their high-end lifestyle to living in a small town. As professional motivational speakers, they are constantly traveling the country giving speeches or attending book signings. I've lost count of how many self-help and success books they've written.

Too bad they missed the memo on how to be good parents.

I flinch. Okay, they aren't *horrible* parents. They've just ... well, they've just never been there for me. When I was in the 7th grade, I told them how tired I was of online school and traveling all the time. I just wanted to stay in one place long

enough to at least make one friend. They listened to me. Or so I thought. But instead of stepping away from speaking, they brought me to Hartburg to live with Gram so I could have stability, and as much as I wish they would have put me ahead of their careers, I can't begrudge them for leaving me with Gram.

Because Gram and I are best friends. She's my person. My ride or die. Which is why my failures sting so much.

Sighing, I flip on the lights and drop the keys on the dining room table, glancing around the modest home. There's a lit Christmas tree—though it's bare of ornaments—in the living room by the fireplace. Garland drapes the mantle and little Christmas villages sit on top. The fire is crackling, giving off a —

Wait.

Why is there a fire? Why is the tree lit?

I glance around quickly, my insides shaking. I get the outside lights. That makes sense. But no way Beth and Thomas left a fire going. Even if they had, I'm pretty sure it would have burned out by now.

Someone's here.

As quietly as I can, I grab my purse, burying my hand into its depths. It's honestly more of a Mary Poppins bag and I never really know what I'm going to find inside.

"Come on," I whisper to myself, just as I hear a noise coming from one of the back rooms.

Oh, fudge.

Another noise. It almost sounds like shuffling footsteps.

Finally, my fingers connect with what I'm looking for. "I have a gun!" I yell. I don't. It's mace. But whoever is in the house doesn't need to know that. "And I know how to use it!" Maybe. I mean, it can't be that hard.

My hand is shaking as I hold the mace out in front of me. "Come out! Or I'll shoot!"

Why? Why are these words coming out of my mouth? Why didn't I grab my keys and run? I could have called the cops. But I'm stuck now, as the thudding sound continues my way.

God, help me.

The hallway isn't lit, so all I see is a shadowy figure step out of one of the rooms, and somehow I manage not to scream.

The figure makes a tsking sound. "Millie Jane," a low voice rumbles and my entire body stiffens. "So very violent of you."

My panic turns into desperation as my mind screams at me to run. My feet don't get the memo though, because I am frozen in place as the hallway light flips on, putting me face to face with the one person I never wanted to see again.

Dex Hart.

A slow smirk tugs at his mouth. "Why Millie ... surprised to see me?" His eyes dart to the mace in my hand and his smirk widens. "Nice gun."

I growl. Literally, growl. I wish I could be poised and collected, but this man brings out the worst in me. “What are you doing here?” I practically hiss at him. He’s just lucky I don’t mace him anyway.

With his cocky grin still in place, he crosses his arms and leans against the wall. It looks a bit awkward given the fact that he’s using crutches.

I gasp. “Dex, what happened?”

He lets loose a deep chuckle. “Why Mills, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you cared about me.”

“I’m not a jerk. Just because we can’t stand one another doesn’t mean that I want to see you hurt.” Well, maybe just a little, but I don’t tell him that.

He shrugs. “Fractured fibula,” he says, not elaborating. I’m too frazzled with his unexpected appearance to ask more questions. Adjusting the crutches, he pushes off the wall, not quite hiding the flash of discomfort in his expression. “Now, if you don’t mind, I was going to watch a movie.” He nods toward the living room.

“No,” I huff out. This cannot be happening.

His eyebrows shoot up. “No? I can’t watch a movie?”

I press my palm to my forehead. “No. No. Why are you here?” Jerking my hand down, I meet his steel gaze. “Does Beth know you’re here?”

“Yes. Of course, she does. Why are you here? Why didn’t you go to your grandmother’s?”

There is no way I'm going to tell him the full truth. Not that he'd care anyway, so I settle on a half truth. "I just wanted a few days to myself so I could ... relax."

"Oh, you want me to help you to relax? I'm sure we could work something out." His lip curls up, revealing his dimples and all I want to do is wipe that smug grin right off of his face.

Crossing my arms, I level a look at him, ignoring his insinuation. "Did you know I was going to be here?"

Moving closer, one dark eyebrow arches. "And if I did?" he whispers and I try to tamp down the swooping sensation in my stomach.

"I'm going to kill Beth," I mumble.

Dex chuckles. "Now, now. No need for murder. You know how Beth is. Generous to a fault."

I sigh. He's not wrong. "I wish she would have told me you were going to be here too."

He cocks his head, his eyes calculating. "Would you have come if she had?"

"Of course not," I reply, throwing my hands up in the air. "I would have been perfectly fine never seeing you again." I spit the last words out harsher than I intended, though they're no less true.

Dex's jaw tightens, his lips thinning into a firm line. "Well, I'm sorry that my presence is so unwanted. I promise I'll stay out of your way. Consider me ... not even here." He turns and begins to hobble away.

Guilt pricks my heart, but I straighten my shoulders, tilting my chin up. “I’ll leave first thing in the morning.” I’d leave tonight if I wasn’t so exhausted from the almost six hour drive from Nashville. I really didn’t want to face Gram so soon, but anything is better than staying in this house alone with Dex Hart.

Dex plops himself on the couch. “Whatever you want, Little Lamb.”

I stiffen at the use of his old nickname for me, but I choose to ignore it. If I act bothered, it’ll only add fuel to the flame.

“The room on the left is for you,” he calls out as I grab my luggage and make my way down the hallway.

“Thanks,” I mumble bitterly, before slamming the door behind me. Okay, I don’t really slam it. More like I shut it very firmly.

Grabbing my phone, I don’t even worry about the time as I call Beth. She answers on the second ring.

“I take it you made it to the house,” she says with a nervous laugh.

“Beth,” I whisper-yell. “How could you do this to me?”

She sighs heavily. “Millie, I’m not doing anything to you. I’m helping you. And I’m helping Dex.”

“Surely he has somewhere else to stay.” I rub my temple.

“No. He really doesn’t. Dad and Regina are renovating the house. It was supposed to be done yesterday, but they ran into

some issues that have prolonged the work and made it impossible for anyone to stay there. Especially with Dex on crutches. Dad and Regina are out of town until Christmas when the renovations should hopefully be done.”

“Doesn’t he have like a million friends, teammates, girlfriends ... anyone else he could have stayed with?” I huff as I pace the small room, my nerves fraying more with each step.

“Dex doesn’t have a girlfriend and his friends are all traveling for games,” she replies gently and I try not to latch onto the fact that Dex is single. “Look, I know you two don’t get along, but maybe this would be a good time for you to bury the hatchet?”

A maniacal laugh escapes my lips. “Oh, yeah sure. Like Dex Hart cares a smidge about what I think of him. If he did then —” I cut off and clear my throat. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I’ll go to Gram’s house in the morning.”

“I’m really sorry, Mills. I would have told you, but I had no idea about the renovations until I talked to Dad about an hour ago.”

Sighing, I flop onto the bed. “It’s fine, Beth. I’m not really mad at you. He’s your family. I can’t expect you to put him out in the cold.”

“You’re my family too.”

I smile. “I know.” Sucking in a deep breath, I say, “It’s okay. I’ll be fine.”

“Just ... can you promise me something?”

Rocks settle in the pit of my stomach. But how can I say no?
“Anything.”

“Give him a chance, Millie. I know he’s a bit gruff and snarky on the outside. But he’s changed. He’s really not a bad guy.”

I have to hold back a snort. “Sure. If you say so.”

“Mills ... ”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll give him a chance.” For the five minutes I’ll be seeing him before I leave in the morning.

Beth lets out a relieved breath. “Thanks. You won’t regret it. I promise.”

We say goodbye and I rummage around in my bags for my swimsuit. At least I can still enjoy the hot tub for one night before I leave. And since he’s in a cast and on crutches, I don’t have to worry about Dex disturbing me.

I slip on the retro one piece, ignoring the goosebumps from the cool air. I’ll warm up in the hot tub. Pulling my blonde hair up in a messy bun, I grab my towel and breathe a quick prayer for patience. Then, I step out into the hallway.

The background of the page is decorated with a variety of snowflakes in shades of light blue and teal, scattered across the page. There are also small, faint grey dots scattered throughout, creating a wintry, snowy atmosphere.

Two

Dex

I didn't lie to Millie. I did know she was coming. About thirty seconds before she walked in the door. I didn't even have time to argue with Beth before I heard Millie pull into the driveway.

A muffled voice comes from Millie's bedroom and my lips tug up in the corner. No doubt she is already on the phone with my step-sister, chewing her out for this unexpected turn of events.

I can't really blame Beth though. It's not like she knew that renovations would be pushed back. If she had, she wouldn't have offered her home to both of us. Beth knows better than anyone the animosity between Millie Jane Brooks and myself. Mostly on Millie's end.

The voices stop and I instinctively tense, waiting for Millie to come out in all her fire and glory to lay into me again. And I'll just sit here and take it with a grin—well, most likely a smirk—

because having Millie speaking to me after all these years is worth a few heated barbs sent my way.

Besides, I deserve every last one of them. Well, mostly. I'd love to move on from the past. Make it up to her in some way. But given her reaction to seeing me, I doubt that will happen.

Sighing, I scrub a hand over my face, just as the bedroom door opens. I jerk my gaze in her direction and every sarcastic thing I was going to say dies on my tongue. I try to swallow over my suddenly dry mouth as Millie steps into the room in a red swimsuit with white polka dots and a towel draped over her arm. Her hair is piled high on top of her head with curly strands framing her face. I can't keep my eyes from tracing her long legs and soft curves.

She clears her throat and I pray that she missed my casual perusal of her in that swimsuit. As much as I would like to clear the air between us, maybe it's a good thing she's going to Dottie Mae's in the morning. I'm not sure I could handle being this close to her for days if she's going to be walking around looking like *that* the entire time.

"I'm getting in the hot tub," she says, turning away and heading to the back porch. And now I'm going to have to pray extra hard so I don't have *that* image in my mind.

I must have a death wish, because I find myself calling after her, "Want some company?"

Pausing, she stops and looks over her shoulder. Her eyes dart to my cast and briefly back to my face, before she turns back around and waltzes outside without a word.

I want to curse my blasted leg that's keeping me inside, but it's for the best. If I thought almost seven years and thousands of miles between us had removed any feelings I'd had for her, man, was I wrong.

Pulling out my phone, I shoot Beth a text message. I would call, but I can't chance Millie overhearing.

It's a good thing you're my favorite step-sister in the entire world or I would seriously be considering ways to murder you right about now.

Beth

I'm your only step-sister. And you'll survive.

You didn't see the murderous darts shooting from Millie's eyes.

Beth

Meh. Her bark is much worse than her bite.

Did you sabotage the renovations? Was this part of your master scheme the entire time so you could force the two of us together?

Beth

Obviously.

You're more devious than you look, ya know that?

Beth

Looks are deceiving, Dex.

Beth

Listen ... can't you at least try? I would love to have two of my favorite people in the world on good terms before T.J. arrives. How are you two going to be godparents to my son if you can't even be in the same room with one another?

Godparents?

Beth

Oops. I wasn't supposed to say anything yet. But yes. Thomas and I want you to be T.J.'s godfather and Millie to be his godmother.

I smile. It took us a bit, but you'd never know that Beth and I didn't grow up together. My mom married her dad when we were in high school. It was hard for both of us. But time and forced proximity turned us into the best of friends. I'll do anything for Beth. Even if it means trying to get along with Millie.

I'm flattered. Truly. And I will try to play nice with Millie. Though the blasted woman makes it difficult.

Beth

Blasted? Really? You sound like you're some sort of British lord. You've been watching regency movies again, haven't you?

No. I'm not a monster. Regency books are far superior to the movies.

Beth

Thomas is looking at me weird for how loudly I just snorted.

Well, Millie says she's leaving in the morning. I promise to be a true gentleman until then.

Beth

Thanks, Dex. Love you.

Love you too, sis.

I turn off my phone, frowning at my cast as I contemplate what Beth said. My injury forced me to cut this season short, but I haven't told Beth or anyone else that I'm not certain if I'm renewing with the Denver Dragons. I love hockey and my dream has always been to go pro. But ... well, I'm tired. The thrill that used to be there when I was on the ice is gone, and the

broken leg almost feels like a sign from God that it's time to hang up my hockey blades for something else.

I'm just not sure what that something else may be.

Plus, I really want to be here for Beth and Thomas and my new nephew. Beth and I didn't have much family growing up until our parents married. I don't want my nephew to experience that same kind of loneliness. I want him to know that he's always got someone in his corner. And while, yes, I can do that while still playing hockey ... I'm just not sure that I want to.

Yawning, I turn off the TV and grab my crutches. As much as I want to go check on Millie, I decide it's best if I just head to bed. I don't need the image of her in a hot tub burned into my brain. Imagining it is torture enough. And I'm trying really hard not to even do that. I'll just make sure I'm up in the morning before she leaves.

After brushing my teeth and taking the pain meds the doctor prescribed, I set my alarm. As I close my eyes, I pray that God will help me mend the bridges I burned so long ago. For Millie and I to, at the very least, forgive one another. I don't pray for anything more. That's too much to even hope for.

Yet, as I drift off, images of Millie swarm my mind. Invading my dreams. Making me crave things I thought I'd long since buried.



As I begin to wake, it takes me a moment to remember where I'm at. The house is quiet. And cold. Which makes my leg ache

and throb.

Sighing, I grab my crutches and as quietly as I can, get dressed. I peek my head out the door, thankful that Millie is still asleep. Unless she's already left. I glance out the windows, but it's still too dark to see anything. Her bedroom door is closed, so I'm guessing she's still asleep. Though, it wouldn't surprise me if Millie had already gone. She's stubborn like that.

Making my way into the kitchen, I put coffee on and then do my best to make a decent breakfast. It's hard with crutches and not being able to put pressure on my foot. A lot easier to woo a woman when you have the use of all your extremities.

Wait ... not that I'm trying to woo Millie. I am not.

Shaking my head, I banish the interfering thoughts. I need to get my head screwed on straight. All I'm doing is trying to build a bridge. Extend a peace offering. Millie and I just need to get on common ground. Like Beth said. We need to be able to be in the same room together without biting each other's heads off.

For T.J.'s sake.

Either Millie sleeps like the dead, or I'm being a lot quieter than I think as I prepare pancakes and bacon. I don't think Millie has any allergies or food intolerances. Not that I remember anyway.

But ... it's been a long time since we've seen each other. And those last weeks of high school were filled with a lot of tension. Millie wouldn't look at me or speak to me. It stung. Still does, to be honest.

Flipping the last pancake, I hear Millie's bedroom door open. My heart rate spikes and I'm suddenly self-conscious as I glance down at my attire. I tried to look semi-presentable this morning, but with a cast on my leg, my clothing options are limited. So ball shorts and a long-sleeved T-shirt it was.

Millie steps into the kitchen, guitar in one hand and duffel bag in the other. My breath whooshes out of my lungs at the sight of her. How did I forget how beautiful she was? She's clad in dark brown leggings, knee-high leather boots, and a burnt orange sweater. Her blonde hair is curled and hanging down her shoulders and back. And her eyes—

Well, they're icy blue daggers that would freeze the heart of most men. Not me though. I'm immune to Millie's glares. Actually, I find them humorous.

“Good morning, Little Lamb,” I say cheerfully as she makes a subtle attempt to not eyeball the food I've prepared.

That icy gaze lands on me. “I'm surprised to see you up so early.”

I jerk my chin to the counter where the coffee, bacon, and pancakes are waiting. “I thought I'd send you off with a good, warm breakfast.”

There's a slight softening in her eyes before she averts them. “Coffee,” she murmurs and takes a step toward the pot. Her shoulders sag and she glances over at me. “Thanks.” It comes out almost strangled.

I laugh. “Really, Mills? Was a thank you so hard to say?”

She scowls, brushing past me to grab a mug. I watch her as she pours it in silence, my lips twitching. If she'd try half as hard to get along as she does to hate me, we might be best friends by this point.

Closing her eyes, she takes a long sip and sighs. "Mhmm ... "

"Good?"

She gives a half shrug. "It's okay," she replies nonchalantly.

I chuckle. "Plates are over there. Help yourself."

She eyes the pancakes suspiciously for a moment. "How can I trust you didn't do something to them?"

"How can you trust I didn't do something to the coffee?"

Her eyes widen as she looks at the mug in her hand and then back at me. "You wouldn't."

As casually as I can, I lean against the counter—which is much harder to do when you have crutches and a cast on your leg—and shrug. "One can never be sure."

Her eyes roam my face for a beat, before she mumbles, "I hate you."

Leaning closer to her as she takes another sip, I lower my voice to a husky whisper. "You know what they say, Little Lamb? There's a fine line between love and hate."

She sputters, almost spitting her coffee out as I smirk at her. "You are the absolute worst, *Dexter Hart*." She emphasizes my full first name, knowing how much I hate it.

“Is that any way to talk to the man who made you breakfast and coffee before sending you out in the bitter cold?” I shake my head in disappointment. “And here I thought we were starting to be friends.”

She scoffs. “Friends? That ship sailed a long time ago.” And the way she says it, with so much hurt and maybe a hint of wistfulness, brings a prick of guilt to my heart.

“You know, Mills,” I say, my tone turning serious, “people can change.”

Raising a skeptical eyebrow, she replies, “Sometimes. Or sometimes they just prove what you’ve known all along.”

I want to argue with her, but words aren’t going to convince Millie of anything. No, she needs actions. Tangible proof.

Sighing, I run a hand through my hair. Millie’s eyes track the movement and I can’t help but flex my arms, just a little. “Like what you see there, Mills?”

Red creeps up her face and she quickly looks away. Instead of answering, she grabs her luggage and marches toward the door.

Crap. I’m doing it all wrong.

Balancing on my crutches, I move toward her. “Millie—” I start, but am cut off by her strangled cry.

“No. No. No,” she repeats over and over.

“What?” I move quicker, cursing these darned crutches. “What’s wrong?” I ask again, coming up behind her. I peek over her shoulder, my eyes widening at the sight. “Oh.”

“It’s okay,” she says to herself. “I can drive in this.”

“No, Millie. There’s no way.”

Turning to me, her face pales and her eyes flash with desperation. “It’s not that bad. I’ve driven in snow before.”

“That’s not snow. That’s a blizzard.”

Biting her lip, she glances back outside where the world has been blanketed in at least two feet of snow. And it’s still coming down.

“It’ll be okay, Mills,” I say quietly. “I’ll stay out of your way. I won’t bother you. I promise.”

Turning her watery gaze to me, she asks in a whisper, “Since when do your promises mean anything, Dex?” Shutting the front door, she pushes past me and my shoulders deflate.

Getting her to trust me again is going to take a lot of work. And prayer.



Three

Millie Jane

I am going to lose my mind. Checking the weather app, I groan. The blizzard is expected to dump another foot or two of snow over the next twenty-four hours, and temperatures are supposed to remain below freezing for several days after that. So much for getting to Gram's soon.

Now I'm going to be stuck in this house with Dex for who knows how long.

I can't. I can't do it.

But he fixed you breakfast, says the part of me that's obsessed with good breakfast food.

No, I scold her, straightening my shoulders. I will not be bought with food, no matter how delicious it looked and smelled. It doesn't matter that he got up early to make me breakfast. That was just a power play on his part. He wants me to relax around him. To become comfortable. That's when he'll rip the rug right out from under me.

Listen, I know I should let bygones be bygones. But I've never been able to get over the betrayal of what Dex did to me. If it weren't for him, I might be a famous country singer by now. He ruined my one real chance at stardom and completely humiliated me in the process. That's not something I can let go of so easily.

Maybe if I would have been able to make it in Nashville, it wouldn't sting so badly. But well ... we see how that's going, don't we? I'm homeless. Jobless. Relationshipless.

Not that I've had time to pursue relationships. I've spent the last seven years studying music and picking up any side gig I could find. I don't even remember the last time I've gone on a solo date. Most of my interactions with men have been when my previous roommate, Lainey, forced me into a double date situation.

Thinking of Lainey brings a weird mixture of emotions. I'm ecstatic that she found the love of her life and is now blissfully married to him. But it did force me to evaluate my situation and realize that 1) I did not want to live with a newly married couple in a tiny apartment and 2) I did not have the funds to find my own place in Nashville. My friend, Enid, offered for me to stay with her, but she's dealing with enough raising her teenage brother. I didn't want to be an added burden to her.

Not to mention the fact that I'm just ... tired. I'm exhausted from always having to paste on a smile for every performance and pretend that I'd rather be standing there singing Reba,

Carrie Underwood, or Dolly Parton than at home in my pjs watching 90s movies while eating junk food.

It's not that I don't love singing. I do. And I know people have to work their way up the ladder to be successful. I just wish it would have happened sooner for me. Or at all.

I've tried building an online presence and praying that I can take off that way, but I abhor social media. No matter how many reminders I set on my phone to post daily, I will sometimes go two weeks without logging on. It's not great for building awareness about my music.

The people who have followed me are amazing and supportive. They love my sound. But the numbers aren't impressive enough to gain a record label's attention or even a music manager. I should have worked harder at it, but I was always more focused on in person events than recording video clips to share online.

I'm sure if I was performing every night in a packed arena, I would feel more engaged, more alive, more passionate about music. Instead, I was always stuck in some sketchy bar praying that by some miracle, there would be someone there who could connect me with a record label or music manager.

The smell of bacon still wafts in the air and through my closed door making my stomach rumble. Ugh. I love bacon. And pancakes. And I never finished my coffee so now I'm getting a caffeine headache.

Sighing, I pull off my boots and slip my feet into my fuzzy Rudolph slippers. I stare down at the red nose on each foot and

smile. I'm sure Dex will have something to say about them, but I don't care. They keep my feet warm and make me smile and that's good enough for me.

Bracing myself, I step out of my room and take hesitant steps into the kitchen. The house has an open floor plan so the kitchen and dining room are connected with the living room where Dex is currently lounging on the couch reading.

I whip my head in his direction, my mouth dropping open before I can stop myself. Who knew that Dex read?

Dex snorts. "Wow. I didn't know you thought that little of me."

Fiddlesticks. Did I say that out loud?

I cringe. "Uh. Sorry."

Dex's eyes meet mine over the top of his book, a slow smirk forming on his lips. "Did you just apologize to me, Lamb?" Rolling my eyes, I continue into the kitchen, ignoring him even though I can feel his gaze boring into me.

"Your plate's in the microwave," he says casually.

I glance over my shoulder where he's gone back to reading, my eyes snagging on his hand that's holding the book. His long sleeve shirt is pulled up just a little revealing the beginnings of a tattoo wrapped around his wrist, disappearing into the end of his sleeve. I wonder if it's a snake or dragon? It's hard to tell and there's not a snowball's chance I'm going to ask him about it.

Turning my thoughts back to feeding the dragon that is my empty stomach, I move toward the kitchen. I'm still not sure if I trust him, though I do appreciate that he saved me a plate.

"Thanks." It's probably the nicest tone I've used with him in years.

"You're welcome," he replies, not looking up. Which is for the best. I can only handle so much of his attention on me.

Opening the microwave, my mouth waters at the sight of two pancakes and the four strips of bacon beside them. I heat it up and then check for my coffee, which has gone cold by now. Thankfully, it looks like there's still a half pot.

"Um ... " I begin. "Are you going to drink this?"

Dex glances up, then back down. "I already had mine. I made another pot for you."

Ugh. I can handle a snarky Dex. But a nice Dex? That brings back too many memories that I'd rather remain buried.

I should thank him, but I've already done that enough for one day. Instead, I pour myself another cup of coffee. When the microwave beeps, I pull out my plate and load it down with maple syrup. Settling myself at the table, I eat in silence. The only sound is the fire crackling, the Christmas music playing softly in the background, and the quiet sound of Dex flipping the pages of his book.

"What are you reading?" I blurt out and instantly regret it.

His gray eyes land on me and I divert my gaze.

Listen, I'm immune to Dex's personality, but I am not immune to his level of attractiveness. I'm not sure any woman is.

The man is ... well, he's hot. Okay? He's a pro hockey player so he has muscles for days. Not that I know that for sure since last night was the first time I'd seen him in years. I'm just assuming that under all that hockey gear he normally wears is a very muscular body.

He's also tall. Exactly six feet two inches according to his hockey profile. Again, not that I've looked. Well, maybe once. Or twice. His hair is dark black against his olive-toned skin. Like so black that sometimes it almost looks like a deep shade of blue. And he wears it just long enough that every now and then it falls into his eyes. Those gorgeous gray eyes that always made me feel as if he was seeing into my very soul.

"Hmm ... " Dex's voice rumbles from the couch. "I do believe you are blushing over there, Mills."

Well, I certainly am now. "Wh-what? No, I'm not."

Dex snorts, but doesn't say anything else about my overheating face. He clears his throat. "You aren't allowed to laugh," he says and he sounds almost ... embarrassed?

Now I'm even more curious. Taking the last bite of my pancake, I stand and walk toward him. He quickly closes his book, hiding the cover from me. I arch an eyebrow. "What are you reading, Dex?"

Sighing, he replies, “If you really must know, I’m reading a re” —he clears his throat again— “a regency romance book.”

I snort a laugh. Which isn’t cute at all, but come on. Dexter Hart is reading romance? And not just any romance, but regency?

His face reddens. “You weren’t supposed to laugh.”

Wiping a tear from my eye, I reply, “I never agreed to that.” I eye his red neck and cheeks, a smirk growing on my face. “Who’s blushing now, Dex?”

He shoots me a glare, but then something unexpected happens. Dex smiles. Like a legitimate smile. Not a smirk. Though, I have to admit that the man has the sexiest smirk I’ve ever seen.

What? No. No, he does not.

But this smile? It’s blinding. It’s carefree and happy and a pang of longing shoots straight through my chest. Because this looks like the Dex I knew in high school. The Dex who was my friend. The Dex who promised that he’d always be there for me.

Sudden tears spring to my eyes and I turn away before he can see them.

“Millie? Are you okay?” His voice is concerned, but it only makes me angrier.

“I’m fine,” I reply tersely. “I-I’m just going to ... ” and I walk away before finishing my sentence.

Closing my bedroom door with my foot, I allow the tears to fall and pray that I can make it another few days in this house with the guy who broke my heart and ruined my dreams.



Four

Millie Jane

High School

Beth slides in beside me just before Mrs. Price begins class. As soon as Mrs. Price turns her back to write on the chalkboard, I mouth to Beth, “Where were you?”

Waggling her eyebrows, she sneaks me a piece of paper under our desks.

I carefully open it, being sure not to make any noise.

The new Hart kid started school today. I call dibs.

Glancing up at her, I raise my eyebrow, then bite back a laugh when she shrugs sheepishly. Beth is a flirt. Not that she has to try that hard. She’s drop dead gorgeous. Long dark hair, tall and lean, and big puppy dog brown eyes that could make a heart of stone turn to mush when she looks your way.

I'm not jealous. Most of the time. Beth is my best friend. Has been for the past five years since my parents ditched me at Gram's so they could travel the world.

Beth also has a heart of gold. She's the sweetest, most genuine person I've ever met. Which is one reason I never get angry when she calls dibs on a cute guy. Especially a guy like this Hart kid.

According to the rumor mill, he was born here, but his parents divorced when he was five, and his mom whisked him away to Ohio. But she just moved him back to town. His dad practically owns Hartburg. He's some bigwig businessman and investor who had an ice rink built in town and funded a hockey team at Hartburg High.

Yes, these are the Harts of Hartburg. Which explains how his dad was able to convince an entire school whose main sport is basketball that they needed a hockey team. Just for his son. I guess it's kind of sweet. In a way.

Anyway, I don't have time to think about a guy. No matter how rich and hot he is. Not when I'm so focused on school and music lessons.

Gram was a country music star back in the day. She's shared the stage with Dolly Parton, Reba, Johnny Cash ... just to name a few. And I want to carry on her legacy.

So as soon as I graduate, I'm hitting Nashville. Unless I can find a way to get there sooner. I'm always looking for opportunities to audition at one of the singing competitions, but Gram is pretty strict and if it's more than a two hour drive,

she won't let me go. She says that I have plenty of time and should really pray about pursuing a music career.

The thing is, I have prayed about it. I pray all the time that God would open the doors. I want to make Gram proud of me. Mom is the only child Gram and Grampa had and since Mom's not following in her footsteps, it's up to me to carry the torch.

Not to mention that God gifted me with a really great voice. And I don't say that to brag. But why else would He choose to give me a singing voice if I wasn't supposed to use it like Gram did?

I'm pulled out of my musings when the classroom door opens and a guy strides through. My heart jumps into my throat when he swings his gaze around the room and his eyes seem to land on me.

His lips pull up into a slight smirk and I can feel my face heating. Do I have something on my face? In my hair? As much as I want to wipe my face or run a hand over my hair, I resist the urge.

Mrs. Price turns toward the newcomer with a frown on her face. "Late on the first day. Not a good look, Mr. Hart."

Oh.

My heart falls as I peek over at Beth who resembles a lovesick puppy as she stares dreamily at him.

I shake my head and push down the disappointment. One thing Beth and I have always promised is that we will never be

petty enough to fight over a guy. Our friendship is too important. So if Beth likes him, then I'll tamp down on the instant attraction bubbling up inside.

I keep telling myself that even when he slips into the desk on the other side of me and shoots me a wide grin, which I ignore completely.

After class, he leans over and whispers. "Hey, I'm Dex."

My mouth opens and closes, because holy cow. His voice is deeper and smoother than any seventeen year old has a right to be. And his eyes are so gray. Like a gathering of storm clouds preparing to light up the night sky.

"Hi, Dex. I'm Beth. And this is my friend, Millie Jane." Beth is suddenly beside me, thrusting her hand out for Dex to shake. He takes it, giving her a brilliant smile, before turning back to me.

"Millie Jane?" he asks.

"Just Millie," I somehow manage to say.

"We're heading to lunch," Beth interrupts. "Are you free now? You could join us?"

Dex glances between the two of us and his smile stretches. "I'd love to, ladies." Standing, he motions his hand in front of him. "Lead the way."

Beth giggles, twirling her hair and I shake my head. But when I glance back at Dex, he's not looking at Beth.

His gaze is locked in on me.



Three Months Later

“My life is over,” Beth cries into her pillow. She called me muttering something about her dad, bells, and being humiliated.

I sit on the bed beside her, patting her back and making shushing sounds while she keeps mumbling into the pillow. “Beth,” I say in my calmest tone. “I can’t understand a word you’re saying. What’s going on?”

She sits up, wiping the back of her hand across her face, leaving a trail of mascara underneath her red-rimmed eyes. “He’s getting married, Millie! Married!”

My eyes widen. “What? Who? Your dad?”

She nods miserably, another tear slipping down her cheek.

“Isn’t that a good thing? You’ve talked about how your dad needed to get out more and meet someone.” Beth’s mom died in a car accident when she was eight and her dad has rarely dated since then.

Beth sniffs loudly and then huffs. “Well, it would be, except ... ” she trails off, her face turning red.

My brow puckers. “Except?”

Throwing her hands up in the air, she wails, “He’s marrying Mrs. Hart. Dex’s mom.”

My jaw drops and I’m sure my eyes are bulging out of my head. “Your dad,” I say slowly, “is marrying Dex Hart’s mom?”

Beth nods miserably and suddenly her freak out makes perfect sense. Because Beth has had the biggest crush on Dex since he moved to Hartburg. “Oh,” I whisper, causing Beth to cry harder.

I wrap my arms around her, letting her sob into my shoulder, because what else can I do? I have no words for this situation. I mean, is there a guide on how to help your friend get over their crush because now they’re going to be their step-sibling?

Cringing, I squeeze her tighter. “It’ll be okay.”

“I was going to ask him out, Millie. I-I ... ” she trails off, sitting up and looking down at her hands. “I just really like him.”

“I’m sorry, Beth. I don’t even know what to say.”

She lets out a bitter laugh. “Because there isn’t anything to say. The guy I’ve been dreaming about for months is going to be my-my”—she gags a little—“my brother.”

“Step-brother,” I clarify and then grimace when she glares at me.

“Not helping.”

“Sorry.” Sighing, I rub her arm. “Okay, I know this is hard, but don’t think about Dex for a minute. What do you think of Mrs. Hart?”

She lets out a heavy breath. “She’s wonderful. And I’ve never seen Dad this happy.” Throwing herself backwards on her bed, she covers her face. “I’m being so selfish.”

“No, no. You’re having a normal reaction to an impossible situation.”

She peeks at me from under her arm. “What am I going to do, Mills? I can’t just turn off the switch and *not* think Dex is hot. But he’s going to be living under my roof. *My* roof. What if he sees my bras in the laundry room?!” Her face pales. “What if he walks in on me naked?!”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “Beth, you have a bathroom in your room. He’s not going to walk in on you. Just keep the doors locked.”

She covers her face. “How am I going to face him?”

Biting my lip, I pat her back. “I’m so sorry. I know this is hard. Look ... he didn’t know about your crush, right?”

She shakes her head.

I nod. “Okay, good. Well ... then I think the only thing to do is to start trying to think of him as family and to try to talk to him without flirting.” I narrow my eyes at her.

“What? I don’t flirt.”

My brow arches. “Twirling your hair? Batting your eyelashes? Giggling at everything he says?”

“Okay, I don’t flirt ... much.”

Smiling, I wrap an arm around her. “Just keep thinking about how happy your dad is. And how much you like Mrs. Hart. And we’ll both be praying that God will help you to see Dex as family, not a crush.”

“Yeah,” she mumbles.

“Besides, he’ll be leaving next year for college, right?”

She shrugs. “I guess. Most likely. Unless he gets drafted to go pro.”

I ignore the uncomfortable feeling in my stomach at the thought of Dex leaving Hartburg while at the same time trying to calm down the new realization of what is happening. Dex is going to be Beth’s step-brother. Which means ...

Which means absolutely nothing.

Because I still can’t act on my attraction to the high school heartthrob.

Dex and I have been hanging out some. Mostly for school projects since we share a few classes. He’s funny and snarky. And he’s so gorgeous it almost hurts to look at him.

But I’ve kept walls up to keep myself from falling too hard since Beth has been crushing on him. Even though sometimes I think he might like me. I mean, *like me* like me. It’s just, sometimes I catch him staring at me and his eyes are soft and

he has this small smile on his face that makes the dimple on his cheek pop ...

I shake myself. I need to focus on Beth. She's having a hard time with this new development and I can only imagine how she must feel.

So, I force down all my wayward thoughts and feelings about Dex Hart and focus on my friend.

"I bet he's really weird," I say.

Beth arches a brow. "What? Dex?"

I nod enthusiastically. "Yeah. I bet he's a slob at home. Probably leaves his stinky socks everywhere."

Beth giggles.

"He's probably a secret nerd and sits at home doing live action role playing all weekend." I pause, then add, "By himself."

Beth throws her head back, snort laughing.

I smile. "I'm sure he has costumes for each role too."

Slapping her thigh, Beth says between hiccups, "Stop it! You're going to make me pee myself."

We spend the rest of the afternoon laughing and making up stories about how weird Dex Hart probably is behind closed doors.

Too bad I don't actually believe any of it.

The page features a decorative background of various snowflake designs and small grey dots scattered across the white space. The snowflakes are in shades of light blue and teal, with some appearing as simple six-pointed stars and others as more intricate, multi-layered patterns. The dots are small and grey, adding a subtle texture to the background.

Five

Dex

I run a hand through my hair. I'm not sure what I did, but I screwed up. Big time. Somehow, I made Millie cry.

Not like it's the first time.

Cringing, I try to adjust my position on the couch without jostling my leg, frustration building up inside. I feel so useless right now. I can't just run to her. For one, I can't run at the moment. And two, she wouldn't welcome it anyway.

Groaning, I lay my head back and stare at the ceiling. If I wasn't in this blasted cast then I could do something for her. I mean, I did manage to make breakfast and coffee. Which, after her mini-freak out, she seemed to appreciate.

But I want to do more.

Glancing around the living room, I wrack my brain for something—anything—that I can do to start building the bridge between me and Millie again.

My eyes land on the tree. Thomas had put it up, but Beth had been too tired from packing and being pregnant to finish getting the ornaments on before they left. Rolling my lips inward, I think about what I'll need and hobble my way into the kitchen to see if Beth has all the items.

I smile as I pull out the supplies I need. I shouldn't be surprised. Beth and I decorate our parents' Christmas tree every year and she always likes making as many of the decorations as she can. She says it makes the tree feel more homey.

Grabbing the biggest bowl I can find, I start popping popcorn. It'll need to sit till tomorrow to make it easier to thread. I frown. I'm hoping Beth has thread somewhere in the house.

I pop six bags, hoping it's enough. Then, I look at everything laid out on the counter. I really do need Millie's help to get this all to the living room.

Sighing, I head down the hallway, praying that she doesn't slam her door in my face.

Leaning on my crutches, I tap my knuckles gently against her door. "Millie?" I say quietly. If she's asleep, I really don't want to wake her. A sleepy Millie is worse than messing with a bear cub when mama bear is around.

I start to tap again when the door swings open, leaving my fist dangling in midair.

“What do you want?” Millie crosses her arms, glaring at me. She’s all fire, which only makes her more appealing.

What can I say? I’ve always been a man who likes a good challenge. And Millie Jane is the definition of a challenge.

I fight a smirk and push down the sarcastic words that are on the tip of my tongue. “Actually, umm ... ” Heck, I didn’t realize it would be this hard to ask for help. “I could use your help with something.” I dip my head toward my crutches. “I’m having a little trouble without the full use of my arms.”

Her eyes soften momentarily before she schools her features and huffs. “Fine.” She goes to push past me, but I remain in the doorway. Her jaw ticks. “Um. Wanna move out of the way there?”

And I cannot help myself as I lean closer, inhaling a whiff of her cinnamon and vanilla scent as I do, and whisper in her ear, “What’s the magic word?”

“Bite me,” she retorts, jerking away.

“Hmm ... ” I say, pulling back and rubbing my chin as best as I can. Man, I really hate these crutches. “I didn’t think you were that type, Mills. But”—my eyes dart to her full, pink lips and then back to her eyes—“I’m sure that can be arranged.”

“*Dexter*,” she says through gritted teeth.

Laughing, I step back and let her storm past me, her long blonde hair swishing along her back. I force my gaze to remain on the back of her head and not the way her hips sway as she walks toward the kitchen.

She stops, her eyes taking in the counter loaded with cranberries, various cereals, and a huge bowl of overflowing popcorn. I've also got chocolate chips, graham crackers, marshmallows, and hot chocolate sitting out.

“Wh-what’s going on?” She swings her gaze to me.

I take a step closer, leaning my weight on my good foot. “Well ... Beth was too tired from the pregnancy and packing that she didn’t have time to decorate the tree. So I thought we could decorate it for her.” I clear my throat. “As a surprise.”

Millie’s jaw drops open as her eyes flit to the counter full of food and back to me. “Wow. Who knew you actually had a heart under all that ego of yours?”

I bring my hand up to my chest. “Little Lamb, you really know how to wound a guy.”

Huffing, she says, “Stop calling me Little Lamb.”

Not a chance. “What can I say? Old habits and all that.”

Millie rubs her temple. “You are impossible.” Before I can reply, she claps her hands together. “Okay. So ... what do you need me to help with exactly?” The sarcasm has dropped from her voice and she almost sounds ... excited.

“Well, we have to bake the cranberries and let them dry overnight. And the popcorn needs to sit overnight too. Then tomorrow we can string those.”

She eyes me suspiciously. “And you just happen to know all this?”

“Yeah, actually. Mom and I always made homemade decorations for the tree growing up.”

She makes a humming sound in her throat. “Anything else?”

I nod toward the hot chocolate. “I thought we could make hot chocolate. Maybe make some s’mores. And then we can go ahead and string the cereal since we don’t need to prep it.”

“Y-you want us to drink hot chocolate and eat s’mores while making Christmas decorations? Together?”

I lift a shoulder. “I mean ... I thought it would be nice. We can put a Christmas movie on and roast the s’mores over the fire. I know you love all the old claymation cartoons. We could watch those. Or ... well, whatever else you wanted to watch.”

Her eyes study me. “Are you sure you didn’t get a head wound along with that broken leg of yours?”

I snort. “My head is perfectly fine, thank you.”

“Too bad,” she mumbles. Then, straightening her shoulders, she says, “Okay, tell me what to do first.”

A smile forms on my face as we get to work. It’s mostly quiet, except for when Millie asks a question directly related to what we’re doing, but it’s not entirely uncomfortable.

Baby steps, Dex. Baby steps.



High School

Beth's avoiding me and I'm not sure what to do about it. I'm pretty sure she was crushing on me before her dad decided to marry my mom.

It's bad enough that Beth is ignoring me, but it also means that Millie is too. I get it, though. She and Beth are best friends. It's like some unwritten rule that if one friend is shunning someone, the other friend has to shun them too.

Thankfully, Millie and I have a couple classes together, so she's forced to interact with me. I'm going to have to say something today because the tense, awkward conversations between us is about to kill me.

I glance over at her as she takes notes. A small smile tugs at my lips. Beth is beautiful, objectively speaking, of course. But

even before she was to be my step-sister, my eyes have only been on one girl.

Millie Jane Brooks.

When I first met her, I thought she was quiet and meek. She barely spoke, seeming to follow Beth around and allowing her to do all the talking for her. It reminded me of the nursery rhyme, “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”

So of course, I called her out on it one day. Which led me to seeing that Millie Jane is anything but a meek, little lamb.

“You know,” I said before one of our classes we shared without Beth. “I think Beth may be taking advantage of you, Little Lamb.”

Her face turned various shades of red, before she let me have it. “Excuse me?”

I should have kept my stupid mouth shut at her tone, but ... well, I’m an idiot. Waving a hand, I replied, “You know? You’re always following her around like a meek lamb.”

She scoffed. “You have some nerve coming here and acting like you know it all. Maybe it’s because Daddy has bought you everything you’ve ever wanted and handed it to you on a silver platter, but that doesn’t give you any right to pretend as if you have a better grasp on my life than I do.” Venom dripped from her words and I sat frozen in place.

“Maybe you don’t have any real friends, Dex, and if that’s true, I feel sorry for you. But friendships are a balance of give and take.” She paused, her eyes darting around as she lowered

her voice. “You see me following Beth around and think that somehow she’s taking advantage of me, but did you ever stop to think that maybe I don’t care? That maybe I’m following her because I love her and enjoy doing things that she enjoys? Even if it might not be my first choice?” Folding her arms across her chest, she narrowed her gaze at me. “Of course, you didn’t. You don’t see all the things that Beth does for me in the evenings or on weekends. She gives to me just as much as I give to her.”

Jabbing her hand into my chest, she continued, “So next time, before you decide to be Mr. High and Mighty, maybe you should consider keeping your mouth shut instead.”

Sitting back in her chair, she mumbled under her breath, “I’m about as much of a lamb as you are the big bad wolf.”

I smirked. “Is that a challenge?”

She narrowed her eyes at me, but was saved from a response when the bell rang and class began.

Don’t worry. I apologized to her for thinking that she was Beth’s lackey. It really was an assumption on my part and I have no problem owning my mistakes.

Did I stop calling her Little Lamb though? Not a chance. And I love seeing her get all riled up every time I say it. Sometimes, I catch her fighting a smile when I use her nickname. Usually though, she ignores it altogether or comes back with some snappy remark.

It's one of the many things I like about her. She has this sarcastic sense of humor that I can't get enough of. And she's super smart. She has this amazing drive that you don't see in most teenagers. Heck, I wish half of our hockey team had just a fraction of Millie's drive and ambition.

I guess that's what happens when there's a hockey team forced onto a small town that is made up of predominantly basketball fans. We're one of very few high school hockey teams in Kentucky. And the only reason Hartburg High has a team is because of who my dad is.

My stomach sours as it always does when I think of Dad. Even though Mom and I moved back to Dad's hometown, I still only see him a few times a year. It's the way I prefer it really. I can only handle so much of his "if you'd only try harder, son" or "when I was your age, I had already invested in multiple businesses and had Harvard and Yale chasing after me." I scoff to myself.

He can take his money and Yale degree and shove it where the sun don't shine.

I'm happy here. Mom's happy. Especially now that she's marrying Mr. Thornsberry. He's a much better man than Dad. He treats Mom like a queen and actually listens to me when I talk. Not only does he listen, he actually seems to be interested and care in what I have to say. He's one of the few men in my life who doesn't belittle me any time I open my mouth.

And I know it's going to be hard for Beth to get used to us living in the same house, but I think—pray—that we'll

become really good friends. She's cool and I enjoy her company.

The bell rings and I'm jerked out of my musings. Millie jumps up, but I grab her arm gently before she brushes past me.

"Mills," I say quietly. "Can we talk?"

She bites her lip and then nods. I follow her out of the classroom and we stop in the corner of the hallway while students move around us.

"What is it?" she asks, but I can tell by the way she's averting her eyes that she already knows.

"Beth's avoiding me."

Millie sighs heavily. "Yeah."

I run a hand through my hair, noting the way that Millie's gaze follows the movement. I want to tease her about it, but stop myself. I can't be flirting with Millie until I make sure Beth's okay. Neither Millie or I would ever do anything to hurt Beth.

"Can you help me?" I ask instead. "I don't want this to be ... any weirder than it has to be."

Her anxious gaze darts around the hallway. "I don't know. I've tried talking to her. It's just—"

"Mills, I know she likes me. Or liked me. Or whatever." I wave my hand.

Her blue eyes widen. “Please don’t say anything, Dex. She’ll be so embarrassed.”

“Of course, I won’t. I just don’t want to hurt her or make it more awkward and I don’t know how to do that.”

Millie chews on her bottom lip—something I try not to notice—as she thinks. Suddenly, her eyes light up. “Oh, I think I have an idea,” she says excitedly.

“Yeah? And what’s that?” I don’t even realize I’ve leaned closer to her and I don’t think she has either, but no way am I moving now. Millie smells of cinnamon and vanilla and I inhale as subtly as I can. Man, she smells good.

“Get her a date.”

I blink. “What?”

“A date. With another guy, obviously. Maybe one of the hockey players?”

Frowning, I pull back. That wasn’t what I was expecting. Still ... “A date, huh?”

Millie nods. “Yes. Listen, I love Beth more than anyone besides my Gram, but ... well ... ” she trails off her face flushing slightly.

I smirk. “She’ll forget all about me if she has another guy to think about?”

Millie grimaces and sends me a sheepish smile. “Yeah? Most likely.”

Laughing, I nod. “Okay. That shouldn’t be hard. But ... well, I’ll have to screen the guys first. Only the best for my step-sister.” I wink at her, though I mean the words. There are some sketchy guys on the team. No way am I setting up my soon-to-be sister with any of them.

“Wow, Dex. That’s really sweet.”

“I have my moments.”

“Rarely,” she deadpans.

I laugh, which earns me a small smile, before we say goodbye. I head to practice with a little spring in my step. Hopefully, with Millie’s advice, I can make the situation with Beth a lot better, and also be able to clear the way so I can pursue Millie.



Seven

Millie Jane

Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought that I would be sitting in front of the crackling fire watching Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer while stringing colorful cereal garland for the Christmas tree with Dex Hart.

It feels so ... cozy.

I hate it.

Or at least, I keep trying to convince myself I'm hating every moment with this man. Dex is normally saying or doing something to infuriate me so it's usually easy to keep my walls up around him. Except, at the moment, he's being surprisingly quiet as we fall into a routine of him handing me alternating colors of cereal so I can thread it onto the string. He insisted on a pattern of red and green. I'm almost positive it was so this would take longer than it needs to.

I peek at him from the corner of my eye as he separates the reds and greens into two piles. I'm sitting on the floor beside

him while he sits on the couch with his broken leg propped up. He's using a dinner tray across his lap that I found in a cabinet in the kitchen.

His brow is furrowed as if he's thinking intently about something. It can't possibly be taking that much of his brain power to separate cereal into color coordinated piles.

Does he think this is as strange as I do? Or maybe he's coming up with some new devious plan to drive me insane while I'm stuck here.

I wish I knew for sure.

No, I scold myself. I do not need to know what nefarious scheme is going on in his brain.

"You're staring," Dex says without taking his eyes off the cereal in front of him. But I don't miss the slight quirk of his lip. The jerk.

My face heats as I snap my gaze away and scoff. "And make that head of yours inflate any bigger? I don't think so."

"Deny it all you want, Little Lamb. But I know what I saw." I can feel his eyes on me, but I can't bear to meet his gaze. He lets out a low chuckle. "Your face always did tell the truth, even when you didn't."

Jerking my head up, I glare at him. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

His lips twitch as he lifts his forefinger and gently traces it across the apples of my cheeks. I barely hold in a gasp.

“There,” he whispers, his eyes darkening. “You always blush when you’re flustered or lying.”

I swat his finger away, trying to calm my racing heart. For goodness’ sake, it was just a simple, light touch. It wasn’t as if he kissed me. Without my permission, my eyes dart to his lips just long enough to see them lift into a smug smirk.

Well, fiddlesticks.

“See something you like there, Mills?”

“I was just wondering if your lips know how to make any other expression besides that stupid smirk of yours,” I say lightly before my words fully hit me. Oh, no. When will I learn to keep my mouth shut? I literally opened myself up for whatever is getting ready to come out of his mouth.

Leaning a little closer, Dex whispers, “Oh, Lamb, my lips can do many, many things.”

“Keeping shut is apparently not one of them,” I retort, cursing the heat that’s rushing to my face yet again.

Dex smiles. “Now where would the fun in that be?”

Rolling my eyes, I point to the cereal. “Get back to work. I’d like to finish this sometime today.”

“Why? What else do you have to do?” he asks as he hands me another red piece.

“Nap, for one.”

“Ah. Because napping is so much more fun than spending time with a friend doing Christmasy things.”

I pause, a stone forming in my throat. “I’m not sure what you think this is, Dex,” I say softly, “but we are not friends.”

A muscle twitches in his jaw, but otherwise, he doesn’t say anything. I begin working again, pushing away the unease trying to claw its way up. We finish twenty minutes later and I silently put everything away, queasiness twisting my stomach as I do.

Dex hasn’t said a word. He’s barely glanced in my direction. That’s what I wanted though. Wasn’t it?

Once I’m finished, I escape back to my room, guilt tightening my chest. I close the door and flop onto my bed.

Why am I the one feeling guilty? He hasn’t apologized for what he did. I’m being civilized—well, mostly. Isn’t that enough?

What makes him think that we can just return to how things were?

I roll my lip inward, pressure building behind my eyes. I would typically go to Beth with any problems, but it’s kind of hard to do that when the problem is her step-brother.

Instead, I find myself dialing Mom’s number.

“Hello, dear,” she answers after the first ring.

I smile. “Hey, Mom.”

“I can’t talk long, your father and I have to leave for a speaking engagement in fifteen minutes.”

I swallow back the tears. I should be used to it by now, but sometimes I just want Mom and Dad to act like they care about me more than whatever speech or book they're working on.

"It's fine," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "I just wanted to check in." Pausing a moment, I inhale a deep breath. "I miss you guys."

"We miss you too, Millie. How's Nashville? Got any big Christmas shows booked?"

"Uh ... Nashville's good." Not a lie. Nashville is good. I'm just not there. "And no. No big shows."

"Oh, well I'm sure something will come up next year." The words would be encouraging, if they were coming from anyone else but Mom. From her, the words are dismissive with a note of relief. My parents hate that I'm pursuing music. I've never been able to figure out why. They are always giving motivational speeches about chasing your dreams and going after your heart's desires, yet they don't want their own daughter going after hers.

"Yeah. Maybe. Well, anyway. I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to Gram's house for Christmas. Will you guys be coming in?" I trace the lily pattern on the quilt, trying not to get my hopes up.

Mom gives a breathy laugh. "Oh, no, dear. I'm sorry. We're booked through New Years with almost back-to-back events. We have a few book signings, interviews, and speeches."

“Okay.” As much as I try, I can’t hide the disappointment in my voice.

“We’ll take a look at our schedule and plan something for early spring. How’s that sound?”

“Great,” I reply, forcing some enthusiasm into my tone.

“Perfect. Well, we’ve got to run. Love you, Millie.”

“Love you, Mom. Tell Dad I love him too.”

We hang up and it’s only then that I let the tears come. I didn’t even get to ask her advice for what to do about Dex. Though, I would never tell her I was staying here with Dex alone. It probably wouldn’t matter to her anyway. Mom’s canned responses are: “Listen to what your heart is saying, Millie. What do you feel, deep down inside? Whatever it is, do that thing.”

As if it was that easy.

I’ve never understood the whole follow your heart thing. My heart doesn’t know what it wants half the time. How am I supposed to follow it?

Not to mention that the Bible says the heart is deceitful above all things.

Right now is a good example. My heart is going back and forth between wanting to apologize to Dex and wanting to stay locked inside this room until the snow melts and I can leave.

So which part of my heart do I follow?

I ignore the voice—that sounds an awful lot like Gram—telling me that I should be praying about this. I know I should and I have before. Sort of. But I also know that if I pray about it right now, God's going to ask me to do what I desperately do not want to do.

It was easy to ignore it when I wasn't trapped in the same house with him. There were even times I would go weeks—okay, days—not thinking of Dex at all. That's kind of impossible at the moment.

Groaning, I throw my arm over my eyes, not even bothering to climb under the quilt. I'm too drained to think. Too exhausted to fight all these different emotions tumbling around inside of me.

My eyes begin to drift closed as I wonder what I'm going to do about Dex. Maybe when I wake up, I'll have an answer. Preferably one that doesn't involve me letting down the walls I've spent years building around my heart.



Eight

Dex

High School

I'm at The Screaming Peach waiting in a line that's almost backed out the door, when I catch sight of Beth and Thomas sitting at a booth in the corner. I watch with amusement as Beth twirls a strand of her dark hair around her finger and bats her eyes at Thomas. By the look on his face, he's already a total goner.

"Looks like it worked," someone whispers beside me.

Tilting my head, I smile down at Millie. "Yeah. Seems to be," I reply, shaking my head. "I still can't believe it did though."

She gives me a smug smile. "Don't sound so surprised, Hart. Just had to put a little brain power into it."

I lean closer, my lips twitching. “Yeah? And what else is going on inside that pretty brain of yours?”

Millie’s cheeks turn an adorable shade of pink as she tilts her chin up. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Grasping a strand of her blonde hair, I rub it between my fingers, my eyes boring into hers. “I want to know everything about you, Little Lamb.” Her eyes flash at the now-familiar nickname and I fight back a laugh. It never gets old teasing her and seeing that fire lighting up her eyes.

Swatting my hand away, she huffs. “Can you be serious for five minutes?”

The line is moving at a snail’s pace, but I don’t even notice now that Millie is here.

“What?” I ask, feigning surprise. “I’m always serious.” And I was dead serious about what I told her. But apparently, she’s still ignoring our undeniable chemistry.

Millie crosses her arms across her chest. Her gaze darts around the cafe, before hesitantly landing back on me. “Um ...” she clears her throat. “Are you getting yours to go or ...” she lets the question drop.

“Hmm ...” I cock my head, my lips quirking up on the side as I rub my jawline. “This is an interesting development. Are you asking me on a date, Millie Jane?”

Her cheeks were pink before, but now they are beet red. “What? No. I-I was just making small talk. That’s all.”

I nod my head. “Oh, of course,” I say with a smirk.

Sighing, she shakes her head. “Never mind.”

“Are you getting yours to go? Or are you going to sit down for a while?”

She shrugs. “I *was* thinking about hanging around here, but that was before I found out the company was so obnoxious.”

My smirk grows wider. “Ah. So you were asking me on a date.”

Rolling her eyes, she gives my shoulder a gentle push. “Pay attention, Hart. The line’s moving.”

I grab her hand that’s still on my shoulder and twine our fingers together. Tugging her to me, I whisper, “I meant what I said. I want to know everything about you.” Pulling back, I stare into her eyes. “Do you still want me to stay?”

She swallows and steps back, raising a delicate shoulder. “If you must.”

I chuckle and we make our way to the front, where I insist on paying for both of our peach smoothies. Despite her protests, I can see the pleasure in her eyes.

Millie starts to walk toward Beth and Thomas, but I clasp her elbow. “Hey, why don’t we grab our own seats? Let the two lovebirds stay in their little bubble.” She only hesitates a moment, glancing over to them, before following me to a booth close to the window.

We sit in silence for a while before Millie asks, “So, how do you like living in Hartburg?”

I take a drink of my smoothie, trying to figure out how to answer that without dragging all my dirty laundry into the conversation. But for some reason, Millie makes me want to open up and bare my heart and soul.

“There are pros and cons,” I finally admit.

Her lips twist up. “Pros?”

“I like living in a small town. The city was too busy and loud. I love that Mom is finally happy. I like that the school is smaller and for the most part, everyone is cool.” I trail my finger lightly across her hand. “I like living here so that I can sit here with you and talk.”

She ducks her head, but not before I see her small smile. Clearing her throat, she takes a drink of her shake, and then glances back at me. “Cons?”

That one is easy. “Dad lives here too.”

She makes a sound in the back of her throat. “I take it you two don’t get along?”

I snort. “That’s putting it mildly.”

“I’m sorry. Th-that must be hard.” Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, she says, “I mean ... I kind of understand how you feel.” She doesn’t elaborate. I know she lives with her grandmother and that her parents travel for work, but it sounds like there’s more to her story.

“It’s just that my parents are so career focused,” she finally adds. “They love me. In their own way. But I’ve never been enough for them.” She scoffs. “When I asked them to settle

down and put me in a real school so I could have at least one real friend, they brought me here and left me with my gram.”

I flinch. “That’s ... man, that sucks.”

She smiles softly. “I’ve gotten over it. Mostly. And I couldn’t ask for a better place to live. Gram and I are best friends. She’s the Lorelai to my Rory.”

My brow furrows. “I have no idea what that means.”

Laughing, she replies, “Oh, Dex, you need to educate yourself. It’s from *Gilmore Girls*.”

“Ah ... ” I shake my head. “Yeah, still have no clue.”

She shakes her head sadly. “But your dad made an entire high school hockey team happen for you,” she says brightly. “That’s got to mean something.”

I huff. “Yeah, it means he’s obsessed with success. He’s always telling me that I’m useless. I need to prove myself. Uphold the family name,” I say the last part in a deeper voice, mimicking my father. “He wasn’t upholding the family name when he cheated on my mom with my nanny.”

Millie grimaces. “Yikes. Yeah, that—”

“Sucks?” I ask, my lips tugging up.

“Yeah.”

We spend another hour talking about our hopes and dreams. Millie wants to follow her gram and become a country music star. And regardless of my dad’s intrusion into my life, I

actually really do love hockey and would like to go pro someday.

The more she talks, the more her eyes sparkle, and the more I'm drawn to her. And just like Thomas is with Beth, I know I'm officially a goner for Millie Jane Brooks.

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Nine

Millie Jane

When I wake up, my head is pounding and I feel worse than when I fell asleep. I stretch my hand toward the side table until I find my phone. It's almost four in the evening. How did I even sleep that long?

Something tells me it's the emotional strain of dealing with Dex and these deep buried feelings.

Groaning, I slowly stand and stretch. I'm not any closer to an answer about Dex than I was before my nap.

I sigh and glance down at my rumpled clothing with a frown. I debate putting something less bedraggled on ...

No, I tell myself, shaking my head. It doesn't matter what I look like, but ... I can at least brush my hair and suck on a mint before forcing myself out of my little cave. It doesn't matter how much the man frustrates me, no one deserves a whiff of my after-nap breath.

I'm just finishing with my hair when my phone rings and Beth's name flashes across the screen.

"Hey, boo," I say as I answer.

There's a small pause. "Hey, Mills." Her voice is slightly strained. Reserved.

"What's wrong?" I ask, my heart rate spiking as my mind races through dozens of scenarios. "Are you okay? Thomas? The baby?"

"We're all fine." She chuckles, but I've known her for most of my life and I can tell it's forced. "Um ... so, Dex called me."

My heart drops. "Oh."

"He said you were snowed in?"

"Yeah, lucky me," I grumble. She's quiet for so long, I start shifting nervously. "I'm sorry, Beth. I know you love him. I shouldn't talk about him like that with you."

"I know it may take a while for you to believe it, but he's trying, Mills. Really. And you promised you'd try too. Remember?"

I sigh. "I am." Not really. But I'm thinking about it.

"Are you sure?"

Anger flares in my chest. I can't believe Dex went running to Beth.

As if she's reading my mind, Beth continues, "I know what you're thinking and you're wrong. Dex hasn't complained

about you to me. All he said was that you were snowed in together.”

Shame washes over me. “Oh.”

“He did sound ... off, but he assured me everything was fine.” Beth heaves out a sigh. “I’m going to say something that I probably should have said a long time ago. And honestly, I’m sorry it’s taken me so long.” Her voice is stronger now and my stomach twists into knots. Because I can already guess what she’s going to say. “Millie, you’re letting this old hurt destroy you.”

“No, I’m—”

“Please, let me finish. I am not excusing what Dex did. I’m not denying that you were hurt and angry. Anyone would have been. But you’ve never let it go and moved on. I thought—hoped—maybe you had, but I can see that I was wrong.”

I wait for her to continue, not wanting to interrupt again. Tears prick the back of my eyes as I sink to the bed.

“You’ve let that anger and hurt turn into deep-rooted bitterness that is spreading like cancer. And I’m afraid if you don’t get rid of it now”—a sob escapes her and now my own tears are falling—“I’m afraid you never will. And I really don’t want to lose my best friend.”

“Beth,” I say through my tears. “You’re never going to lose me.”

I hear her snuffle. “I don’t want to, Mills. I really don’t. But ... well, Dex is going to be T.J.’s godfather and I was hoping

you'd be his godmother. I'm not even saying that you have to be good friends with him, but how are you two going to be there for my child when you can't even be in the same room together for more than five minutes?"

My heart stops as I let her words sink in. "Godmother?" I echo.

"Of course. Who else would I ask?"

I'm wiping fresh tears from my eyes, but at least these are happy ones. I inhale a shuddering breath, chewing on everything Beth has just thrown at me and honestly, she's right.

The bitterness I've had toward Dex has turned me into a cynical person. I don't trust easily because I'm afraid of being let down—of being betrayed again. I've let his one action from seven years ago chip away at my confidence. My happiness. My peace.

"You're right," I breathe out. "I've been holding on to this for too long. I'm sorry, Beth. I've never meant to hurt you or drag you into the middle of it."

"Have you tried asking him about it?"

My shoulders tense. "No. And ... I don't plan to. I don't know that I can, but I am going to work on actively forgiving him." I give a strained chuckle. "It may take a while though."

"It's okay. That's understandable. Just know that I'm here for you and I'm praying for you. Okay?"

I smile. "Thank you."

We say our goodbyes and I spend a few minutes composing myself before I have to walk out there and face Dex again.

God, please forgive me. And help me to forgive Dex.

Straightening my shoulders, I head out of my room.



Ten

Dex

Have I mentioned how much I hate this cast on my leg? I'm not used to sitting all the time and pacing is so much harder when you're using crutches. Still, that doesn't stop me as I awkwardly move from the kitchen to the living room and back again.

I need to keep moving. To outrun the force of the words Millie threw at me earlier.

Of course, we aren't friends. We'll probably never be friends again at this rate. Stones settle in my stomach at the thought and I wonder ... should I tell her everything that happened that night? It doesn't negate what I did so I doubt it would even make a difference to her.

God, what do I do?

After a while, I get annoyed with the slow, awkward pacing and go rummaging through Beth's game stack. She has several puzzles and classic board games, chess, and four decks of

cards. If Millie ever speaks to me again, maybe we can have a game night.

The idea of sitting by the fire, watching Christmas movies, and playing games with Millie stirs something within me. I want that with her.

Grabbing a tote, I put a couple of puzzles, a deck of cards, and a Hartburg themed Monopoly game inside and head toward the dining table.

It takes a bit of maneuvering, but soon I've got my left leg propped up on a chair and have started sorting the puzzle pieces. All straight edged pieces in one pile, every other piece in another.

I'm not sure how much time passes as I sort through them and start piecing together the frame. Man, these pieces are tiny and there are a lot of them.

Glancing down at the box, I groan. 6,000 pieces? How did I not notice that before? Then, I take a closer look at the image on the box. It's a picture of downtown Hartburg. Who knew the town had its own puzzles too?

My stomach is starting to growl and I realize that I haven't eaten lunch and now it's almost supper time. I'm debating on if I want to extend another olive branch to Millie or just leave her be for now when I hear the creak of a door.

I look up and force my expression to remain neutral as she comes down the hallway. She stops beside me, her eyes on the table and puzzle pieces.

“Did you turn into an old lady?” she asks, her eyebrow arching.

I frown. “What?”

Her gaze meets mine. “First, you’re reading romance, then you’re making homemade Christmas decorations, and now you’re sitting here putting together intricate puzzles.” She starts looking around me and under the table.

“What are you doing?”

Standing back up, she replies, “I was wondering if you had a basket of yarn and a cat hiding under there.”

“My yarn and knitting needles are in my bedroom. I left Fluffy with a friend because Beth hates her. Says she looks like she’s thinking of ways to eat her,” I reply. “Want me to teach you how to knit?”

She narrows her eyes, placing a hand on her hip. “What kind of cat?”

“Sphynx.”

“Beth loves animals.”

“Not Fluffy.”

“Name one knitting stitch,” she says, crossing her arms.

I arch an eyebrow. “Do you even know a knitting stitch name?”

“I’m not the one being interrogated,” she retorts.

“Garter stitch.”

She pulls out her phone and types something in. “Lucky guess. How old is Fluffy?”

“Two and ... ” I trail off, looking to the ceiling as I think. “Four months.”

“Show me a picture.”

I whip out my phone, and show her the lockscreen which is a picture of Fluffy staring creepily into the camera.

Millie’s jaw works back and forth. “And you named her Fluffy because—”

“It was ironic,” I reply with a smile.

She’s studying my face and I realize how close she is. Close enough that I could wrap my arm around her waist and pull her into my lap.

No. Bad idea, Dex. Baby steps, remember?

“Do you really know how to knit?” she asks quietly.

I bark a laugh and place my phone on the table. “No. Mom tried to teach me when I was younger, but what self-respecting pre-teen boy wants to knit?” I scrunch up my face and shudder dramatically.

Millie’s lips twitch and I hold my breath, waiting for her to let loose and really laugh. Her features smooth and I know I’m going to have to work extra hard to earn one of her laughs.

Glancing around the room, she sighs heavily before looking back at me. “Dex,” she begins in a quiet voice, “I’m sorry for what I said earlier. It was ... it was uncalled for.”

Warmth spreads across my chest, even as teasing words work up my throat. I push them back though. She's finally opening up to me. This isn't the time for teasing remarks, even if I do love bantering with her.

Taking a chance, I brush my finger lightly down her arm. Just a quick touch—though it's no less electrifying—before pulling my hand away. “It's okay, Mills. For what it's worth, I'd really like to try and be friends with you.”

She runs a hand over the spot on her arm that I just touched and I wonder if she felt the same spark that I did. She says nothing though. Just nods and turns to walk away.

Without thinking, I grasp her wrist gently. “Please, don't run off.” There's a desperation in my voice that I hope she doesn't hear. I clear my throat. “You could stay and work the puzzle with me.”

“Relax, Dex,” she says with a small smile. “I just thought I'd make supper for us.”

My muscles instinctively relax as I release her wrist. Leaning back in the chair, I cross my arms across my chest. “Wow. I didn't know you learned how to cook.”

Narrowing her eyes, she replies, “Overcooking something one time does not mean I can't cook.”

I snort. “Overcooking? They caught on fire.”

“The parchment paper, Dex,” she exclaims. “Not the cookies.”

“Whatever you say, Lamb. I know what I saw.”

Shaking her head, she turns around, but not before I hear her mumble, “You are impossible.”

“What was that?” I call after her. “Did you say I am impossibly handsome? I have to agree with you there.” An oven mitt comes hurling at me but misses by a couple of feet. I laugh. “You gotta do better than that.”

“Are you really trying to enrage the woman who is cooking your supper?” She’s not looking at me as she opens cabinets and pulls out food.

“But you’re so cute when you get all riled up,” I reply and she visibly stiffens.

Ignoring my comment, she asks, “How does spaghetti sound?”

“Whatever you want,” I say with a shrug. “I’m not picky. Do you want any help?”

“Nope. You’re a safety hazard on those crutches.” She inclines her head toward the table. “Just go back to working that puzzle of yours, Granny.”

Laughing, I turn my attention to the puzzle pieces in front of me. I try to focus, but it’s pointless with Millie in the kitchen. She’s singing softly and I close my eyes for a moment, letting her warm voice wash over me. It’s soothing and brings a sense of calmness to my heart that I haven’t felt in a long time. Every muscle in my body relaxes. I can’t make out all the words, but it’s something about trusting God and His will for your life.

I've not heard it before, but it's beautiful. Even more so because she's the one singing. And the lyrics are stirring up the questions that have been heavy on my heart for the past few months.

God, I'm not sure I want to go back to the Dragons. Especially now that Millie has reentered my life. And—I break my inner prayer off and glance at Millie—if there's a way to make Millie part of my future, please help me find it. I know I need to apologize, but please ... let me know when the time is right for her to hear and accept it. Because I don't think I can bear to lose her again.

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Eleven

Millie Jane

High School

Mr. Mullins just delivered the most exciting news I've ever received.

Clearing my throat, I ask him again, just to be sure I heard him correctly, "Voice of Wonder? They're coming here?" I'm practically bouncing in my seat as he nods.

"Yes, Ms. Brooks. They've decided to use the Hartburg High as their base for searching out local talent. They said it would be a special edition of finding talent in rural areas."

I glance over at Dex, who winks at me. My face flames. I'm pretty sure that Dex only talked his way into choir to be closer to me. He hasn't said that and he actually does have a pretty amazing voice, but ... he doesn't seem to really care about the

class. Then again, most of the kids don't take it as seriously as I do.

Mr. Mullins continues with rehearsal, but I can barely focus.

Voice of Wonder is a reality show that scouts for the next great singer in America's youth. Only those eighteen years and younger can audition. And they're going to be at *my* high school. God has to be opening doors and I can't let the opportunity pass me by. Ideas are turning around in my head as we finish the last song and as soon as Mr. Mullins dismisses class, I'm scrambling to Dex.

A wide grin spreads across his face. "You're going to do it, aren't you?"

I nod excitedly as we exit the choir room. "Of course, I am. I need to study the pamphlet Mr. Mullins handed out to see what I need to do in order to prepare."

"That's awesome, Mills. You'll blow their socks off."

I snort. "Or freak out and make a complete fool of myself."

Dex cups my elbow, pulling me to a stop with my back against the lockers. "Don't do that to yourself. You have more talent in your little finger than most people have in their entire bodies."

"I need talent in my voice, Dex, not my little finger."

He rolls his eyes. "Har, har. You know what I mean."

I take a deep breath. "Yeah, I know. And thanks for cheering me up." I smile up at him. "You're a good friend."

“Friend?” he asks quietly, placing his forearm on the locker above my head, his eyes searching mine. “Is that what we are, Mills?”

My heart races wildly as he leans closer. “Aren’t we?” I ask, my voice catching.

“Hmm,” he mumbles. With his other hand, he reaches out and runs his fingers lightly over my hair. “I suppose we are. But ... ” he trails off.

“But?” I whisper.

Dex smiles that heart-stopping, wide smile that makes my stomach swoop and my knees knock together. “But,” he repeats, leaning closer until his mouth is next to my ear. “I don’t want to be just friends with you.”

“You don’t?” Ugh, why can’t I stop repeating everything he says?

Chuckling, Dex presses a kiss against my cheek. “I like you, Millie Jane.”

He pulls away slowly. The place where his lips touched my skin is on fire, along with the rest of my face. I can’t help myself as I bring my fingers to the spot.

Dex gives me a knowing smirk. “And just wait,” he continues easily, as if he didn’t just make me melt in a puddle beneath his feet, “until I’ve kissed you for real.”

My gaze snaps to him. “For real?” I almost choke out.

Smiling tenderly at me, he runs a hand down my arm and laces our fingers together. “Our first kiss isn’t going to be in the middle of the hallway with everyone watching. You deserve more than that, Little Lamb.”

He doesn’t drop my hand as we make our way down the hall and to the cafeteria for lunch. And I can still feel the touch of his lips hours later when I lie down to sleep.



It’s my free hour and normally I spend it with Beth, but she’s off somewhere with Thomas. So instead, I’m pacing the hallway, chewing on my lip waiting for Dex’s class to let out.

God, don’t let him say no.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, the bell rings, doors open, and students start pouring out. As soon as I catch a glimpse of Dex, I grab his arm and pull him toward me.

He gives me a slow smile. “Someone’s eager to see me.”

“I need your help,” I blurt out.

“Your wish is my command.” Dipping his head down, he whispers, “I hope that this means you’ve finally agreed to go on a date with me.”

Dex has been asking me out for a week since that kiss on the cheek. I do want to go on a date with him, but I also need to focus on this competition. Also, what happens in a few months when we both graduate and go our separate ways? Knowing his dad, he’s probably got scouting agents lined up to come to

Dex's next game. It wouldn't be surprising if he got signed right out of high school.

Dex isn't just good at hockey. He's great. Though he can play each position, his skill is as the center. Did I like hockey before Dex Hart moved to town? No, I did not. Did I learn everything I could about it after he moved here and we got our own team? Yes, yes, I did and I am not ashamed about it.

Still ... just because Dex makes me feel things I've never felt before doesn't mean it's a good idea for me to date him. Not with the competition coming up and the very high chances of Dex going pro in the next year or two.

"Actually," I reply. "It's about the Voice of Wonder competition."

"Okay. Whatever you need."

My eyebrow hikes. "You don't even know what it is."

Shrugging, he replies, "It doesn't matter. I'll always be there for you, Mills." The words send butterflies fluttering around in my stomach, but I can't let his good looks and smooth words distract me. I have a competition to win.

"Okay, then. I need you to be my partner."

"Partner?"

"For the competition. In two weeks."

"The singing competition?"

"Dex," I scold, placing my hands on my hips.

He shakes his head a little. “Sorry, I’m just ... you want me to sing with you?”

“Forget it,” I mumble. “This was a bad idea.” I start to turn away, but he grasps my wrist gently, holding me in place.

“Millie, wait. I’ll do it.”

My gaze snaps to his, my jaw dropping open. “Y-you will?”

“I said I’d do whatever you need,” he replies casually, dropping my wrist. “Though I don’t know why you need my help. You’re amazing all on your own.”

I lower my voice to a whisper. “I have a bit of stage fright.”

He frowns. “You sing in church all the time. And what about choir?”

My shoulders sink. “I know. It’s ridiculous. It’s just ... it’s just easier to sing around family and friends. And it’s easier to sing at church because I’m not trying to perform. This is different. I’m going to be critiqued and judged.”

Dex nods. “No, that makes sense. Of course, I’ll be your wingman.”

Tears build up in my eyes. Then, I throw my arms around his neck. “Thank you, Dex,” I whisper against his neck. Oh, he smells so good. Like fresh pine and spice. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me closer, before I step back.

Heat rushes to my cheeks. “Okay, great. Um ... I’ll text you about rehearsing?”

A wide smile forms on his face. “It’s a date,” he says,
sending me a wink.

Well ... fiddlesticks.



Twelve

Millie Jane

There's a thrill of anticipation when I wake up the next morning. I try to tamp it down. The fact that Dex and I had a civilized evening means nothing. It was simply us attempting to get along. For Beth's sake.

I can't give Dex any more space in my heart. We've been down that road before and it only leads to soul-crushing heartache.

Still ... I can't help but remember the way he brushed his finger against my arm. Or the way he looked at me when he thought I wouldn't notice. A spark of fire and hope mingled with caution in his eyes. I've never seen that look on him before and I refuse to analyze it further. I was probably imagining it anyway. Even if he did say I was cute.

My cheeks warm with that thought. Ugh. He can't be saying stuff like that, even teasingly. If he does it again, I'm going to have to say something. But then he'll know that it's affecting me and will probably double down with his flirting.

I blow out a breath. That man is exhausting, frustrating, annoying, and ...

Ridiculously hot.

Seriously? How does the man look so amazing in just a white tee and ball shorts?

Okay, I have to pull myself together before I step out of this room. With that in mind, I take my time getting ready. Not, I repeat *not*, because I'm trying to look my best. It's simply to give myself more time to think and pray ... and remove any hint of attraction I may still have for Dex Hart.

That thought flies out the window when I leave my room and practically knock the man over. I grab his arms to steady myself and him, especially since he's using crutches, and I cannot help but notice how firm and muscular his forearms are.

He's wearing a short sleeve shirt and I'm finally able to get a better look at the tattoo on his right arm. I wonder just how big it is because it still disappears into the sleeve of his shirt. Though, I'm pretty sure my first assumption of it being a dragon is accurate. It doesn't look like a snake tail. My fingers are itching to trace its length.

I snap my thoughts away, turning my irritation on him. "Why were you right outside my room?"

"Sorry," he replies, and there's not a hint of snark or sarcasm in his voice. "I was coming to see if you wanted breakfast."

Why is he being so sweet?

I take a calming breath and look up at him. He's smirking at me. Forget what I said about him being sweet.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I hike a brow, trying to get my equilibrium back. This infuriating man has knocked me completely off kilter.

He tilts his head down until his mouth is hovering over my ear. "Your actions are giving you away, Lamb." His breath is warm against my neck, and my skin pebbles.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about." I cringe at the shakiness of my voice.

"Your hands."

"My hands?" I ask, then glance down to see that they are still locked onto his arms and my traitorous thumbs are brushing back and forth along his skin. Quickly, I jerk my hands away and take a step back. Heat climbs up my neck and spreads across my face.

Dex chuckles. "Mills, if you want to touch me, all you have to do is ask."

"Shut up," I mutter, pushing past him.

Thankfully, he doesn't say anything else as he follows me into the kitchen. "I wasn't sure what you wanted for breakfast, so I thought I'd wait and ask." He attempts to rummage through the fridge, but I can tell he's having a difficult time with the crutches.

My heart softens—just a teeny bit—and I step beside him. "I'll make something for us. You go rest."

“I want to help you.”

I smile. “And that’s nice, but it’s okay to let someone help *you* when you need it.”

Letting out a frustrated breath, he mumbles, “I know, I know.” Rubbing a hand over his face, he says, “I’m just so tired of feeling useless.”

There’s sadness in his words and I remember how often his dad used them against him. How often he made Dex feel useless for not doing what he wanted him to do.

Dex’s dad is a lot like my parents. They are all driven by success. There’s one glaring difference between them though. My parents do love me. They may love their life and careers more, but they still love me and take at least a minimal interest in things I like. Mr. Hart, though? I’m not sure he’s even capable of love. It sounds harsh, but it’s the truth of the matter.

Sympathy bubbles up inside of me. Dex is injured. It’s not his fault that he’s struggling to do normal things right now. He shouldn’t be made to feel useless when it’s not something he can control.

I purse my lips. “Well, what if you started stringing the popcorn while I make us some breakfast? We need to do that anyway.”

Gray eyes study me for a moment before he smiles softly. “Okay.” He heads toward the couch. “I hate to ask, but can you bring me the popcorn?”

“Of course.” I gather everything he’ll need and bring it to him.

Once Dex is settled, I return to the kitchen, but my gaze keeps straying back to him. He’s concentrating and doesn’t notice me watching him. I can feel my defenses falling and I wonder ...

Would it be so bad to let them all fall? What would it be like to have Dex as a friend again?

I can’t let myself think any further than that though. Just because we had a small spark in high school, doesn’t mean we would now. Seven years is a long time. People change. What drew us to one another then might not even be present now.

Stop lying to yourself. You’re still drawn to that man.

Sometimes I hate my inner voice.

I’m saved from arguing with her by Dex. “You should sing something,” he says casually.

I chuckle nervously as I flip the sausage patties. It’s true that I’m normally humming or singing quietly, but singing in front of people has become such a tedious task that I almost hate it now. Even if it’s just Dex. No, especially if it’s just Dex.

“Didn’t you hear?” I ask, trying to keep a light tone. “I’m booked through the holidays.” I begin cracking eggs into a bowl, hoping that he won’t push.

“Aww ... come on, Mills. It’s just me and you. I’ve heard you sing before.”

I swallow over the lump in my throat. “I am not singing *All I Want for Christmas is You*.” I know that is going to be the first song he requests just to see me blush.

Even from the kitchen, I can feel the heat of his gaze as it swings my way and he takes me in from head to Rudolph-clad toes. He smiles at the slippers. “Nice slippers. And I was actually thinking you could sing, ‘O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.’” He looks back down at the popcorn garland. “Your version is my favorite.”

I still my egg beating and look over at him. He doesn’t seem to realize what he’s just said. He ... no. He couldn’t have. Could he?

The thing is, I’ve only sung that song publicly once in my life. It was for a Christmas event at the Grand Ole Opry and the only reason I got to sing was because one of the other opening acts came down with the flu.

I’d gotten the call only a few hours before the show. We had time to run through the numbers one time. It was my favorite performance I’ve ever done. I mean, it’s the Grand Ole Opry, how could it not be?

But it was more than that. It was being able to sing Christmas music and see the festive decorations. Gram had been in town to spend the holidays with me, and I’d been able to get her a backstage pass so she could watch me perform. Of course, she’d known some of the performers from her own music career.

I'd honestly thought it would be my big break. I had never wanted to use Gram's connections to make my way. I'd thought that performance would be enough to get me noticed.

Unfortunately, it wasn't.

I'm still staring at Dex when he turns around. His brow furrows when he notices me watching him, slack jawed. "What?" he asks, rubbing his face. "Do I have something on my face?"

"Dex"—I set the eggs down and take a step toward him —"did you ... did you come to my performance at the Grand Ole Opry?"

His eyes widen and I'm surprised to see his neck turning red. Clearing his throat, his gaze flicks across my face. "Maybe."

"I was a fill-in. How did you even know about it?"

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. "Um ... Dottie may have called me and told me you were performing."

Placing a hand on my hip, I huff. "What?"

He raises his hands. "Look, Dottie knew I was in Nashville. And she called me like two hours before the performance and said she had an extra ticket."

"That little conniving woman" I mutter.

Dex chuckles, still looking sheepish. "Yeah, well ... um. I went." He shrugs, then looks at me. "You were amazing, by the way."

I press my fingers into my temple to try and cover my reddening cheeks and because ... what the heck, Gram?! “I’m not sure I’m understanding. Why would Gram know you were in Nashville? And why does she have your number?”

“Because I’m irresistible to women of all ages.” He smirks and I grab a pillow and throw it at his head. “Okay,” he laughs and rubs the back of his neck. “Did you know she loves hockey?”

“Of course, I knew that. She’s *my* gram.” I did not in fact know this. Since when does Gram like any sport, let alone hockey?

Dex nods. “I came home not long after signing with the Dragons and Dottie Mae cornered me at church.” He smiles and shakes his head. “She had a lot of advice for me on my form. Somehow the conversation ended with me putting my number into her phone.”

“I-I have no words for this.”

“Yeah, she texts or calls after every game. The entire team has adopted her as their honorary grandmother and the last time she came to a game—”

“She’s been to your games?” My voice comes out as a screech. Who is this woman? Has Gram been living a double life this entire time?

Dex flinches, his expression guarded as he replies, “Uh ... yes.”

“How many?” I cross my arms.

“Honestly? I have no idea. Sometimes she’d plan it ahead of time. And sometimes she’d just show up.”

“And the entire team knows my gram?”

His lips quirk up. “Yeah. And everyone loves her.”

“Of course, they do. She’s the best.”

“She is.”

I shake my head. “Wow. This is all ... this is crazy. Do you know that? I feel like I’m in the Twilight Zone. Or the Multiverse,” I mumble the last part to myself.

“Hey, Mills,” Dex interrupts. I glance up and he nods toward the kitchen. “I think something’s burning.”

“Fiddlesticks,” I yell and dart toward the stove, Dex’s laughter following me. I reach the stove and turn it off. Thank goodness the sausage didn’t actually catch fire, but they are ... crispy. “Not a word, Hart,” I call into the living room. He’s never going to let me live this down.

“I didn’t say anything,” he replies, but I can still hear him holding back laughter.

“Yeah, well, you’re eating every bite of it,” I threaten, though the more I look at them, the more I wonder if any of them are edible. “I’m going to make the eggs and toast now. Please don’t distract me again with stories about how my gram is apparently living a double life behind my back.”

“My lips are sealed.” He grins and starts working on the garland again.

Sighing, I finish cooking breakfast, being careful not to burn anything else, and wonder how I'm going to talk to Gram about the secrets she's been keeping from me.

The page is framed by a decorative border of snowflakes and small dots in shades of blue, teal, and grey. The snowflakes vary in size and complexity, some with six points and others with more intricate patterns. The dots are small and scattered throughout the border.

Thirteen

Dex

Persistent knocking on my door startles me awake.
“Dex?”

I sit up and sling my legs over the bed—which is much harder when one is in a cast. It’s still completely dark out, but the full moon is shining through the window. I blink a few times, my eyes adjusting to the darkness.

Another knock.

“Come in,” I say over a yawn.

Millie opens the door, a hand over her eyes. “Are you decent?”

“Define decent.”

“Dexter ... ” she grinds my name out.

“Would I have said come in if I weren’t?”

She snorts, her face still covered. “Probably.”

I smile, though she can't see me. "Rest assured. I am fully clothed." Her shoulders relax as she drops her hand and looks over at me. "Disappointed?" I ask with a smirk.

She ignores me completely. "The power is out and I'm freezing." As if to prove her point, her teeth start chattering. It's then I notice she has a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, her Rudolph slippers peeking out at the bottom.

"Millie Jane ... are you implying that we need to share body heat in order to survive the night?" I waggle my eyebrows at her.

"Good grief, Dex." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm implying that you need to come help me get a fire going."

I shake my head sadly. "That is disappointing. But I suppose we can at least cuddle on the couch underneath a nice fuzzy blanket."

Pointing her finger at me, her icy eyes flash. "There will be no cuddling of any kind."

Grabbing my crutches, I stand and walk closer to her. "Is that a challenge, Mills?" I grasp a lock of her hair, twirling it around my fingers, making sure not to break eye contact. "You know how I love a good challenge."

Though the air around us is cold, I can practically feel the crackling tension that's tugging us closer. I can't be the only one feeling this. Can I?

Millie bites her bottom lip and takes a shaky breath. “Will you please come help me build a fire, Dex?”

Ah. Avoidance. Well, it’s better than outright hostility. So I’ll go with it. For now.

Dropping her hair, I reply, “Since you asked so nicely.”

She spins around and walks out of the room, and I follow her.

“What time is it?” I ask as we step into the living room.

“Three-thirty.” She stands looking at the fireplace. “I know it needs a starter and logs, obviously. I just—”

“It’s okay. I’ll walk you through the steps so you can do it yourself next time. If you want.”

She flicks her gaze to me. “Thanks. I would like to know.”

I nod and then guide her through each step of the process. It’s not difficult, but it’s important for her to know what she can and can’t use for an indoor fire.

When the flame leaps to life, she smiles. “Look! I did it.”

I chuckle. “Never doubted you for a minute. Do you need anything else before I go back to bed?”

“No. Thank you.” Rolling her bottom lip in, she glances at the TV. “I’m going to stay in here since it’s warmer. I think my laptop has enough charge for me to put one of Beth’s old Christmas DVDs on.” Shrugging, she moves past me and starts adjusting the couch pillows.

“Was that your subtle way of inviting me to stay up with you?”

She blows out a breath. “Yeah. I guess it was.”

I press a hand to my heart. “I’m touched, Mills.”

Swatting my chest, she mutters, “Shut up.” She grabs quilts from the basket at the end of the couch, not meeting my eyes. “I’m trying to let go, Dex. Okay?” Clutching a quilt to her, she says, “Beth pointed out that I’ve become bitter. And ... well, I don’t want that. So I’m trying to let go and move on.”

I swallow over the sudden stone lodged in my throat. “Millie, I am”—I sigh, rubbing a hand over my face—“I’m sorry. Truly.” I want to say more. To give her a reason for what happened. But there isn’t one.

Nodding, she replies, “Thank you.” She clears her throat. “Do you want me to grab a snack?” It’s obvious she’s wanting to change the subject.

“Whatever you want to do,” I reply as I settle on the couch.

Millie’s apology and admission sit heavy on my chest. I hate that she has spent years not being able to move past the hurt and pain I caused her. I never imagined just how much damage my actions would cause.

But now that she’s admitted to being willing to move on—to forgive—I selfishly pray she’ll allow me back into her heart as well.

The page features a decorative border of snowflakes and dots in shades of teal and grey, framing the central text.

Fourteen

Millie Jane

I burrow deeper into my pillow. I'd gotten so cold when the power went out, but now I am cozy and warm. Something is attempting to wake me up, but I try to ignore it so I can go back to sleep.

I'm just so comfortable.

Slowly, awareness starts seeping into my mind as my senses begin to become aware of my surroundings.

First, I hear the sound of a movie. It seems familiar, but I'm still too deep in sleep to name it.

Then, I feel the warmth from the crackling fire.

Oh, that's right. I was in the living room next to the fire to keep warm after the power went out.

And that's the moment I become aware of someone running their fingers through my hair.

Ah, snickerdoodle. No. No. No.

I can't move. If I do, I have to face the man whose lap my face is buried in. My hand is laying on his leg, right above his knee. If I adjust it, he'll know I'm awake. Oh, there is no way he isn't going to say something about this.

I'm also unable to move because every stroke of his hand is sending tingles throughout my body. It's hypnotic. He starts at the top of my head, brushing his fingers all the way down the length of my hair, before he begins again. I have to force myself not to shiver under his touch.

I don't know if I want to run away or wish this moment would never end.

The stroking stops, and my heart stops along with it as Dex shifts.

Suddenly warm breath is on my ear and cheek. "Looks like I won, Lamb."

I try to remain still. Maybe if I do, he'll think I'm still asleep.

Dex chuckles, his breath still fanning across my cheek. "You can stop pretending. I know you're awake."

I think through my options for a moment and realize I'm stuck. No matter which way I go, Dex Hart will have the last laugh in this.

Groaning, I push myself off of him, attempting not to notice the solid muscles of his leg. My cheeks are on fire as I work to dodge his gaze. "Just ... don't. Okay?"

He makes a zipping motion across his mouth, but he's barely restraining a grin.

I shoot what I hope is a glare to end all glares in his direction, which only earns me ... you guessed it, a smirk. Guess I wasn't as convincing as I wanted to be.

Dex reaches over, tucking a strand of hair behind my ears, his fingers lingering there. "But," he says quietly as he slowly lets his fingers trail down my hair, "you can't deny that you weren't enjoying your little nap on me."

Ignoring the fluttering in my stomach, I narrow my eyes at him. "Is your social cue meter broken or something? What about my body language makes you think I want you to touch me?"

Girl, you are lying to yourself.

Shut up, I reply ... to myself.

Dex's eyes flick across my face as I wait for whatever flirty response he has in his arsenal. But instead of a teasing glint in his eyes or a sexy smile, his features are as serious as I've seen him. "You're right," he says with a nod. "I'm sorry for invading your personal space. But to be fair, you're the one who fell asleep on me."

I cross my arms and arch a brow. "In your lap?"

"On my shoulder. But you looked really uncomfortable, so I was trying to make you more comfortable," he answers, sincerity ringing in his tone.

"Fair enough. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

Intense gray eyes meet mine. “You didn’t,” he says softly, and I force my gaze away from the heat of his stare. “But,” he continues, “I don’t think you’re being honest with yourself.”

My head snaps back around to him. “Excuse me? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Your body language doesn’t seem to be saying that you don’t want me to touch you.”

I scoff. “Because your meter is broken.”

“Or because you are lying to yourself.” He shrugs. “You can try to convince yourself all day long that there isn’t something here”—he motions between me and him—“but you won’t convince me.”

“Well, if you won’t listen to my actions, listen to my words”—I stand and look down at him, clenching my fists so he can’t see my trembling hands—“there is nothing at all between us. No chemistry. No spark. No attraction. Nothing but two people trying to get along for the sake of a mutual friend.” I don’t break eye contact with him, praying my words will penetrate that thick skull of his. “Now, I’m going to go see what kind of breakfast I can scrounge up without electricity.”

Without waiting for Dex to respond, I spin on my heel and walk toward the kitchen, the word *liar* echoing in my heart with each step I take.



While I made breakfast, Dex called the power company and found out that the heavy snow had knocked down a tree which had landed on a power line. Crews were already working to restore power, but they couldn't give us a timeline. I'm praying it will be before bedtime tonight because there's no way I can end up in another cuddle session with Dex.

The air has been heavy with tension ever since I lied to Dex and told him there was nothing between us.

Okay, I didn't lie. Not exactly. But just because there's some leftover attraction from high school doesn't mean that it can or even should turn into something more.

It can't. I can work on being civil to Dex for Beth and baby T.J.'s sake. But I can't give him my heart. Not when he did such a thorough job of crushing it once already.

We're sitting quietly in front of the fire. Dex is on the couch with his leg propped up, reading a regency romance. I snicker to myself and shake my head. I still can't believe he reads romance. I'm sitting in the chair across from Dex, buried under several quilts, reading a fantasy romance—because fantasy is superior to regency in every way—when we hear a weird noise.

“What was that?” I whisper, glancing around. “It sounded like rice spilling out of a bag.” Dex is staring at something above my head and a feeling of trepidation wraps around me. “Dex?” My voice is strained.

“Don't freak out, Mills,” he says calmly as he grabs his crutches and stands.

“Don’t freak out means that I totally should freak out.” I set my book down on the table and quickly knock off the quilts. Gripping the armrests, I look up at Dex. “Do I need to run for my life?”

Dex chuckles. “Just stand slowly and come over here with me.”

I only hesitate for a moment before I’m hightailing it to Dex. Taking a deep breath, I turn to face whatever was behind me and let out a high pitch scream as I jump up on the couch behind Dex.

“Smooth, Mills. Real smooth.”

“That is the biggest wolf spider I’ve ever seen in my life, Dex! You acted like I was fine!”

“You were fine.”

I slap his shoulder. “I was not,” I squeal. “That thing could eat me whole.” Shuddering, I give Dex a little nudge. “What are you waiting for? Go ... go take care of it.”

Dex glances at me over his shoulder and it’s only then I realize how close our faces are. The corners of his lips quirk up. “Normally, I would step in and be the hero, but unfortunately” he trails off and lifts his crutch off the ground for a second. “I’m a little incapacitated at the moment.”

My jaw drops open. “You aren’t suggesting that we just let that monster loose in the house, are you?”

His eyebrow lifts. “Monster?” Tilting his head, he glances toward the spider. “That little thing?”

“It’s the spawn of Satan, Dex. SATAN.”

Dex laughs and if I wasn’t so terrified at the moment, I’d be basking in the way his deep voice sounds so carefree and happy. “I’m not suggesting we let it go.” He eyes me and I start shaking my head.

“No. Nope. N. O. There is no way.”

He lifts a shoulder. “All I’m saying is ... you’re going to have to take care of it or it’s going to get away. And the longer we stand here arguing, the more likely the latter will happen.”

“I ... I can’t.” My voice breaks and Dex’s eyes soften.

“You can. You can do anything.”

I want to believe him, but ... well, the thing is almost as big as my hand. “I-what do I do?” I hear myself ask. I cannot believe I’m even thinking about squashing that thing.

As if reading my mind, Dex replies, “Well, I’m not sure you actually want to squash it. Because ... well, that’s going to leave a big ol’ mess, especially if it has babies on it’s back.”

I press a hand to my stomach. “I’m going to be sick. Can’t we just ... burn the place down?”

One dark eyebrow lifts. “You have quite the violent streak, did you know that?”

“Only when it comes to spiders and you,” I retort.

Dex laughs and shakes his head. “Forget arson. Why don’t you go get one of those plastic cups from the kitchen? We can trap it that way.”

“And do what? Let it outside in the cold? It’ll just get back in.”

“We can flush it down the toilet.”

I cross my arms. “And chance it crawling back up and biting one of us in the rear?” I shake my head. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t want any spider bites on my bum.”

Dex chuckles. “You really are terrified of it, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I admit, trying to quell the nervous swirling of my stomach.

“I’ll be right here. It really can’t hurt you. Okay?” His gaze holds mine until I find myself nodding.

“Okay,” I reply and point to the wall. “Keep an eye on it while I get a cup.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

On shaky legs, I hop off the couch and scurry to the kitchen. It takes me a moment to find the cups and then I’m back beside Dex.

“What do I do now?”

“I think you should be able to reach it by standing on the chair. I’ll be right beside you. If it starts to get away, I’ll try to get it with my crutch.”

I glance at him. “I thought you said it wouldn’t be a good idea to smash it.”

“It’s not. But still better than it getting away.”

“Okay.” I take a steadying breath. “I can do this,” I mutter to myself as I stand on the chair.

“You’re doing great, Mills. Now, just put the cup under it and use this”—he hands me a magazine—“to push it into the cup.”

My arms are shaking as I do as Dex instructed. The spider’s leg twitches causing me to let out a squeal.

“It’s okay,” Dex says in a confident, soothing voice.

“Yeah, well, you’re not the one up here facing your own death,” I mumble bitterly.

His chuckle almost brings a smile to my face. “The sooner you do it, the sooner we can be rid of it.”

“All right, all right.” I take the magazine and give a gentle push, surprised when the spider lands right in the cup. “I did it,” I whisper-yell, but then, I realize I’m holding the spider with only a thin plastic cup to separate it from my hand. “Dex,” I say, unable to hide the panic from my voice.

“Just step down.”

My entire body is shaking as I step off the chair, but then ... well, I’m not responsible for what happens next.

The spider moves in the cup and I scream bloody murder as I start to fall backwards. Dex tries to catch me, but because he’s

on crutches, I end up crashing into him. As we both fall toward the ground, the cup flies out of my hand. The spider shoots out, twisting through the air right before it lands in the fire and I swear, I hear the thing screaming.

At some point, Dex must have dropped his crutches because he managed to break my fall by wrapping an arm around me and keeping me close to his chest. Unfortunately, this meant that he took the brunt of the collision to the ground.

He groans as we land and I rush to try and scoot off of him. His grip around my waist tightens. “I’m okay,” he says, though his voice isn’t so convincing.

I have one hand pressed on the floor beside him as we lay chest to chest. My gaze flicks across his face. “Are you sure? That was a pretty hard fall.”

“You’re telling me.”

Again, I try to rise, and again his grip tightens. “Dex, what are you doing?”

And then the man has the audacity to bury his nose into my neck. “Enjoying the moment,” he mumbles against my ear, his warm breath sending shivers up and down my spine.

Against my will, my body relaxes for a microsecond as a small sigh escapes my lips. It’s faint. Barely audible and I know ... I know that there’s no way that Dex could have heard that.

Except, his next words against my ear prove me wrong. “Bluff called, Little Lamb.”

Groaning, I unclasp his arm from my waist and stand. “I hate you,” I say through gritted teeth.

Dex sits up, angling his face toward me with his signature grin in place. “Hmm ... if you say so.”

He scoots toward the couch, bracing himself until he’s sitting on it. I reach for his crutches and prop them up where he can easily reach them.

My eyes drift toward the fireplace as I sit on the couch. “It for sure died. Right?” I ask, turning to look at Dex.

He lifts a brow. “Do you think it was like some kind of mutant spider that doesn’t burn?”

“No. I’m just not sure that fire affects the devil’s spawn.” Dex throws his head back and laughs. “Shut up,” I say, slapping his chest.

Before I can pull my hand away, Dex wraps his fingers around my wrist and draws me closer. “Keep finding reasons to touch me, Lamb, and I’m going to start thinking there’s something here after all.” His breath fans against my cheek and my throat goes dry as his thumb strokes the inside of my wrist.

The air is crackling, and it’s not just the sounds coming from the fireplace. I find myself leaning into his touch, even though I know I should move. Not just move. I need to run for the hills. Whatever is happening, it’s a horrible idea.

Without thinking, I run my tongue over my bottom lip and Dex’s gaze zeroes in on my mouth. Oh, snickerdoodle. If the

heat from Dex's eyes could keep the house warm ... well, let's just say we wouldn't need a fireplace.

My heart races as he dips his head, while my brain is still screaming for me to run away.

I can feel his breath on my lips when the lights blink on, shaking me from the spell Dex has me under.

Pulling back a little, I say in a shaky voice, "Looks like the power's back on."

Dex doesn't say anything, just continues giving me the same heavy look. There's a plea in his eyes. I can almost hear him begging me not to run. But ... I just can't.

I remove my wrist from his hand and stand, my legs wobbly from the heated almost-kiss. "I-I'm going to go ... uh ... call Gram." Or anyone. I may just go hide out in my room for a while. Maybe take a cold shower.

Anything to get away from this man and whatever magnetic pull keeps drawing me closer to him.



Fifteen

Dex

The next morning when I wake up, I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling. The snow eased up yesterday, but it's still cold enough that I doubt any has melted. Most likely, everything is iced over.

Millie is meandering through the house. The urge to go to her is strong. But I'm also not sure I trust myself. There's a very fine line with Millie. If I step too far over, she's going to run. And not just into the other room. She's going to shut me out completely.

I almost crossed it yesterday when I tried to kiss her. No matter how much she wanted it too. And I know she did. The woman was pretty much putty in my hands until the blasted electricity came back on. I've never been so annoyed at having electric power as I was at that moment.

Sighing, I rub my hand over my face. I stand and begin the painfully slow process of getting dressed. I put on the green Christmas T-shirt Beth gifted me. It has a gingerbread man

with a hockey stick and ... one of its legs has been broken off. She tried not to laugh when she gave it to me but ended up snort laughing until she cried.

“I’m so sorry,” Beth said, wiping tears from her eyes. “I thought it was funny when I got it. Ya know, break a leg and all that.”

I glared at her. “That’s for theater.”

She waved her hand. “Whatever. It was cute.” She glanced down at my leg. “Though, very, very poor timing.”

Thomas just stood beside her, shaking his head, not quite masking his own laughter. I couldn’t help but laugh with them as I hugged her and let her know that I loved it.

After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I decide to face Millie. When I step into the living room, though, she’s nowhere to be seen. Glancing down the hallway, I see that her door is open.

Surely she wasn’t in the hot tub this early? That thought brings unwanted images to my mind until another thought pushes it aside.

She wouldn’t.

No, it’s Millie Jane. She totally would.

As fast as I can on my crutches, I make my way to the front door and open it, both relieved and frustrated when I see her.

“Mills, what are you doing?” I call out.

She slices her gaze toward me. Her cheeks are pink, her breath coming out in rapid puffs. It is freezing outside. But she's out there like an insane person.

“Get inside.”

Ignoring me, she turns back to her task of shoveling snow away from her car tires.

“Millie Jane,” I say as threateningly as I can.

Huffing, she stands. “What Dex? What are you going to do about it?”

“You don't even have gloves on. You're going to freeze to death.”

“It's not that bad,” she replies, though I can see her bouncing up and down to ward off the cold.

“Now is not the time to be stubborn. Please come in. I'll make you coffee or hot chocolate and you can warm up by the fire.” I can see her struggling with the decision as she looks between me and the shovel in her hand. “Even if you get it out of the snow, the holler isn't going to be clear to drive for a couple more days. It's probably iced over at the moment.”

Her shoulders sag and she makes her way back to the house. I sigh in relief. The last thing I want is for her to get hypothermia. She sets the shovel down on the porch and I move to let her pass, shutting the door behind us.

After taking off her boots, she stands and I cup her cheeks with my hands. “You're like an ice cube. You need to get

warmed up.” She starts to pull away, but I tighten my grip. “Mills, I’m only trying to warm your face a little. Okay?”

Nodding, she allows my hands to remain for a few more seconds before stepping away. I reluctantly let her go.

“I ... umm ... I’m going to go take a hot shower and put some dry clothes on.”

“Coffee or hot chocolate?” I ask as she turns to leave. Glancing over her shoulder, her eyes flick to my crutches. “I can manage. Which do you want?”

“Hot chocolate.”

“With marshmallows, whipped cream, and a candy cane?”

Her face softens. “Yeah, that’d be nice.”

It takes me a little longer to get all the ingredients together, but by the time Millie is out of the shower, I have both of us a huge cup of hot chocolate that is almost overflowing.

Millie’s eyes go wide when she spots them on the counter. “That is a big cup of hot chocolate.”

I grin. “It is. I thought it would help you warm up.”

“Thanks, Dex.” She smiles before her eyes drop to my shirt. Her brow furrows. “Uh ... that shirt is ... ”

“Cheerful?” I ask with a grin.

“Unfortunate.”

I laugh. “Yeah, Beth says she felt pretty bad for it after I broke my leg. I’m not sure I believe her though since she laughed until she cried when she gave it to me.”

Millie chuckles. “That sounds like Beth.”

Her gaze trails over my chest again and I try to stand a little taller, though it’s difficult while leaning on the crutches. Then, her eyes drop down to my left wrist, before tracking a path to where my tattoo disappears underneath my shirt sleeve. My skin burns everywhere her eyes touch and my heart is beating so hard, I’m having difficulty breathing. She’s making it awfully hard for me not to grab her and kiss her right now.

Jerking her gaze away, she clears her throat and grabs our mugs, taking them to the table where we still have the puzzle laid out. “Do you want to work on the puzzle for a while?”

“Sure.”

We sit at the table, working quietly together while sipping our drinks. When Millie sighs into her cup, I glance up and see her smiling.

“Good?” I ask.

“It’s delicious. What did you do?”

“Added melted chocolate to it.”

“Well, that’ll do it.”

I look down at the puzzle, but all the pieces are blending together. “Want to tell me why you were trying to run away again?”

“I wasn’t trying to run away.”

My eyes snap to hers. “Millie, it’s five degrees outside and we’re buried under three feet of snow and ice and you decide

it's a good idea to try and dig your car out?" My question is soft. I'm not angry at her. I'm just ... disappointed. Every time I feel like we're taking a step forward, it seems she takes five steps back.

She won't meet my eyes as she absently plays with a puzzle piece, flipping it back and forth between her fingers. "I just ... I don't know Dex. Okay? I just needed some space and was hoping that it wasn't as bad as it is outside."

My lips thin. "Okay, Mills. I'm sorry if I've been ... " I trail off. What have I been doing? Of course, she's not going to just up and forgive me after the way I hurt her. If we want to truly put the past behind us, we're going to have to talk about it at some point, but I can tell from her tone that today isn't the day for that discussion.

Glancing up, I notice the way she's watching me. Her ice blue eyes are hesitant but open, and a spark of hope ignites within my chest. Maybe, with a lot of work and prayer, she'll actually be able to forgive me.

"I'm sorry I've been too much," I offer, hoping it's enough of an olive branch for now. "I'll try to tone it down."

Millie's shoulders relax as she nods.

We spend the rest of the day decorating the tree, watching 90s Christmas movies, and completely avoiding the elephant in the room.



Sixteen

Millie Jane

It's warmer today and I watch by the window as the icicles begin melting. It'll still be at least another day or two before I'll be able to make it out of this holler. And that's only if the weather continues to warm. Right now, it's most likely a solid sheet of ice, and as badly as I need to get away from Dex, I don't want to wind up wrecking.

If I had a four-wheel or all-wheel drive vehicle, I could possibly make it out of the holler. Unfortunately, while my little Corvette is perfect for living in the suburbs of Nashville, it is less than ideal for winter in southeastern Kentucky.

I frown. If I'm home for good, then I'm probably going to need to trade it in for something more reliable in the snow.

Dread pools in my stomach. What is Gram going to say when she finds out about my failure? She's always been encouraging of my dreams and proud of the fact that I didn't want to use her name or influence to move up in the industry. No, my stubborn self wanted to do it all on my own.

“And look where that got you, Millie,” I mumble to myself.

“What was that?” Dex asks from across the room where he’s still working on the puzzle.

I glance at him over my shoulder. “Nothing. Just thinking out loud I guess.”

Dex shoots me a look, then turns back to the table. “Want to talk about it?”

Sighing, my shoulders deflate and I walk toward the table. Dex watches me as I sit down, but doesn’t press. He’s been quieter since our conversation a couple days ago and I appreciate that he’s been respecting my boundaries. But ... well, do I still want him to?

I mean, yes, of course I want him to be respectful. But also ... I don’t know. Maybe my boundaries are changing. Just the teensiest bit. It’s not like I’ve torn down the fort around my heart. More like ... I’ve moved the walls back a little, letting Dex a fraction closer.

“How,” I begin as I stare down at my hands, “how did you know that you were meant to be a hockey player?”

Dex shrugs. “I loved hockey and I went for it.”

Yeah, you sure did, I think bitterly, but quickly push it away. I’m supposed to be moving on from the past. Not dredging it all back up.

“But what if going for it wasn’t enough?” I ask quietly.

“Hmm ... ” he replies, his eyes still on the puzzle pieces. It’s over halfway complete now. “I guess if that would have happened, I’d have to find peace with knowing that maybe it wasn’t God’s path for me after all.”

My shoulders tense and I cross my arms. “What if it is God’s will and you just ... didn’t work hard enough.”

Dex’s sympathetic gaze meets mine. “Is that what you think happened to you?”

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “I just ... I just know that I’m supposed to sing. I’m supposed to honor Gram, but it doesn’t seem to be happening.”

“Maybe your priorities are wrong.” If his tone wasn’t so gentle, I would bristle at the words. “I’m sure Dottie Mae loves that you are following her footsteps, but knowing her like I do, I know she would want you to honor God over her.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” I argue.

His eyebrow arches. “Didn’t you?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Are you saying that I’ve been following my own path this entire time?”

“No,” he replies quickly. “All I’m saying is that maybe you should take a step back and reevaluate your motives. Ask God to really show you what *He* wants for your life.”

I want to buck, but how can I argue with that? What he’s saying isn’t unreasonable. And though I have been praying about my situation, it’s always more about me asking God to

open the doors. What if this entire time He's been answering my prayers by closing them?



While I make chicken and dumplings for supper, Dex turns the game on. It's not long before he's griping at the TV.

"Ah, come on Turner," he says. "What a dumb move."

I snort. "Sounds about right," I mutter.

Suddenly I can't hear the game anymore.

"Mills," Dex says slowly. I turn to find his lips quirking up in the corner, revealing his dimple. "Are you a hockey fan? Specifically, are you a Dragons fan?"

Warmth spreads across my cheeks. I'm going to blame it on standing in front of the stove as I gently stir the dumplings. "What makes you say that?"

I hear movement, but I don't look up. Ugh ... how in the world did he hear me? I feel him near me before I'm brave enough to look over at him. He's completely in my personal bubble, looking down at me with a glint in his eyes.

"Mills?"

"I may have watched a game or two a couple years ago." Or all of them since Dex joined the team, but he doesn't need to know that.

"Turner started six months ago."

Oh, snickerdoodle.

I chuckle nervously. “Oh. Did he?” Shrugging, I turn my attention back to the dumplings, praying that Dex will drop it.

Newsflash. He doesn't.

Stepping even closer, he says in a low, deep voice that I feel all the way down to my toes, “You want to know what I think, Little Lamb?”

“I'm sure you're going to tell me either way.”

He huffs out a laugh. “I think that you like me more than you want to admit. To me or yourself.”

“That's just your ego talking, Hart.”

“How many of my games have you seen?” he challenges and I bite my lip, averting my gaze. “Five? Twenty? Fifty?” He studies my face with each number he spouts out. “Two hundred? Three hundred?”

“I've seen them all, okay?” I blurt out. “Happy now?”

His grin is stretched so wide, it's almost blinding. “Extremely,” he replies. And as he walks away, I swear I can hear him mumble under his breath, “I can work with that.”



The next morning I'm awakened by a loud thud and what can only be described as a howl of pain. I jolt out of bed and run toward the living room where I'm pretty sure the noise came from. My heart's racing as I round the corner and see Dex crumpled on the floor between the living room and kitchen holding his casted leg.

“Oh, Dex,” I say. “Are you okay?” He’s obviously not.

He gives a shake of his head, not even looking at me or shooting me a snarky comment, which tells me just how hurt he is.

Kneeling down beside him, I rub his back. Obviously, I know his back is fine, but it’s the only thing I can think of to try and offer him some comfort. He hisses under his breath and I know he’s probably only restraining letting out some not nice words because I’m sitting beside him.

After a few tense moments, his shoulders relax and he sucks in a deep breath. “I’m okay.” His voice is tight and pain-laced.

“No, you aren’t. Let me help you.” I stand and grab his crutches, leaning them against the closest counter. “Do you think you can get to your knees and then stand that way?”

“Yeah, I think so.” I hold out my hand and he grasps it as he slowly adjusts until he’s on his knees in front of me. Glancing up into my eyes, his lips twist in the corner as he says in a facetious tone, “Millie Jane Brooks—”

I hold up a hand, barely containing a laugh. “Don’t.”

He shrugs. “Can’t blame a man for trying.”

Ignoring him, I grip his forearms and help him stand. He’s wobbly and his jaw is tight as he attempts to keep weight off of his injured leg. He’s balanced on one foot and I quickly duck under his right arm. “Lean on me.”

He does without hesitation and I ignore the fluttering sensation in my stomach as his fresh pine and spice scent

swirls around me. I reach over and grab his crutches, waiting as he adjusts himself off of me and onto them.

“You need to park it on the couch,” I command.

Dex chuckles. “You’re bossy when you first wake up,” he replies as he turns toward the couch.

“You scared me.” I follow him, waiting for him to get settled so I can help him prop his foot up. “Do you need me to get you some ice? Pain meds? A snack?”

“Wow. This entire time all I had to do was trip and make a fool of myself to get you to take care of me?” He shakes his head. “I’d have done it sooner if I’d only known.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re impossible. How did you trip, though?” I glance around as he says, “Oh, it’s nothing.” But then, my eyes land on the culprit and guilt cuts through my heart.

I walk over and pick up my bag. I’d had a sudden strike of inspiration in the middle of the night and wanted to sit in front of the Christmas tree while I wrote the lyrics that were flowing out of me. “Oh, Dex. I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize—”

“It’s fine, Mills. Things happen.”

Tears prick the back of my eyes. I’d been exhausted by the time I finished writing and I honestly didn’t remember what I did with the bag. Apparently, I left it lying in the middle of the floor. “I know, but ... ” I trail off, ducking my head. “Do you think you did any damage to your leg?”

“Nah. It’ll ease off. Might swell a little, but should be fine if I take it easy the rest of the day.”

I nod and start grabbing cushions from the end of the couch and the chair. “Lift your foot,” I order. Dex huffs a little laugh, but obeys. “Do you want a blanket?”

“I’m good.”

“Where’s your pain meds?”

“In my bedroom on the dresser.”

Guilt continues twisting my insides as I make my way to his room. I can’t believe my absentmindedness could have seriously hurt Dex. If he’d landed wrong or harder, it could have set his healing back. And then what would he do about hockey?

Grabbing his meds, I pour him a glass of water and give it to him. The entire time, my stomach is in knots. Dex takes a long drink of water as he swallows his pills and then hands me the cup. I set it down and turn to go make him some breakfast when he clasps a hand around my wrist.

“Millie, look at me.” His voice is so soft and when my eyes meet his, the tender look he’s giving me makes me want to cry. “It’s not your fault. And I’m fine. Okay?”

I nibble on my bottom lip. “I was being careless. I was up late writing and I guess I was just so tired—” Dex gives a tug, pulling me down onto his lap. “Dex,” I squeal, trying to get out of his hold. His arm wraps around me firmly.

“I want you to listen to me,” he says, his voice gruff. His eyes are holding me captive more than his large arm around me. “I really am fine. My leg is already feeling better. It was an accident. Nothing more. Okay?”

I nod, unable to say anything else. His fingers are stroking up and down my arm and goosebumps pop up everywhere he touches.

I should move. But I don't.

Wracking my brain for something to say before I do something completely crazy like kiss him, I ask, “How did you break your leg?” Now that I've asked, I really am curious. “Was it during practice?”

Dex groans and throws his head back, giving me the perfect angle to admire his strong jawline and neck. I want to press a kiss to where his pulse is beating. I shake the insane thought away.

There will be *no* kissing.

None. Nada. Zilch.

All the never happening words.

“I wish it would have happened at practice.”

I arch a brow at this. “Oh, interesting.” Neither of us have pointed out that I'm still sprawled out on his lap and he's still stroking my arm. “So what happened?” My voice is breathy and I pray he doesn't notice.

“Fluffy happened.”

“Your cat?” He nods. “Your cat broke your leg?”

“Not intentionally. Though, Beth would disagree with that.” He winks at me and I might as well be a pile of butter on top a stack of hot pancakes. I’ve been so strong this entire week, but the man gets a little booboo and now I’m literally melting at everything he does. “I was at Mom’s house during Thanksgiving break and Fluffy somehow escaped outside and climbed onto the roof.”

“Oh, no.” I can see where this story is headed.

Dex nods sadly. “Yup. We tried coaxing her down with treats, but she wouldn’t budge. And well ... she’s a hairless cat and it’s winter time. We couldn’t very well wait for her to decide to come down.

“So, I got a ladder and climbed up there to get her. It would have been fine, but as soon as she saw me, she thought it was play time and jumped on my back.”

“No,” I cover my mouth with my hand. “She made you fall?”

“Yeah. And I was trying to grab hold of the rotten thing to keep from crushing her on the way down, but she managed to jump while we were falling, and of course, landed on all fours, while I landed on one leg and well ... we know what happened.”

“Ouch.” I grimace. “You sure you want to keep her? I’m starting to wonder if Beth is right about her.”

Dex shrugs. “What can I say, I like a challenging woman.”

My eyes narrow and I shake my head, my gaze falling on his tattoo. Without thinking, my fingers graze the black and blue scales covering his skin. “How long have you had this?” I ask quietly, letting my fingers continue to trace around the tattoo.

Dex’s arm tenses and when I glance up, his focus is on where my fingers are still trailing across the tattoo. I jerk my hand away, heat rushing to my face. “Sorry,” I mumble at the same time as he says, “Do you want to see it?”

I shouldn’t. “Yes,” I say instead.



Seventeen

Dex

My heart is racing as I remove my arm from around Millie's waist. I pull my shirt over my head and her jaw drops. I fight back a smirk. She's so adorable when she's flustered. And man, I do enjoy flustering her.

"Dex," she says, throwing her hands over her face.

I huff out a laugh. "I thought you wanted to see the tattoo."

"I thought you would push your sleeve up or ... or something," she exclaims, her voice frantic.

"Just open your eyes."

She inhales deeply, slowly prying her fingers away from her face and I can no longer hold back the smirk as her gaze trails across my torso.

"Don't you dare say whatever you're thinking of saying." She sends me a pointed glare, before turning her attention to the details of my tattoo. Then, her fingers glide across my arm

as she examines each intricate detail. My skin buzzes with each touch of her fingertips.

“It’s gorgeous,” she whispers. Her eyes meet mine briefly and it literally takes all my willpower not to draw her to me and kiss those flawless, plump lips of hers. I wonder if she tastes like she smells? A perfect combination of cinnamon and vanilla. “How long did it take?” she asks, pulling me from my wayward thoughts.

Clearing my throat, I reply, “Three sessions.”

She makes a humming sound in the back of her throat as her fingers continue their exploration over my forearm and up my bicep. I watch her throat bob as her gaze flicks to the dragon’s head. The dragon’s tail starts at my wrist, wrapping all the way around my arm and up my shoulder, and stops with the head of the dragon on my right pectoral.

I’m waiting for her to remove her hand, but my heart nearly leaps out of my chest when her light touch moves from my shoulder down toward my chest. A wave of heat floods my body as her fingers trace the dragon’s head. She doesn’t seem to notice how fast my heart is racing just centimeters away from where her fingers are skimming across my chest.

When I can’t bear her scorching touch any longer, I grasp her hand gently, and meet her eyes. They’re almost glazed over, as if she was in a trance. A sense of satisfaction swells within my chest at that thought. She’s just as affected as I am.

Feeling bold, I press a lingering kiss to the smooth skin of her wrist, my nose brushing across her pulse—which is racing

as fast as my own—as I breathe her in. “I think that’s enough for now.” My voice comes out like gravel, but this woman is going to be the death of me.

Millie’s face turns various shades of red as she jerks her hand away from me and jumps off my lap so fast, she almost careens forward. I steady her with my hand to her stomach. “I-I ... uh ... I’m going to make breakfast. And coffee. Lots of coffee. Do you want coffee? Maybe some biscuits and gravy? Bacon and eggs? Oh, I think we have sausage left too. Yeah, that’s good.” The words spew out of her like a geyser as she bolts to the kitchen.

I smile softly as she scurries around the kitchen. Pulling my shirt over my head, I’m unable to shake the ghost of her fingers on my skin. My right arm is useless now. Every inch that she touched is still on fire, the feeling extending to my chest.

My mind replays the events of this morning. How her eyes filled with tears as she blamed herself for me tripping over her bag. The sympathy in her voice when I explained how I broke my leg. Though, I could tell she wanted to laugh a few times. How right it felt having her in my arms.

Every interaction we had in high school comes rushing back, along with the ones from this week, and I realize that I’m more than simply attracted to her—though there’s no doubt there’s plenty of chemistry between us.

But it is so much more than chemistry or attraction.

In fact, I think I’ve fallen in love with Millie Jane Brooks.



My leg is aching, but I don't dare let on to Milie for fear she'd get upset again. She's already waiting on me hand and foot. I can't say that I necessarily hate it. Except for when she scurries away as fast as she can once she's made sure I'm comfortable.

I guess I can't blame her after our little heated moment on the couch earlier. The memory of her touch has stayed with me throughout the day. Sometimes I find myself rubbing my hand across my tattoo, remembering the way she looked as she touched me.

Without my permission, my gaze seeks her out. She's sitting across from me in the chair, curled up under a blanket and writing away in some kind of journal. Her hair falls in blonde waves across her shoulders as her brow furrows and her lips purse.

"What are you working on over there?" I ask, hoping she tells me. I want to know everything about this grown up version of the girl I fell for in high school ... the girl I've fallen for again.

Millie's eyes flick to me and then back, and just as I'm about to lose hope, she sighs. "I'm writing."

"Obviously," I reply dryly. "What are you writing?" Then, just to get her going, I add, "It's about me. Isn't it?" I waggle my eyebrows at her when her narrowed eyes slice to me.

“You’re ridiculous,” she mutters. “And no. I’m not writing about you.” She pauses, closing her journal and turning to me. “If you must know, I’m writing song lyrics.”

“Really? That’s awesome, Mills. I never thought I’d be featured in a country music song. Unless you pulled a Taylor Swift on me.” I shudder and she flings a pillow at my head.

“It’s not a country love song, Dex.” She ducks her head and says quietly, “I’ve never really been great at coming up with those.”

“What are you writing then?”

“Hymns.” Pink stains her cheeks. “They suck. I know. But ... ” she trails off and shrugs. “I enjoy writing them. Even if God and I are the only ones who will ever see or hear them.”

“May I?” I tilt my head toward the journal clasped in her hands. “I mean, you don’t have to. But ... I’d like to read them.”

Biting her lip, she considers it. “Promise not to laugh?”

“Millie, I would never laugh at this.” I hope she can tell by my tone how serious I am.

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear before standing and handing the notebook to me. Now that I’m holding it, I can see it’s a prayer journal. “Well, I think I’ll ... take a shower.” She turns to go, then glances over her shoulder. “Just ... don’t tell me if you hate them. Please?”

I smile. “You wrote them. There’s no way I’m going to hate them.”

She doesn't respond as she walks away, pulling her door shut softly behind her. I spend the next twenty minutes reading through her words, over and over.

They're ... breathtaking. The lyrics are deeply moving. Despite our high school choir teacher, Mr. Mullins' effort, I never did learn to read music. I was always too distracted by watching and listening to Millie sing and play guitar. So I'm not sure of their tune, but just reading the words she's written has pressure building behind my eyes.

I scan over the lyrics again, trying to imagine her sweet voice singing them.

When I behold all this world has,
Wonders found in every place
My flesh desires to hold it all
But my spirit cries for only grace.

Grace, grace, give me grace,
The sweetness of mercy
From the holiest place

Grace, grace, give me grace,
Pardon and pity
Sweet sovereign grace.

There isn't a doubt in my mind that these songs need to be shared with the world. Not hidden away in a journal. Now I just need to get Millie to believe it.

When she emerges from her room a few minutes later, her wet hair has been braided and thrown over her shoulder. She has on white fuzzy pajama pants with little Christmas trees and cowboy boots on them and her long-sleeved shirt has the words "Have a Holly Dolly Christmas" written on it.

Smiling, I say, "Nice pjs."

Chuckling, she surprises me by settling on the arm of the couch, right beside me. "Gram got us matching ones last year."

"They're cute," I tell her honestly, looking up into her face. It's the closest we've been since the tattoo incident earlier and I wonder what she would do if I pulled her onto my lap again and let her explore my mouth this time.

She'd sock you, Dex. That's what she'd do.

Ignoring my compliment, she points to the journal in my hands. "So, what's the verdict? Are they awful? No, wait, don't tell me." She groans, covering her face with one hand.

I chuckle, and shift on the couch so I can pull her hand away from her face. I wait until we make eye contact before I answer her. "No, Millie. They're amazing."

Her eyebrows raise. "Re-really? You think so?"

Nodding, I glance down at the book in my hand. "Why don't you sing these?"

She shakes her head. “No. I-I couldn’t.”

“Why not? I’m not lying. They’re good.”

“They’re okay,” she concedes. “But they aren’t good enough for me to land a music manager. Or a record deal. Especially with a country record company. If I was going to sing any Christian songs, it would have to be old-school gospel music.” She raises a delicate shoulder. “Even then, it wouldn’t be enough to really get me noticed or get me playing on stage again.”

I’m quiet for a moment, absorbing her words. Her excuses make sense from a business standpoint. But ... “Millie, have you ever wondered if maybe this”—I wave the journal—“is actually what you’re supposed to be singing?”

Her spine stiffens. Crossing her arms, she asks, “What do you mean?”

“I mean ... have you ever thought about singing Christian music?” I place the journal in her hands. “Millie, these songs are powerful. There’s something there and I think people need to hear them.”

She stares down at the journal, her finger tracing over the word *prayer* embossed on the cover. “You don’t even know what they sound like.”

“I don’t need to. The words speak for themselves and with your knowledge of music, these would be hits. More importantly, you said that you enjoy writing them. So why not think about doing that for a living?”

A laugh huffs out of her. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It is.”

“Well, I’ve—” a loud noise outside cuts her off. “What was that?”

“Sounds like a plow or tractor.”

Millie leaps off the couch and runs to the window, peeking out behind the curtains. “Oh, snickerdoodle,” she mumbles under her breath, closing the curtain quickly behind her. “Dex,” she whispers, motioning me with her hand. “It’s Mr. Mullins. I think he’s heading over here.”

I raise a brow. “Mr. Mullins as in the choir director?”

“Yes,” she hisses, backing away from the window. “Dex, you have to talk to him. Don’t let him know I’m here.”

“Why, Mills? Afraid it’ll be a scandal if everyone knows we’ve been snowed in together?” I ask as I make my way toward her.

She shoots me an icy glare. “It’ll only be a scandal if I end up murdering you in your sleep.”

Shaking my head, I make a tsking sound. “Back to the violence. I thought we’d moved past that, Lamb?”

“Would you just go see what he wants?”

I step closer to her, my brow puckering. “Why don’t you want him to know you’re here?”

She gives me an exasperated look. “Because he’ll tell Mrs. Mullins who is best friends with Gram and then she’ll mention

it to Gram and then Gram will know that I lied about still being in Nashville.”

I blink at the news. I’d known she had come to Beth’s for the quiet, but I thought Dottie Mae knew about it. “Your gram doesn’t know you’re here?”

“No—” she’s cut off from saying more when there’s a knock on the door. “Please, Dex?”

“Okay.”

She hurries down the hallway, calling out quietly, “And don’t invite him in.”

Yeah, right. That’s like rule number one in Southern hospitality.

I wait for Millie to disappear into her room before I open the door.



Eighteen

Millie Jane

I leave the door cracked open so I can eavesdrop on Dex and Mr. Mullins. Under different circumstances, I would have been the first one to greet my old choir director. Word will definitely get back to Gram if Mr. Mullins finds out I'm here, though. However, I have other reasons for not wanting to see Mr. Mullins at the moment.

It's just that ... Mr. Mullins was always so supportive of my music and encouraged me to chase after my dreams. Besides Gram, I'm pretty sure he had the most faith in me that I would make something of myself. I can't bear to face him yet. To see disappointment etched on his face.

Tears form in the corners of my eyes, but I push them down, leaning closer to the door so I can hear what they're saying.

"Hey, Mr. Mullins. Nice to see you on this beautiful day," Dex says, a teasing note to his voice.

Mr. Mullins laughs. “Beautiful, maybe, but colder than the county jail. How are you Dex?” A short pause. “Oh, man. I forgot about your leg or I would have tried to make my way out here sooner.”

“Meh. It’s not a big deal. I’ve been getting around okay,” Dex replies, before asking, “Would you like to come in? Warm yourself by the fire?”

I groan inwardly. That jerk.

“Nah. I’m going to try and clear out the rest of the holler before heading home. I just wanted to check on you and let you know the road should be completely clear tomorrow. But by the looks of it, you won’t be driving anyway. Do you need anything?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks though. Beth made sure I was stocked up before she and Thomas left.”

“All right. Sounds good. You let me know if you need anything.”

“Sure will. Thanks for scraping the road.”

They say their goodbyes and after I hear the door close, I scramble out of the bedroom.

“Dex, I told you not to invite him in,” I scold. “And what’s the first thing you do?” I plant my hands on my hips, narrowing my eyes at him.

Shaking his head, he chuckles. “I couldn’t ignore southern hospitality 101, Mills. Besides, I knew he wouldn’t come in. He still has to make his way down to the Browns.”

I make a conceding humming sound, before moving on to another topic. “So ... sounds like I’ll be able to go to Gram’s tomorrow?” Even I can hear the uncertainty in my voice.

To be honest, I’m not sure how I feel about leaving Beth’s. It’ll mean I can get out of this forced proximity situation with Dex, especially after the tattoo incident. I was definitely right about the muscles he was hiding. Warmth crawls up my neck as I picture the tattoo spread across his chiseled chest. What was I even thinking touching him like that? Still, my fingertips buzz just recalling how it felt when they were grazing his arm.

Yes, putting some distance between me and Dex is definitely a good idea. But it also means I have to face Gram earlier than I’d wanted.

Dex’s eyes scan my face as he leans on his crutches. I try not to squirm under his scrutiny. “Why doesn’t Dottie know you’re here?”

I sigh heavily. “I ... I needed some time to think.”

“About?” he presses, but his eyes are soft, and for some strange reason, I find myself wanting to tell him.

“I was trying to figure out how to tell Gram that I failed her,” I whisper, turning around and walking toward the living room. Pressure builds behind my eyes and I suddenly feel so exhausted from it all as I sink onto the couch.

Dex follows, setting his crutches against the end table as he settles beside me. “What are you talking about? How did you fail her?”

I glance down at my hands. “I didn’t make it, Dex.” Lifting my head, I feel the first tear fall down my cheek. “You know how I was asking you how you knew hockey was your dream?” He nods. “Well, I wasn’t just looking for some encouragement. I failed in Nashville. I wasn’t good enough to follow Gram’s steps and become a star. And I don’t know how to tell her that I won’t be able to carry on her legacy.” Another tear escapes.

Dex smiles softly, his hands coming up to cup my face. He wipes the tears away with his thumbs. “Mills, you aren’t a failure.”

I let out an exasperated breath. “Well, what do you call it then? Besides that one performance at the Grand Ole Opry, I’ve never played anywhere but bars and dance halls. I never signed with a record label. Never recorded music on anything more than my phone.” Lifting a shoulder, I swallow over the lump in my throat. “If that isn’t failure, I don’t know what is.”

Dex is still cupping my face and wiping the tears as they land on my cheeks. I should move, but his tender caresses are loosening something around my heart.

He still hasn’t said anything, so I continue baring my soul to him. “I just don’t know what I am without music, Dex. It’s my life. It’s been the air I breathe, and all I’ve thought about for so long.” My chin quivers, weight pressing down on me at the admission. “I feel like I’m floundering, like I’m lost at sea, being tossed about by the waves and there’s no shore in sight.”

A sob escapes my lips on my last words, and the next moment, Dex has me wrapped up in his strong embrace.

I cry into his shirt as he strokes my hair and though I'm a mess, the heaviness in my chest begins to ease. His arms tighten around me and he presses a kiss to my forehead. The touch of his lips against my skin sends a series of goosebumps along my arms.

"First of all, Millie Jane Brooks," he begins in a low, gruff voice, "you are not a failure. Isn't there a saying that you only fail when you don't try?"

"It was Einstein and it's 'you only fail when you *stop* trying', which is kind of proving my point."

He winces. "Yeah, well, I like mine better."

My lips lift in the corner. "You would."

Pressing another kiss to my temple as if we do this all the time, he says, "Regardless, you aren't a failure. You've been pursuing something and giving it your all. And like I said before, maybe you should reevaluate things. Pray about it."

"I have prayed. For years," I whisper against his chest where his heart beats a steady rhythm beneath my ear. I'm not even sure how we ended up here, with Dex's arms wrapped around me as he kisses my forehead, but at the moment, I can't bring myself to care or move away.

"Maybe that's your answer, then. What if God has been answering your prayers by closing doors?" he asks gently. Pins

prickle my skin with his words. An echo of the question I asked myself the other day.

“Yeah, maybe.”

“And you aren’t lost at sea, Mills,” he says.

Glancing up, I meet his gray eyes. They’re soft with concern, and another crack forms in the walls around my heart. “It sure feels like it.”

“I know. But feeling like we’re lost doesn’t mean we’re actually lost. God is holding you. He’s the anchor in the storm. Remember?” The truth of his words flood my chest, comforting and soothing.

My eyes burn as more tears threaten to fall, but I push them away and study the man in front of me. I’ve been reluctant to admit it to myself, but even with his relentless teasing and flirting this week, there have been so many times where he’s challenged me and encouraged me. It reminds me of how things were before he hurt me so badly.

But then again, I hurt him too.

My angry words to him still haunt me. They weren’t true when I spoke them, and they’re definitely not true now. Though his actions started the fallout, we both acted selfishly back then. I’m seeing that now. Beth was right. Dex has changed and maybe it’s time to move on from the past and give him another chance.

Dex trails his fingers up and down my arm in gentle strokes. I can’t hide the shiver that works its way up my spine. Leaning

closer to me, his mouth twitches as if he's fighting back a grin. He brings his lips to my ear, his nose brushing against my hair. "What's going on in that pretty head of yours, Lamb?" Dex's voice is low and husky, causing my stomach to flutter.

"I-I'm not sure I should tell you," I reply quietly.

His nose is still buried in my hair, and I hear him inhale deeply. "Do you know what I'm thinking?" My throat is too tight to speak, so I shake my head. "I'm thinking that I love the way you have always smelled like Christmas morning. I never knew cinnamon and vanilla would be so intoxicating." He makes a humming sound in my hair that I feel all the way down to my toes.

"Oh."

I'm at war within myself. There's a teeny-tiny voice telling me to *get away now. Far away. Danger. Danger.*

But the larger part of me is melting into Dex's touch. Each stroke of his fingers down my arm, each murmured word, each and every time he calls me Lamb.

Dex Hart has been chipping away at the walls around my heart ever since I stepped foot into this house, and in a matter of days, he's not only created cracks ... he's taken down entire walls and stormed the castle.

The only thing left for me to do is decide whether I'm going to go on the defense, or if I'm waving the white flag in surrender.

I tilt my head to meet his stormy gaze as I argue with myself.

Defense? Surrender?

Honestly, I'm so tired of fighting. I'm tired of playing defense with this man who makes my heart race, who lifts me up when I'm down, challenges me, and flirts like there's no tomorrow. Yes, he hurt me in high school. In more ways than one. But aren't we called to forgive? Isn't that what I promised Beth I would try to do? Though, I'm sure she never imagined my brand of forgiving would be me all cuddled up with my mortal enemy.

Slowly, I bring my hand up and run my fingers along his stubbled jawline. His eyes darken, flicking to my lips and back up. My heart is beating wildly as I angle my head toward him. We're so close, our breath mingling together, neither of us making that final move.

"Mills," Dex whispers, his warm breath fanning against my face. "Were you thinking about kissing me?"

"Oh, shut up," I reply, then close the distance between us.

The moment our mouths meet, the tension drains from my body. I lean into the kiss, giving just as much as I'm taking. Dex's arms wrap around me and he breaks the kiss for just a moment before he's tugging me onto his lap.

"That's better," he murmurs. "Now, where were we?"

I smile down at him, as his lips meet mine once more. Placing my arms around his neck, I pull him closer, deepening the kiss.

Kissing Dex is everything I'd always thought it would be and so much more.

His hands run up and down my arms, before he buries them in my hair. He shifts under me, and I lean back until our foreheads touch.

“Am I hurting you?” I ask as he shifts again.

“If that’s what hurting is like, hurt me all you want, Little Lamb.” He runs his hands down my hair, then places them on my hips, giving me a squeeze.

I bite my lip, but my smile breaks free. I press a light kiss to his eyelids, then his cheek, and finally another tender kiss at the corner of his mouth. Then, I carefully climb off his lap and sit down beside him on the couch.

He lifts his hand, brushing his fingers against my cheek. “I can’t believe you kissed me.” Jokingly, he touches my forehead. “Are you feverish, Mills?” Then, he brings the same hand to his own temple. “Am I feverish? Was that a dream?”

I chuckle. “It wasn’t a dream.”

“Huh. Maybe you should kiss me again. Just to make sure.”

Smiling, I reply, “Honestly, I’m surprised you didn’t make a move first. I keep checking for hidden mistletoe around the house.”

Dex laughs. “Oh, believe me, it wasn’t for a lack of trying. I’ve searched everywhere, but it looks like Beth doesn’t have any.”

“She’s married. She doesn’t need an excuse to make out with her husband.”

“And what was your excuse?” he asks.

My eyes meet his, and the look he’s giving me makes my heart trip over itself. “Do I need one?”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “Never. You, Millie Jane, need no excuse to kiss me whenever you want.”

My face warms, but I can’t stop my smile from spreading. “Duly noted.”

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Nineteen

Dex

My gaze follows Millie as she rummages around the kitchen making us a late lunch or maybe an early supper. We were so lost in one another, we may have forgotten important things like eating or even how to breathe. But really, who cares about eating and breathing when Millie Jane is peppering you with the sweetest kisses?

Yeah, I know. I sound all sappy and like I have big heart eyes bulging out of my face and honestly ... I do. The verdict is in, and I'm pleading guilty. I am a lovesick fool. My heart has been hopelessly lost to Millie Jane.

She's humming as she pulls various items out of the fridge. "How do chicken and steak fajitas sound?" she asks, glancing over at me.

"Perfect," I reply with a smile. She returns my grin, and my chest expands with so many emotions, the biggest one being the love I have for this amazingly beautiful woman.

I want nothing more than to make her mine. I want more than a few days snowed in together. More than a make-out session. I want to pursue her. Date her. And then, marry her.

Before we can truly move forward, though ... I think we're going to have to talk about what happened all those years ago. There can't be any lingering hurt and anger if we're to have a relationship. And after this morning, I can't imagine not having Millie in my life.

But today has been perfect and I'm not ready to burst the little bubble of bliss surrounding us. What if her feelings aren't as strong as mine and bringing up the past draws out all the old hurt and bitterness for her again? If I don't handle it correctly, it could blow up in my face.

Sighing, I run a hand through my hair. I'll bring it up tomorrow. Today, I just want to bask in the happiness of having her in my arms.

We eat dinner at the table while we finish the puzzle, laughing and filling in the pieces of our lives from the last seven years. We talk about everything. Except high school. We're both tiptoeing around it.

After supper, I move to the couch and Mille follows. I grasp her wrist, stopping her before she has a chance to sit. "Sing for me."

Her lips twist and her brow furrows. "Oh. I thought we were going to watch a movie?"

“After you sing and play for me.” Turning her hand over, I press a lingering kiss to her palm. “I’ve missed hearing your voice,” I add softly.

“Okay. If you insist,” she replies, her tone teasing.

I grin up at her. “I do. And I want you to play your songs.”

“You are awfully demanding, Hart.”

“Only when it comes to things I want,” I quip back.

She makes a humming sound in the back of her throat as she pulls her hand from mine. I watch her as she disappears into the hallway, praying the entire time that I don’t mess this up with her.

When she returns with her guitar, she settles onto the chair across from me. “Are you sure you don’t want me to play a Christmas song?”

“Nope,” I reply, popping the *p*. “But ... if you don’t want to sing them for me, I won’t press.” As much as I want to hear her sing her songs, I won’t push her.

Millie studies me a moment, then inhales softly as she pulls her guitar out of the case. After adjusting it on her lap, she closes her eyes and begins strumming. Her sweet voice joins the strum of the guitar a few moments later, sounding just like I remembered, but also so much more.

It’s warm and rich and I find myself closing my eyes as the lyrics wash over me.

When I behold all this world has,

Wonders found in every place
My flesh desires to hold it all
But my spirit cries for only grace.

Grace, grace, give me grace,
The sweetness of mercy
From the holiest place

Grace, grace, give me grace,
Pardon and pity
Sweet sovereign grace.

Through toil, want and strife,
Demands of life in plenty
There may be few spots of light and love
Seek only one among the many.

Grace, grace, give me grace,
The sweetness of mercy
From the holiest place.

Grace, grace, give me grace,
Pardon and pity

Sweet sovereign grace.

Friend, on that dreadful darkest day

When before the throne you stand

What will you say to enter in

Only one thing meets demand.

Grace, grace, give me grace,

The sweetness of mercy

From the holiest place.

Grace, grace, give me grace,

Pardon and pity

Sweet sovereign grace.

As she sings the last note, she immediately switches to another song. I watch her as she's lost in the moment. Her face is glowing, and the corners of her lips are pulled up into the sweetest smile. It's as if I'm seeing the real Millie for the first time. This. This is what she's supposed to be doing.

She strums the last note, the room vibrating with the echo of her music. Slowly, she opens her eyes, her cheeks darkening slightly. "I've never sung these for anyone before," she whispers.

I smile at her. “It was amazing, Mills. I’m glad I was the first to hear them.”

Now to convince her to let the rest of the world hear them too.



Twenty

Millie Jane

I'm lying in bed enjoying the warmth of the quilts and reliving the last twenty-four hours with a huge, goofy grin on my face.

I. Kissed. Dex Hart.

Not only did I kiss him, but *he* kissed me back. And believe me, that man can kiss. As if there was ever any doubt. We spent the day laughing, playing board games, and cuddling on the couch while we watched Christmas movies.

Oh, and we kissed some more.

Somehow, he even managed to convince me to sing my music for him. Okay, it was the palm kiss that did me in. How could I refuse when he was being so sweet and tender with me?

I pull my pillow over my head and let out a little squeal. I want to call Beth and tell her, but as I'm reaching for the phone, I hesitate.

What if whatever Dex and I are doing falls apart?

We did a lot of things yesterday, except talk about the incident in high school and the future. I'm more than willing to put the work into a long distance relationship when Dex returns to playing, but is he? I believe he would be. But until we have that conversation, I won't know for sure.

So, I decide to wait until things are a little clearer between me and Dex before telling Beth anything.

I drag myself out of bed, shower, and pack my bags. Now that Dex and I are on good terms, I'm not as eager to leave. But ... it's also another reason to leave. Dex is too tempting, and being alone with him is not a good idea since we've crossed the I-can't-stand-you line into the I-want-to-kiss-you-forever line.

When I walk into the living room, Dex is sitting on the couch with his leg propped up, reading his Bible. My heart melts at the sight.

"Sorry," I say quietly. "Didn't mean to disturb you."

Dex smiles at me, closing his Bible and setting it behind him on the end table. "You never disturb me. I was finished anyway." He motions for me to come closer.

As soon as I get close enough, he latches onto my wrist and pulls me down onto his lap. I give a little yelp. "Dex," I laugh out. "What are you doing?"

His strong arms wrap around my waist as he draws me closer and buries his face in my neck. "Saying good morning to the

most beautiful woman in the world.” His warm breath on my skin sends a shiver down my spine as I lean into him.

He trails kisses on my neck up to my jawline before his lips capture mine. My hands move over his toned stomach, up his chest, across his broad shoulders, until I sink them into his hair, pulling him closer and deepening the kiss.

I can feel him smile against my lips as he draws back. “Wow,” he breathes out. “That’s one heck of a good morning, Mills.”

My lips curl up, and I drop another kiss at the corner of his mouth. “Now, I need to go make us breakfast.”

His arms tighten around me. “What if I want dessert first?” He waggles his eyebrows, and I chuckle.

“That’s not good for your health.”

“You are very good for my health, Little Lamb,” he whispers, his voice gravelly as his thumbs trace circles at my waist. His eyes are dark, swirling storm clouds as they skate across my face. “You’re perfect, Millie Jane.” Thick emotions clog my throat at the sincerity and adoration in his voice.

Leaning forward, I press my lips gently to his. My heart is so full it almost aches. Pulling back, I smile at him, and run a light finger across his jawline. “You’re not too bad yourself, Hart.”



As I clean up after breakfast, Dex announces that he's going to go take a shower. I glance down at his cast. "Uh ... "

Dex chuckles. "Beth has a walk-in shower. I just sit on a stool with my cast wrapped in a towel and stick it outside the shower."

I grimace. "That sounds ... awkward."

"Pretty much." An evil glint lights his eyes. "You know you co—"

"Dexter Hart, you better not even finish that sentence."

He throws his head back, a deep laugh erupting from his mouth. "Okay, okay." Turning and heading down the hallway, I hear him mumble, "It's your loss."

I bite back a laugh. He's such a shameless flirt. But he's also good and caring.

I've just finished washing the last of the dishes when Dex's phone rings. Glancing around, I find it laying on the dining room table. I walk over and reach for it, but stop when I see "Dad" scrolled across the top of the screen. I doubt Dex would care about missing a call from his dad, so I let it ring. I'll just let Dex know when he gets out of the shower.

The ringing stops, only to start up a moment later.

I bite my lip. Dex's dad can be persistent, but what if something is wrong?

I can still hear the shower going and there is no way I am interrupting Dex. Taking a steadying breath, I swipe the answer

button.

“Hello,” I say.

There’s a beat of silence, before Dex’s father replies, “Oh. Veronica? I wasn’t aware you and Dex were back together.”

My heart stutters. Veronica? Back together? I know it isn’t true, but the words alone have me feeling unsteady on my feet.

“Um ... no, Mr. Hart. It’s uh ... it’s Millie Jane. Brooks,” I add. “From Hartburg? Dex and I went to high school together.” I clamp my mouth shut to stop the words rushing out.

“Oh. Millie.” He says my name almost like a curse. “It all makes sense now.”

My brow puckers. “I’m sorry?”

“It’s you,” Mr. Hart says, disdain dripping from his voice. “You’re the reason my son is quitting.”

“Quitting?”

Letting out an exasperated sigh, he continues, “Don’t play dumb with me, Ms. Brooks. I know how your influence affects my son. Well, I’m telling you it didn’t work in high school, and it isn’t going to work now.”

My hands are shaking, my mind swirling, trying to understand what he’s implying. “Mr. Hart, I’m sorry, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.” My words come out wobbly.

Mr. Hart snorts. “Dex is quitting the Dragons. And now I know why. Because of you.”

“He hasn’t said anything to me. I had no idea. How is that my fault?”

Scoffing, he replies, “I know your type, Ms. Brooks. You think you can manipulate men to get what you want.” He’s practically growling into the phone.

Taking a deep breath to steady my racing heart, I reply in the calmest voice I can manage, “Mr. Hart, I will tell Dexter that you called, but I don’t think I have anything left to say to you.”

“You tell that son of mine that this isn’t high school, and I’m not playing these games with him again. I made sure he didn’t ruin his chances of a hockey career because of you once already. I refuse to let you attempt to get in his way again.” And before I can say anything else, he hangs up.

My mind is reeling from his words.

“Hey, what do you think about—” Dex cuts off when I glance at him, his eyes darting between my face and his phone that’s still in my hand. “Millie, what’s wrong?”

“I-I ... ” Holding out his phone, I say, “Um ... your dad called.”

He hobbles closer to me, slipping the phone into the pockets on his ball shorts. “What did he say? You’re pale. I swear, Mills, if he said something to upset you I’ll—”

“He said you were leaving the Dragons ... because of me.”

He stills. “I’ve been thinking—praying—about it.”

“Since when?”

“For a while. Even before my injury.”

“Oh.” A weird mingling of relief and disappointment washes over me as I bite my lip. Of course, he’s not choosing me over hockey. I didn’t really expect him to. We’ve not even defined what we’re doing here. Maybe the last few days have simply been ... fun for Dex.

Meaningless fun.

I stuff down the disappointment, just as Dex says, “But now that you’re back in my life ... I’ve been thinking maybe it’s time to hang up my skates.”

My pulse quickens at the tender look in his eyes. “Dex—” I start to argue, but he cuts me off.

“Millie, I haven’t made a decision yet. But you should know that I’ll be taking everything into account when I do. Especially us.”

His softly spoken words make my heart turn to mush, but then I remember what else his dad said. “Why does your dad think I almost ruined your chance at hockey?”

Dex lets out a heavy sigh. “He said something about that?”

I nod slowly. “He ... uh ... he said he made sure that I didn’t ruin your chances at a hockey career back in high school.” Shaking my head, I meet his gray eyes. “What is he talking about?”

His jaw works back and forth.

“Dex ... what did your dad do?”

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Twenty-One

Dex

High School

Two weeks of spending every evening and most of the weekend with Millie Jane is simultaneously the most fun, relaxing time I've ever had, and pure torture. I would never have thought that the cute blonde I was falling for could be such a drill sergeant when it comes to something she wants. And she wants to win this competition.

I've sung more the past two weeks than I have in my entire life. Honestly, I don't really mind when it brings a smile to Millie's face and brings her closer to achieving her dreams.

But the endless hours of singing aren't what is torturing me. It's the fact that I am dying to pull her into my arms and kiss her.

I almost did our second night of practice.

Millie was sitting beside me on the couch working through the chords on her guitar. She kept messing up on one part and was getting frustrated with herself, so I gently took the guitar from her hands and set it aside.

“Dex, I have to practice,” she argued.

“I know. And you will, but right now you need to relax.” I handed her an Xbox remote. “Want to play?”

We spent the next thirty minutes playing video games and laughing. Nudging me with her shoulder, she said, “Thanks. I needed this.”

Reaching over, I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, letting my fingers glide down the smooth skin of her neck. She inhaled sharply, and her lips parted as I leaned closer. It was the moment. I was going to kiss her.

She pressed a hand to my chest, giving me a gentle push. “Dex,” she whispered. “W-we can’t do this.”

My heart dropped as I pulled back to look at her. “What?”

Biting her bottom lip, she replied, “I need to be able to focus on the competition.”

A grin broke across my face as I wrapped a lock of her hair around my finger. “Are you saying I’m a distraction?”

“Dex ... ”

Chuckling, I let my hand drop from her hair and leaned back. “All right. I’ll stop.” Meeting her eyes, I continued, “But only

until after the competition. I fully intend to take you on a date and kiss you after you win.”

Red stained her cheeks. “You think we’ll win?”

“I know *you* will.”

When the day of the competition rolls around, Millie and I are standing in the hallway talking about what time I’m picking her up tonight. Millie is a bundle of nerves. She’s been talking nonstop for ten minutes while shuffling back and forth on her feet.

I, on the other hand, can’t stop picturing what it’s going to be like tomorrow evening when I finally get to take Millie on a real date and kiss her goodnight.

“What are you smiling about?” Millie whispers. “I’m freaking out over here.”

Placing my hands on her shoulders, I trail them up and down her arm. “First of all, I’m smiling because I know you’re going to knock them dead tonight.” She shoots me a skeptical look. “And I’m also smiling because I’m ready for our date tomorrow.” I bring my mouth to her ear, my words meant for her alone. “And make no mistake about it, Little Lamb, I will be kissing you before we say goodnight.”

She shudders. “Not helping, Dex.”

A laugh puffs out of me, and I press a kiss to her temple. “You’ve got this. I promise. I’ll be right there with you the entire time.”

Her answering smile makes me want to wrap my arms around her and kiss her right now. “Thank you for doing this for me,” she says.

Hooking my finger under her chin, I tilt her head up. “I’d do anything for you,” I whisper.

Millie’s gaze darts between my eyes and then to my lips. Then, she steps up on her tiptoes and presses the lightest kiss to my lips. Before I can pull her in for more, she backs away. Her face is beet red as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Wow, Mills, you didn’t even wait for the first date,” I tease.

The corner of her mouth lifts as she rolls her eyes at me. “Shut up.”

I want to sweep her into my arms and kiss her again, but we both have to get to our separate classes. We say our goodbyes and part ways, but I’m still thinking about that small kiss a couple hours later.

I’ve been anxiously waiting for practice to be over so I can go pick up Millie for the competition.

“Hart,” Coach calls, breaking me from my daydreaming. We’re almost finished with drills and I’ve got plenty of time to hop in the shower and change into something nicer before picking Millie up.

I glance up to where Coach Woodhouse is motioning me over. Skating toward him, I can’t help but notice a couple of men sitting in the corner staring at me. My heart lurches.

Scouts.

“Yeah, Coach?”

He gives me an apologetic look. “We’re running through a few more drills before we head out.”

I work my jaw back and forth. “I’ve got somewhere to be, Coach.”

“I’m aware. However, we have to run the drills.” His eyes flick to the men and back to me. “Is that going to be a problem?”

I grip my stick tighter. “And if it is?”

Sighing, he runs a hand over his face. “Look, I’m going to try and get you out of here as soon as I can. In time for your competition. I can’t force you to play, Dex, but”—he leans closer and lowers his voice—“it would be in your best interest to stay.”

There’s something in the way he says it that has me eyeing the men once more. They’re off in the shadows so I can’t really tell who they are, but they must be pretty big if Coach is advising me to stay.

“Yes, sir. I just need to send a quick text.”

Coach shakes his head. “No time. Get on the ice and in formation. Play your best and we’ll get out soon.”

Frustration pulses through my veins as I join the rest of the team. They’re all talking in hushed tones, attempting not to stare at the men watching us, but I ignore them all. I know I should be excited that scouts are wanting to see me play, and I am. It’s just the worst possible timing.

“Pretty sure he coaches the Dragons,” Freddy whispers beside me.

My head snaps in the direction of the men and though they’re still in the shadows so it’s hard to say for sure, I think he’s right.

The Denver Dragons are my favorite minor league team and have been on my list of dream teams for the last five years. Nervous exhilaration zaps through me. This could be my big break.

I allow that to fuel my game as we work through several formations. I try to push thoughts of Millie away. I’m still hoping to be done in time, but she’ll understand if I’m late. I know she will. Besides, I don’t bring much to the table as far as singing goes. I do okay as her backup, but she’s the one that steals the show. Millie will probably do better without me there anyway. I’d only hold her back.

I’ve lost track of time, but I’m too caught up in the thrill of the game and the knowledge that my dreams are within reach to worry.

When we’re finally done, I head toward the locker room. I need to at least text Millie that I’m running late. Maybe I can still make it.

“Dexter,” my dad’s deep voice booms through the rink and my spine stiffens.

Turning slowly, I see my dad walking toward me, the two men following him. Now that they’re closer, there’s no

mistaking that one is Coach Pratt of the Denver Dragons.

I straighten my shoulders when the man I don't recognize extends his hand first. "It's nice to meet you Dexter," he says as I shake his hand. "I'm Art Reynolds, a scout for the Denver Dragons. I've had my eye on you for a while now."

My brow arches. "You have?"

"Yes. Which is why I had to come speak with you when the opportunity came up." He motions toward Coach Pratt. "And I'm sure you already know who this man is."

I smile, offering him my hand. "Of course. Coach Pratt. Nice to meet you, sir."

"I've heard a lot about you from Art here so I had to come see for myself. Have you ever thought about joining the Dragons?"

Doing my best to retain my composure, I reply, "Yeah. I mean, your team is the best there is, so it's kind of a dream of mine."

Coach Pratt gives me a wide smile. "I'm glad to hear it." He pulls a card out of his pocket. "Let's set up a time to chat. I'd love to talk more about you joining the team."

This time, I can't keep my jaw from dropping open as I reach for the card. "Wow. Thi-this is great. Thank you, sir."

He dips his head. "I look forward to hearing from you."

I shake their hands one final time, completely forgetting that Dad is standing there. Staring at the card, I'm startled when he

finally speaks. “And to think, you almost wasted your talent on a stupid singing competition.”

Ice pours over me at his words as my brain connects the dots. “Wait. You did this?” I ask.

Dad scoffs. “Of course, I did.”

My jaw clenches. “You set this up? At this particular time?”

“Yes, Dexter. And look at you! Going to sign with the Dragons.”

I feel like I’m going to throw up at the revelation that Dad sabotaged my performance with Millie. “Oh, no. Millie.” I turn toward the locker room.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Dad calls after me.

“I need to get to the competition.”

Dad snorts. “Too late for that.”

Ignoring him, I quickly change, not taking time to shower, and hop into my car. I try to call Millie, but she doesn’t answer. Guilt pricks my heart as I pull into the high school parking lot. The lot is partially full, so I pray that I’m not too late.

I’m walking toward the entrance when a couple girls from one of my classes step outside chatting excitedly with one another. I can’t remember their names, but I stop them anyway. “Hey, do you know if Millie Jane is still inside?”

The two exchange a hesitant look, before the dark haired girl answers. “Um ... I think she left a bit ago.”

My shoulders deflate. “Oh. Okay. Thanks.”

They turn away and I pull my phone back out and try Millie’s number again. This time when it goes to voicemail, I leave a quick message. “Mills, I am so sorry. Please call me so I can explain.”

Running a hand through my hair, I wrack my brain for something—anything—to somehow make this right. It’s not the best grand gesture, but I decide to take her a peace offering from The Screaming Peach.

I run through the drive-thru and order her favorite peach smoothie and something for myself before heading to her house. The lights are still on when I pull into the driveway.

Grabbing her smoothie, I jog up the sidewalk to the front porch. I ring the doorbell, bouncing on the balls of my feet, praying that she will forgive me.

Millie’s grandmother, Dottie Mae, answers the door, staring at me with narrowed eyes. “Can I help you?” Her glasses are perched on the end of her nose and she has her arms crossed. She’s the most intimidating sixty year old woman I’ve ever met.

“Uh. Yeah. Is Millie home?” I lift the smoothie. “I brought her something.”

She sniffs, looking me up and down. “I was really hoping for better from you, Mr. Hart.”

I wince and rub my neck with my free hand. “I know I screwed up, but—”

“Son,” Dottie interrupts me. “You might as well save that apology for later. Millie doesn’t want to see you tonight.”

My shoulders sag and hope deflates from my chest. “But I can explain.”

She holds up a hand. “I’m sure whatever excuse you have sounds good to you. It may have even been for a good reason, but Millie doesn’t want to hear that right now. You have to give her time to get over it.”

Cringing, I can’t meet her eyes as I ask, “Was it that bad?”

“It wasn’t good,” she replies, a heavy sigh leaking out of her lips.

A pit forms in my stomach. “And you’re sure she won’t see me?”

Dottie shakes her head, a sad smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “Give it time.”

The background of the title page is decorated with various snowflakes in shades of blue and green, along with small grey and blue dots scattered across the white space.

Twenty-Two

Millie Jane

High School

After spending the night sobbing into my pillow, I'm ready to face the day and plan my next step, though I still feel hollow inside. Gram let me cry on her shoulder last night and I'm so grateful to her. Honestly, I was ready to give up my dream altogether after Dex bailed on me and I froze on stage.

My cheeks heat just thinking about that embarrassing moment. I've never had stage fright like I did last night. Unable to perform, I ran off the stage, tears streaming down my face.

I've known all along that this journey was going to be hard, especially because I don't want to use any of Gram's connections in the music world to give myself a boost. She

offered again last night, but I want to prove to her that I can do this on my own. And after last night, I want to prove it to myself too.

First thing first though, I need to confront Dex. He tried calling and texting me multiple times, but I didn't answer. I did listen to two of his voicemails before becoming completely disgusted and turning my phone off.

He bailed on me for hockey.

Tears prick the backs of my eyes, but I push them down. I can't figure out why Dex would do that to me. He promised that he'd be there and then ... he wasn't.

It's as if I'm walking in a haze during my first class. Beth is excited when I take a seat, not seeming to pick up on my current mood. It's for the best. I don't want to put a damper on her and Dex's new relationship as step-siblings, which is why I haven't mentioned the competition yet.

"Did Dex tell you the news?" Beth whispers when the teacher, Mrs. Fields, turns around. Her eyes are brimming with excitement.

"Wh-what news?" I ask, my voice wobbly.

"He's signing with the Denver Dragons next week. He's going to be a pro hockey player," she says quietly.

My mouth drops open. "What?"

Beth nods. "It's his dream team. I'm so excited for him." Her eyes widen and she leans closer. "Oh, Millie, you didn't tell me about last night. What was it like?"

I glance around the room and notice a couple of girls staring at me, whispering behind their hands. I think they were there last night, though I'm not one hundred percent certain. Still, by lunch everyone will know, so I might as well get it over with.

Twisting my fingers together, I reply, "I froze."

Beth's face falls, her lips twisting into a sympathetic smile. "Oh, honey. I'm so sorry."

I bite my bottom lip. "Dex didn't show up." I glance up and watch as Beth stills, her brow puckering.

"He didn't?"

I shake my head and lift my shoulder. "It's okay though. It's fine."

She opens her mouth to say something, but Mrs. Fields turns around and starts speaking. Beth mouths *we'll talk later*, before focusing her attention on our teacher.

I fill Beth in after class, and then head off to find Dex. My heart rate increases with each step I take. Finally, I catch him stepping out of the gym. His eyes widen when he sees me.

"Mills, why didn't you call me?" He begins to reach for me, but I cross my arms over my chest and pull back. His shoulders droop. "I'm sorry," he says, the words sounding weak to my ears.

My chin quivers. "How could you do this to me, Dex?"

"I wanted to text you to let you know I would be late, but Coach wouldn't let me."

I scoff at his lame excuse. “Did you try to text when you were signing with the Dragons? Or as soon as you finished playing?”

He opens his mouth, but snaps it shut again.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” I add after he remains silent. “I can’t believe you, Dex. You knew how much I wanted this! You knew how much that meant to me.” A tear trails down my cheek.

“And you know how much hockey means to me, Mills,” he counters. “Besides, you probably did way better without me there.”

My mouth drops open, my insides trembling at his statement. “I froze, Dex! I couldn’t even sing because you broke your promise to me.” I shake my head, my eyes narrowing at him. “All this time, you’ve complained about how your dad never keeps his promises, how he never considers how his actions will affect others. Turns out, you’re just like him.”

His face contorts as anger flashes in his eyes. “Excuse me? How dare you compare me to that man.”

I take a step closer, looking up into his face. “Then maybe don’t act like him. Don’t make promises you can’t keep. Or that you won’t keep because it’s too inconvenient for you.” My voice rises and a few heads turn as they pass us in the hall, but neither of us care.

“Yeah, well, you aren’t the only one with dreams. Maybe you need to stop being so self-absorbed and focus on someone

else other than Millie Jane for a change. If you had an opportunity like I did with the Dragons, you'd swipe it up in a heartbeat. Do you know how rare it is for someone my age to get drafted out of high school? So maybe stop acting like your dreams are more important than anyone else's."

Tears spill out of my eyes. Dex's gaze tracks them, his mask cracking the slightest bit. He takes a deep breath, but I cut him off with a hand in the air. "I-I don't want to see you, Dex," I say, my voice stronger and more sure than I feel. "Not tonight. Not ever again."

I turn away and don't look back.



I've managed to successfully avoid Dex for the past week. Yes, it's involved me missing a few classes that we share together—or sneaking in late and sitting in the far back—and not going to Beth's house, but it's been worth it to not have to see him.

It was inevitable that Beth would eventually find out, though I tried not to drag her into the entire mess. She was understandably angry with Dex for ditching me. It felt good to talk it out with her, but I held back and tried to brush it off as no big deal. She's not buying it. But as angry and hurt as I am with Dex, it feels wrong to try and put a wedge between them when they're officially family now.

I wish that I was over his betrayal so that I could move on and forget about him, but it still hurts. So much. And I miss

him, which makes it all the more frustrating. Yesterday at school, I heard him holler out at someone from down the hallway and my poor heart tripped all over itself at the sound of his voice.

I'm just trying to keep my head down for the next month until graduation. Dex will be moving to Denver and I'll be in Nashville. Then, I won't have to think about the boy I almost gave my heart to.

The Screaming Peach is busy as I step inside and walk toward the counter. I'm halfway there when my eyes snag onto familiar dark hair. My feet freeze as my eyes remained glued on the back of Dex's head. I haven't seen him outside of school since the night before the competition.

Before I can stop myself, my feet have turned in his direction. It's as if there's a thin, fragile string pulling me toward him. I'm so angry and hurt still, but maybe we can talk this out and work through it. Because as upset as I am with him, it sucks not having Dex in my life.

I've only taken three steps when a girl about my age with short black hair with bright blue tips takes the seat in front of Dex. I stop midstep expecting the girl to get back up and leave, but she doesn't. Instead, she adjusts her blue, thick-rimmed glasses and places her elbows on the table, pressing her chin against her palms as she leans in, listening to whatever Dex is saying.

He must be telling some big story by the way his hands are moving rapidly in front of him, and she's smiling at him as if

he climbed a ladder and hung the moon in the sky himself.

Nausea washes over me and I rush outside, gasping for air as I do. Tears blur my vision as I press a hand to my stomach and hurry back to my car.

I thought Dex bailing on me during the competition had hurt, but this ... this is an entirely new level of pain. An ache so deep fills my chest as I work to keep the tears at bay.

Dex didn't just choose hockey over me. He replaced me too.

I can't believe I was thinking about fixing things with him. What if I had sat down before that girl came back? I would have made a fool of myself because of Dex. Again.

A burst of renewed anger has me straightening my spine as I open my car door. That is the last time I will ever entertain the thoughts of something with Dexter Hart. Not friendship. Definitely not a relationship.

From this moment on, Dex doesn't get even a microscopic portion of my heart.



Twenty-Three

Dex

Millie's looking at me with so much hurt and confusion in her eyes. I knew we would eventually have to talk about this, but I want to return to our little bubble where we forget about the dumb fight we had in high school and pretend that seven years haven't passed with us being at odds with one another.

Sighing, I reply, "Dad's the one who set up the scout to come see me practice that night."

"Oh," she says, her nose wrinkling. "But—"

"It's still my fault, Mills. I'm not trying to lay the blame at Dad's feet. Yes, he's the one who scheduled the scout to come, knowing I was supposed to be meeting you, but I was the one who decided to stay and play." I tuck my chin to my chest and shake my head. "I shouldn't have broken my promise to you. I should have tried harder to find another way."

She hums in agreement. “Wha-what about ... ” she trails off, averting her gaze.

“What?”

Worrying her bottom lip, she asks, “What about Veronica?”

My brow wrinkles. “Veronica?”

Millie huffs, crossing her arms. “Yes, Veronica. Veronica Reynolds? Your girlfriend?” She practically spits out the last word, and I have to bite back my smile.

“Jealous, Mills?” I tease, but when her watery eyes meet mine, I turn serious. “Veronica and I aren’t dating. We haven’t dated in years.”

“Hmm ... your dad seems to think otherwise.”

Inhaling a fortifying breath, I choose my words carefully. “Yeah, well, we know Dad isn’t a reliable source. Look, Veronica and I talk, but not often. We ended things on friendly terms, so every now and then she’ll text me to congratulate me on a game, or I’ll text her. Her dad scouts for the Dragons, so I do see her occasionally. But, Mills, there’s nothing but friendship between us.” I pause, trying to gauge her reaction, but she’s looking down at her feet. “Millie, if it bothers you, I won’t talk to her again.”

Her blue eyes snap up and meet mine. “Really?”

I nod. “Of course. I think you’d like her, honestly, but if it makes you uncomfortable, I will cut ties with her.” I move toward her, wishing I could wrap my arms around her, to

reassure her that there's no one else for me. "Millie," I say softly, "You are the only one I want."

"I thought that once before, Dex." She pauses and draws in a breath. "Y-you were just with her for so long. Are you sure you don't still have feelings for her?"

My brow furrows. "What are you talking about? Veronica and I dated for six months like six years ago. I wouldn't call that a very long time."

"Please don't lie to me." Hurt strains her voice.

"I swear, I'm not lying."

Her eyes dart between mine as if she's digging to find a nugget of a lie. "Bu-but ... I saw the two of you at The Screaming Peach. After our argument. I didn't realize who she was until you went public with your relationship the next year."

A memory flickers in my mind of meeting Veronica for the first time during a meeting with Art when we were going over details about signing with the Dragons.

"Veronica and I weren't dating then. I'd just met her. She was there with Art, her dad. I don't really remember it well, but I think he stepped away to take a call at some point." I glance down at Millie who's gone pale again. "You saw that?" She nods. "And you thought I was on a date?"

Lifting her shoulder, she replies, "What was I supposed to think? I was already so hurt and angry at you, then I see this beautiful girl flirting with you. Making you laugh."

“Ah, Mills.” I bring my hand up and cup her cheek, rubbing my thumb over the smooth skin of her face. “I’m so sorry. Veronica and I were just friends for a long time before we tried dating. I would never cheat on you or move on so quickly.”

She barks out a sarcastic laugh as I drop my hand. “It’s not like we were actually dating. And I did tell you that I never wanted to see you again.”

“Still ... ”

Shaking her head, she whispers, “All this time.” She squeezes her eyes shut and a tear trails down her cheek. I’m cursing these blasted crutches for the thousandth time because all I want to do is hold her and comfort her.

“Come sit with me,” I say quietly, overcome with the need to have her wrapped up in my arms.

“I-I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” she says, backing up a step.

My chest tightens at her words. “Why?”

Ignoring my question, she replies, “I’m going to try and start my car and scrape my windows.” She turns away, walking toward the door where her boots are.

I follow her, panic threatening to overtake me. “Millie, don’t do this. Don’t run away.”

She pulls her boots up over her leggings and zips them before standing and facing me. “I just need to ... to process everything.” Grabbing her coat off the coat rack, she puts it on

and pulls gloves out of its pockets. “I’ll be back in a bit,” she says and grabs her keys.

I watch helplessly as she walks outside, knowing I can’t follow her. Well, I could, though I’m sure falling on ice while on crutches wouldn’t be very fun. But I will follow her if she stays out too long.

In the meantime, I’ll pace the room, praying that I’m not about to lose Millie again.



Thirty minutes later, I’ve become increasingly agitated with the fact that Millie is still outside. Worse, she is no longer at her car. I’m not sure where she’s at, but I think she’s been out there long enough. I’m heading toward my bedroom to find my shoes—well, one shoe—so I can go hunt her down when the door opens and she walks inside.

I breathe a sigh of relief at the sight of her. Her cheeks and nose are red from the cold as she takes her boots and coat off.

Hobbling over to her, I brush my fingers against her cold cheek. “You’re frozen.”

“I’m fine,” she replies, not meeting my eyes.

Dropping my hand, I ask, “Want me to make you some hot chocolate?”

She pauses and sighs. “I’m just getting my things, then I’m going to Gram’s.”

My heart shatters as it hits the floor. “You’re running.”

“I’m not, Dex. I just ... ” she trails off, biting her lip. “Don’t you think we’re moving kind of fast? I mean, we’ve not even talked in seven years, and we’ve spent most of that time hating each other—”

“I never hated you, Mills.”

She eyes me suspiciously. “Never?”

I shake my head. “Never. I was angry. Frustrated at times. But I never hated you.”

She works her jaw back and forth. “Well, I wish I could say the same.” Her voice is tinged with embarrassment and regret.

“Do you hate me now?” I ask quietly.

Jerking her gaze to mine, she replies without hesitation, “No.”

“Then that’s all that matters.” I move closer to her. “Please don’t run away from me, Mills. Let’s work this out.”

Studying me for a moment, she steps forward and places her hand on my cheek. I lean into her touch, praying it’s a good sign. “I’m not running, Dex. I promise. I just ... I need to talk to Gram about Nashville and ... everything.”

My lips quirk up. “About me?”

A laugh puffs out of her as she stands up on her tiptoes and presses a light kiss to the corner of my mouth. “You think way too highly of yourself, Hart.”

I close my eyes and rest my forehead against hers. I want to believe that she isn’t running from me, because now that I’ve

gotten the smallest taste of what life with Millie Jane would be like, I don't think I can go back to life before. Yes, I have a successful hockey career, but that pales in comparison to the days I've spent with Millie doing seemingly mundane things like decorating Christmas trees and putting puzzles together.

I can't go back to life without Millie. I don't want to. She's brought an array of colors to my gray, dreary days. This woman challenges me, while also instilling so much laughter and joy into every nook and cranny of my life.

"Just want to make sure your priorities are straight. You know Dottie Mae loves me, right?" I ask.

She chuckles. "Grams loves everyone." Her breath fans over my face.

"But I'm her favorite," I reply, giving her a light kiss on the lips.

"You think you're everyone's favorite."

I open my eyes and draw back until I'm staring into Millie's face. "What about you, Mills? Am I your favorite?"

Her lips twist, but she fights the smile I can tell wants to break free. "Hmm ... jury is still out on that."

"Ouch." I rub my chest. "That hurts."

Patting my chest, she presses another kiss to my jawline. "I think you'll survive."

But as I watch her pack up her car and pull out of the driveway, I know she's wrong. Because I won't survive if

Millie decides that we aren't worth fighting for.



Twenty-Four

Millie Jane

There are an array of emotions swirling around in my heart. As soon as one takes hold, another pushes it out of the way. I'm trying desperately to latch on to any of them, if only to feel more stabilized, but it's impossible when they're galloping all over the place.

I try to organize my thoughts with the information I've learned.

1)Mr. Hart set Dex up so he would have to choose between his promise to me and his dream. Even though he chose his dreams over mine, knowing that his dad initiated everything dulls the ache. Honestly, the ache from his betrayal has been slowly fading with each interaction Dex and I have had over the past few days.

2)Dex may be quitting hockey. And I'm the deciding factor.

3)He's not in a relationship with Veronica, and the one they did have wasn't nearly as long as I thought it had been. Not

only that, he's willing to cut all ties with her if I give the word. And I believe him.

These thoughts, along with the roller coaster of emotions that go along with them run on constant replay as I pull into Gram's driveway. A strong wave of nostalgia hits me as I take in the only place that has ever felt like home.

My lips lift into a smile as I take in the cringe-worthy decor. Gram loves Christmas and shows it on a Clark Griswold level and twenty plus years of accumulated Christmas decorations.

Gathering my luggage, I head toward the porch, apprehension and excitement mingling together in my stomach. I am so ready to wrap Gram in my arms and have her kiss my cheek, but I'm also dreading the conversation that's coming.

When I get to the door, I don't knock, just turn the handle and walk in. I sigh and shake my head. I've tried to get Gram to lock her door for years, but she refuses. I don't think anyone would dare try anything though. If they did, she'd sit them down with a mug full of her homemade hot cocoa, a plate of cookies, and tell them all about Jesus.

"Gram," I call out, dragging my luggage through the door and shutting it behind me. When I turn around, I give a yelp and drop my bag. Sitting on top of the hallway table, staring at me as if it's contemplating eating my soul, is the ugliest—and downright creepiest—cat I've ever seen.

Except I have seen her before. At least pictures of her.

I set my guitar down gently, never taking my eyes off the creature.

“Millie Jane,” Gram says as she comes around the corner with a wide smile on her face. “I didn’t expect you for three more days.”

Ignoring her statement, I point to the cat, who is still staring me down. “What is that thing doing here?”

Gram glances over and waves her hand, chuckling nervously. “Oh, don’t worry about her, dear. She’s harmless.”

Planting my hands on my hips, I slice my eyes to her. “Gram, why do you have Dex’s cat?”

She blinks in surprise. “Oh.”

“Gig’s up. I know you’ve been galavanting all over the country to watch him play.”

Gram gives a sheepish grin as her cheeks flush pink. “Well, dear, he’s an exceptional hockey player.” Cocking her head to the side, she glances up at me. “But I’m curious how you know all of this?”

Busted.

“Uh ... well ... ” I twist my fingers together, ducking my head. “I may have talked to Dex.”

“Really?” Gram asks, her voice sounding all too pleased. “That’s wonderful.”

“Gram ... ” I drag her name out.

“It is. He’s such a nice young man. Did you know he came and put out all my decorations for me before he broke his leg?”

“H-he did?” I ask, my heart warming at the thought.

Gram nods. “Yup. He heard me talking about it at church and showed up the next morning to help. I didn’t even ask him to.”

My eyes flick to the cat. “Why do you have Fluffy?”

“I offered to keep her for him after he broke his leg.”

I smile and step toward her, wrapping my arms around her frail shoulders. “That’s really sweet, Gram.”

She pats me on the back and kisses my cheek. “Yes, Dex Hart is a sweet man.”

Laughing, I press a kiss to her cheek. “I was talking about you taking in Fluffy. But ... yes, Dex is sweet too.”

Gram gives me a knowing look. “Okay, well bring your stuff in, and let’s sit and chat. I have a feeling there’s more going on than you’re telling me.”



I’m curled up on Gram’s couch, a cup of coffee in my hand and a throw across my lap, when Gram walks in and sets a tray of cookies on the coffee table.

“Oh, these look delicious,” I say, grabbing the gingerbread man. My mind immediately flashes to Dex in his gingerbread hockey T-shirt.

“What’s got you grinning like that, Millie Jane?”

I clear my throat. “Nothing,” I mumble, then take a drink of coffee to give me a chance to compose myself.

Gram takes a seat beside me and pats my leg. “Spill the tea, dear. I can tell that you’ve got a lot on your mind and I’m thinking part of that might have to do with my favorite hockey player.” She waggles her white eyebrows at me.

Shaking my head, I chuckle. “You are awful, Gram.”

“I only tell it like I see it.” Rubbing my leg one last time, she leans back on the couch and looks at me. “What’s so heavy on your heart?”

Glancing down at my coffee mug, I try to swallow the emotion that’s clogging up my throat. “I-I’m not sure where to begin,” I answer honestly. “I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed in me.”

Gram harrumphs. “I could never be disappointed in you, dear. Why would you think that?”

I clench my eyes and a tear slips out, sliding down my cheek. “Because I failed you.” Sniffing, I wipe the tears from my eyes and set my mug down on the coffee table. “I couldn’t make it in Nashville, Gram. I wasn’t good enough to follow in your footsteps.”

A sob breaks through, and Gram pulls me to her where I cry harder than I have since the night I froze on stage during Voice of Wonder.

After several moments of Gram making shushing noises and rubbing my back like I'm a child, I pull away and hang my head. "I'm sorry, Gram."

She cups my cheeks, forcing my gaze to lock with hers. Her blue eyes are filled with love and compassion and a soft smile is covering her weathered face. "Now, you listen to me Millie Jane. You are absolutely not a disappointment. How could I be disappointed in you when you've worked so hard and gone after what you've wanted?"

"But what was the point? I never got a record label. No one knows my name." I sniffle again, the pain of my failure flooding my veins.

She drops her hands from my face. "Can I ask you something?" Gram asks, and I nod. "Do you really want to be a country music singer?"

Frustration swells within me. "Of course, I do. Why else would I have tried so hard?"

Gram's eyes flick between mine as she studies me. "Are you sure? What if I had never been a singer? Would you still want to do it? Or are you just doing it for my sake?" She pats my hand. "But most importantly, what does God want you to do?"

The urge to argue and reassure her that it was my dream, that God had called me to follow that path, is strong, but ... "I'm not sure," I finally say, my shoulders sagging. "Dex asked me something similar."

Her thin lips tug up in the corner. “Hmm ... sure seems like you’ve been talking to him a lot. He’s a smart man.”

I stop myself from rolling my eyes. “Anyway,” I say, trying to get the topic back off of Dex. I’m not quite ready to tell her we’ve spent the last several days snowed in at Beth’s house. Alone. “I’m actually moving back home. I mean, if I can?”

Gram’s blue eyes brighten with tears. “Don’t be silly. Of course, you can move back.” She squeezes my hand, and I grip hers more firmly. “Millie, I never expected you to chase my dreams as your own. I thought they were yours alone. But also ... I always felt that you weren’t as passionate about it as you tried to be.”

I bristle. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, you performed well and have the voice of an angel, but it always looked like work for you. Not a passion. Except for when you would sing at church.”

Everything she’s saying is similar to the conversations Dex and I have already had.

Sighing, I eye Gram suspiciously. “I’m starting to feel like you and Dex are in cahoots together.” She laughs.

I fiddle with the throw, twisting the thick fabric between my fingers. “I’m not sure how to feel at the moment,” I admit quietly. “Have I wasted almost half my life running after a dream that I wasn’t supposed to?”

“Now, don’t talk like that. I know things are hard and confusing at the moment, but you have to trust that God

allowed you to walk that path for a reason. Maybe the reason wasn't to fulfill your dreams, but to fulfill His plans for your life. What if He's been using this time to bring you to a place where you can trust Him fully? Where you aren't relying on your own plans and strengths, but on His alone?"

I absorb her words, letting them settle over me as tears prick the backs of my eyes. "Thanks, Gram. I love you."

"I love you too, dear. No matter what." She pats my cheek, then gives me a sly grin. "Now, tell me about you and Dex."

Groaning, I lean back on the couch. "It's complicated."

"Men always are."

I laugh, turning my head toward her. "How did you know Grampa was the one?"

"Mostly because the man was so darned persistent even when I turned him down multiple times," she says with a laugh before her voice takes on a more wistful tone. "But I knew because he was one of the few people I could be around all the time and never get tired of. He made me laugh. He was strong in his faith and challenged me in mine. I found myself wanting to do every little mundane thing with him."

"I wish I could remember him," I say softly.

Gram smiles. "He loved you so much. He'd be so proud of the woman you've grown into. But ... you're changing the subject." She wiggles her shoulders and leans forward anxiously.

So I tell her everything. She already knew about Dex bailing on me for hockey, but I'd never told her about seeing him with another girl. I fill her in on everything I've learned, and also about the fact that Dex and I just spent a week snowed in together at Beth's house. Of course, I leave out the scorching kisses. There are some things a girl just doesn't tell her grandmother. No matter how close I am with her.

"And you just left that poor man out there by himself when he can't even drive?" Gram looks at me as if I'm a monster.

"I just needed some time to think," I argue. "I'm pretty sure he can drive if he absolutely needs to. Or he could call me or Mr. Mullins."

Gram doesn't look convinced, but drops it to ask me, "Are you still angry at him for high school?"

I search my heart and what used to be hurt and anger seems to have vanished. "No. I don't think so, but—"

"But nothing," Gram interrupts. "I guarantee you're making this a much bigger deal than it actually is."

"Gram, we hurt one another so badly in high school. I said some really awful things to him. Honestly ... I'm probably more in the wrong than he ever was. I jumped to conclusions when I saw him out with Veronica, and I should have been more understanding when he told me why he didn't show up for the competition." I pause and glance at her. "What if we hurt one another again?"

Gram snorts. "It's not a matter of *if*, but *when*."

“Well, that’s comforting,” I reply dryly.

“Millie, we live in a fallen world. No one is perfect. We will hurt one another. The important thing is that we come clean when we do and that we learn to forgive one another. A solid relationship isn’t all sunshine, rainbows, and kisses”—my face warms at that and Gram gives me a smug grin—“I knew it! You kissed him, didn’t you?”

I bury my face in my hands. “This is not the conversation I want to have with my grandmother.”

“Oh, fiddlesticks. If you hadn’t kissed that man, I’d have your head examined.”

“Gram,” I puff out a laugh which has her chuckling along.

“Anyway, what I was saying is that relationships take work. It’s not always pretty or easy. You have to fight for one another, especially when life is hard. Things in this world will come at you, trying to rip you apart, and that’s when you’ll need to anchor yourself to Christ and one another. Forgiving all things. Bearing all things. But oh, my dear Millie, when you come through the trials your love will be so much stronger and so much sweeter.”

As she speaks, all I can see is Dex. His teasing gray eyes with the smug grin he wears most of the time. I see him sitting at the table working a puzzle or by the tree stringing popcorn garland. I picture him reading his Bible. I feel the echo of his lips on mine, and the touch of his fingers as they graze my skin. I can hear the awe in his voice as he tells me how much he loves my hymns. Sudden peace fills my heart, wrapping

around every corner and expanding throughout my chest. Dex is the only person that I can imagine walking through this life with. He's the person I want beside me as we fight through the battles life throws at us. He's the person I want to fight for.

At my revelation, another idea begins to emerge, and I know what I have to do. I look over at Gram who's smiling wide, a twinkle in her eyes. "Gram, I need your help."



Twenty-Five

Dex

The silence is going to drive me crazy, I'm sure of it. It's only been a day since Millie left, but the house feels so much bigger and emptier without her presence.

I miss her. I miss the exasperated looks she was always sending me and those icy blue eyes. I miss her smell, her touch. I miss our banter and the sound of her soft laughter. I miss hearing her hum while cooking for us.

I just plain ol' miss her. All of her.

Maybe I wouldn't be so antsy if Millie would call or text. All I received was an "I made it to Gram's. Talk soon!" text yesterday when she got to Dottie's. I've heard nothing since. She even ignored my responding text with all of its flirty emojis. I wanted to call her, but I'm trying really hard to respect her request for space. However, we never agreed on a time frame for how much space she needed.

"If I don't hear from her in the next thirty minutes, I'll call Mr. Mullins. Or a taxi," I mumble to myself.

Do we even have taxis in Hartburg? Probably not. Technically, I'm not supposed to drive. But it's my left leg that's broken, so I should be able to make it to Dottie's house if Mr. Mullins can't take me. Right?

After showering and getting dressed—a painfully slow process—I'm ready to grab my keys and head out the door when my phone dings with a text message. My heart leaps, and I breathe a sigh of relief until I glance down and realize it's a text from Coach Woodhouse. Disappointment almost makes me toss the phone aside.

Coach W

Hey, Dex! I know you're laid up at the moment, but I was wondering if you could fill in for me with practice? I'd really appreciate it.

Sure. Not a problem. When?

Coach W

In about forty-five minutes. I'll have someone come pick you up.

I respond with a thumbs-up emoji. I've never filled in for him before, but I have gone and talked to the team and played with them whenever I'm in town.

Twenty minutes later there's a knock. I didn't even think to ask who he would get to pick me up.

Opening the door, I smile. "Mr. Mullins. How are you today?"

"Good, good. I hear you're needing a lift to the rink?"

"Looks like it."

As we drive through the winding roads, we make small talk. Children are out sledding and building snowmen. A mom and dad are outside having snowball fights with their kids, and an ache settles deep under my breastbone.

I want that someday. But only with one woman. The woman who seems to be avoiding me.

I'm trying to hold on to her promise that she isn't running, but with no word from her since she arrived at Dottie's, it sure feels like she is. And if that's the case ... well, Millie Jane will be in for a surprise, because I am not letting her go without a fight this time.

We pull up to the door at the rink, and I glance around the almost bare parking lot, my brow furrowing. "You sure he gave us the right time?"

Mr. Mullins grunts. "Yup. Maybe they had their parents drop them off because of the roads."

"Maybe."

“Do you need me to stay?” he asks. “I have to run to the store and get a few groceries.”

I shake my head. “Nah. I’m good.”

“All right. I’ll be back in an hour.”

When he pulls away, I move toward the door, being extra cautious of any potential ice in my path. I walk inside and pause in confusion. It’s dark except for the lit arena, and there is Christmas music playing over the speakers.

“Uh ... hello?” I call, my gaze darting back and forth. “Weird,” I mutter to myself as I move closer to the ice.

A flash of movement catches my attention from the other side of the rink and I blink in surprise as a figure skates toward me. *Skates* might be too gracious. She’s moving at a snail’s pace, barely sliding as she clings to the edge of the rink.

“Millie? What are you doing?”

“Just ... hush. I’m concentrating.” She doesn’t even look up, keeping her eyes glued to her feet as she gradually gets closer. I take her in from the bottoms of her skate-clad feet to the top of her head where she has a baby blue beanie pulled over her ears, but then my eyes jerk back to the black and red jersey she’s wearing with the number eight on the sleeves, and there is no stopping the grin that comes over my face.

After what feels like an excruciatingly long time, she’s finally standing in front of me. Her cheeks are flushed and she’s breathing heavily, but when she looks up at me, her eyes are bright. “Hey,” she says, giving me a wide smile.

“Hey.” I angle my head and grin. “So ... me needing to fill in for Coach was—”

“A ruse to get you here.”

I make a humming sound in the back of my throat and glance down at her skates. “I didn’t know you could skate.”

She snorts a laugh. “I can’t. Did you not see me out there?”

“Guess I’ll have to teach you.”

“If only you weren’t on crutches.” She tsks just before her grin turns wicked. “You might have to get someone else on the team to help me. Maybe Cyrus? He seems like he’d be fun.”

A low growl rumbles out of me as I balance on my crutches and lean closer. “You’re wearing *my* jersey.” My voice comes out low and husky.

She focuses on me, never breaking eye contact. “I am.”

I grip the bottom of the jersey and pull her toward me until our chests brush. “Why?”

“Because ... I don’t want you to feel like you have to give up hockey for me, Dex.” She places her hand on my chest as she looks up into my eyes. “You don’t have to choose. It’s not me or your dream this time.” Bringing her hand to my face, she runs her thumb over my jawline. “I’m all in, Hart.”

I lean into her touch. “You are my dream, Little Lamb.”

“And you’re mine, but I’m serious. You love hockey and you are amazing at it. I will stand beside you, Dex. No matter which path you choose. I need you to know that.”

My heart expands at the sincerity of her voice. “Thank you,” I whisper. I’m still not one hundred percent sure what I want to do, but knowing that Millie will be with me either way eases the burden of my decision. Because as long as she’s in my life, I’ll be happy no matter which path I take.

Her eyes flick up above my head. “Oh, what’s that?” she asks in a not-so-convincing innocent voice just as “All I Want For Christmas Is You” starts playing over the speakers.

Glancing up, I let loose a chuckle. Somehow Millie has managed to dangle several boughs of mistletoe on a hockey stick and has it lying on top of the shielding, directly above our heads.

“Merry Christmas, Dex.”

Turning back to her, I smile. “Merry Christmas.” Pressing my forehead against hers, our mouths are so close that I can feel her breath across my lips. “I love you,” I whisper.

She sighs softly. “I love you too.”

I capture her lips with mine and show her just how much I mean the words as our mouths move together. Her arms wrap around my neck, pulling me closer until she almost slips and I’m barely able to catch her.

“Why don’t we get you out of those skates before you hurt yourself?”

She chuckles. “That’s probably not a bad idea.” I move to let her past me so she can sit down. “You’ll have to see if Cyrus has any time off soon to come show me how it’s done.”

“Millie,” I grind out, and she throws her head back and laughs. I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of that sound.

After she changes into her boots, she stands and moves toward me. Standing on her tiptoes, she presses the sweetest kiss to my mouth. “Okay, so Gram is waiting for us at the house ... along with that demon cat of yours.”

“Ah. So you’ve met Fluffy, have you?”

“Yes, and I’m sorry, Dex, but I’m going to have to agree with Beth. That cat is creepy.” She shudders, making me chuckle.

“Hmm ... so ... are you making me choose between you and my cat now?” I arch an eyebrow in her direction.

Sighing dramatically, she replies, “No. Not yet anyway. But I swear, Dex, it’s like she’s trying to suck my soul from my body with the way she looks at me.”

“I promise I won’t let my cat devour you.” Leaning closer, I continue, “As for me ... I can make no such promises.”

“Dexter,” she squeals, smacking my chest with one hand while she covers her reddening face with the other. “You are shameless.”

“Guilty as charged.”



Epilogue

Millie Jane

Seven Months Later

“**A**ren’t you a cutie? Yes, you are. You’re so cute,” I coo at T.J. and am rewarded with a big grin showcasing his four teeth. “I’m glad you noticed,” Dex’s voice cuts in from behind me.

I glance over my shoulder, and roll my eyes playfully at my boyfriend. “I love you, Dex, but you are not nearly as cute as your nephew.”

Dex kneels on the floor beside me, smiling at T.J. as he reaches over and tickles his belly. T.J. gives one of his big belly laughs, which makes Dex and I both laugh too.

“Yeah, I have to agree with you, Mills. I don’t think I’ll ever be as cute as this guy.”

Dex and I are babysitting for Thomas and Beth while they enjoy a much needed date night.

The past six months have been the most fulfilling I've ever experienced. After prayer and consideration, Dex decided not to renew his contract with the Dragons. Instead, he's getting ready to start his new job as the coach of the Hartburg High hockey team since Coach Woodhouse announced an early retirement in the spring. Dex is nervous, but excited to start this new chapter in his life.

I've been living in my old room at Gram's house. Thanks to Dex's encouragement, I shared my hymns with Gram, Beth, and our pastor. Everyone agreed with Dex that I should pray about pursuing this path and so ... I did.

So far, I've written about twenty hymns and I'm working on compiling them into an album. Now that I'm finally passionate about what I'm singing, recording videos and posting them online doesn't seem as daunting, but I still despise social media, so I hired a virtual assistant to handle most of it. Though, I do get on and engage with my fans a few times a week.

My parents aren't sure what to make of my decisions. And even though they were never thrilled with my pursuit of music to begin with, I think they are the only ones who truly think I failed now that I'm back at Gram's and only creating music for churches and social media.

But it's okay. I'm where God wants me to be, and I'm at peace for the first time in years. Maybe ever.

Even though they aren't very supportive of my current music, they are ecstatic about my relationship with Dex. They've actually been home twice in the past six months and I'm pretty sure both times were so they could see him. I'm relieved that they get along so well with him, though if they didn't it wouldn't change anything for me.

Mom and Dad even introduced Dex to one of their author friends and Dex got a call from him last week. Turns out, he wants to write an autobiography about Dex's life and his experience getting drafted into hockey at a young age. Dex asked for a few days to think and pray about it, but I know he'll do it.

I spend most of my time split between my music, hanging out with Beth and T.J., and helping Dex fix up his new home. He bought a beautiful house on twenty acres of land—and hills—only a few miles from Beth's house. It has needed a little TLC but Dex gave me full rein in decorating.

Glancing over at him as he makes silly faces at T.J., I can't help but thank God for bringing him back into my life. Even though he hasn't popped the question yet, we've talked openly about what we want for the future. Our future.

It's why he's insisted that I decorate his house.

Dex turns, catching me watching him. His lips tip up in the corners. "Are you checking me out, Mills?"

I hum. "Nope."

Leaning toward me, he waggles his eyebrows. “Now, no need to be shy about it. Look all you want. I’m all yours.” His lips press against mine as his hands cup my face. I will never get tired of kissing this man.

The front door bangs open and Beth groans as Dex and I jerk apart. “Oh, come on, you guys. You’re supposed to be watching my child.”

Thomas walks in the door. “Did you catch them making out again?”

I bury my face in my hands to hide my blush, but I can’t stop the laughter bubbling up.

Dex hops to his feet, then bends down to pick T.J. up. “We were watching him. See? Perfectly fine.”

Beth shakes her head. “Whatever you say,” she replies, taking T.J. from Dex’s arms. “Anyway, thank you guys for babysitting.”

Standing, I walk over and stop beside Dex. He immediately reaches for my hand, lacing our fingers together. It’s such a simple, yet intimate gesture that sends a flood of warmth throughout my body.

“We love watching our favorite godson,” I say, leaning forward and peppering T.J.’s face with kisses while he smiles.

Dex tugs on my hand. “All right, well, we’re heading out.”

My head swivels in his direction. “What? I thought we might hang out for a bit. Play a round of Rummy or something.” We

usually hang out with Beth and Thomas after they've put T.J. to bed.

Dex shoots Beth a look I can't quite decipher. She gives a completely fake yawn. "Oh, Mills, I would, but Thomas and I are exhausted." Her gaze flicks to Thomas who is in the kitchen pulling a water bottle out of the fridge. "Isn't that right, babe?"

Thomas's eyes dart between us and he nods. "Yeah. Killed. Exhausted. Ready to hit the hay."

My eyes narrow. "You all are acting weird."

Dex wraps his arm around my shoulders. "They are totally weird. Okay, let's go."

I barely have time to wave goodbye before Dex is dragging me out the front door and to his truck. "You are acting weird too. You know that right?"

Dex stops, wrapping an arm around me and pulling me flush against him. Leaning down, he whispers in my ear, "Maybe I'm just eager to get you alone." His lips brush against the skin beneath my ear sending shivers down my spine.

"Hm ... so I take it you aren't taking me home?"

Pulling back, his eyes flash with something before he grins. "Just trust me. Okay?"

A few minutes later, we're pulling into Dex's driveway. The two-story navy blue farmhouse looks so inviting with the setting sun painting the sky in pinks and purples.

Dex jumps out and walks around to open my door. There's a nervous energy surrounding him which is a stark contrast to his usual chilled and controlled attitude.

Lifting my hands, he plants a kiss on each of my palms, then meets my eyes. "Have I told you how much I love you?"

My heart turns to mush with the way he's staring at me. "Not in the last thirty minutes."

Smiling, he gives me a tender kiss on the forehead and then the tip of my nose. "I have a surprise for you, but"— he pulls a long strip of material out of his pocket—"I need to blindfold you."

I arch a brow but turn around so he can tie the cloth around my eyes. Then, he takes my hand and slowly leads me to the house. We walk through the now-familiar space and it's not until he brings me to the door in the kitchen that I falter.

"The basement?" I ask. "I thought it wasn't safe to go down there yet?" He'd told me that there was still a lot of work to do in order to get it complete.

"Just trust me, Mills."

He guides me down the steps. "As much as I love surprises, maybe next time you move your surprise somewhere that doesn't involve steps." I cautiously take another step down and notice Christmas music floating from below.

"What if I told you it was too big to move?"

"Hmm ... and why the Christmas music?"

Chuckling as we hit the last step, Dex places his hands on my shoulders, directing me which way to go. “It’s Christmas in July, Mills.” He stops us and presses a kiss to my cheek. “Okay, keep your eyes closed while I undo the blindfold.”

“If I open my eyes and Fluffy is staring at me, I’m going to scream.”

“Fluffy is upstairs, probably asleep.”

“Or searching for her next victim,” I mumble.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” Dex replies with laughter in his voice. “Now, keep your eyes closed.”

I do as he says and once the blindfold drops completely, I open my eyes. It takes a full two seconds before what I’m looking at registers. My hand comes up to cover my gasp. With a widened gaze I take in the sound board and the two small recording rooms. They’re perfect.

Christmas music is playing from the speakers and twinkling lights are strung across the room. There’s even a small Christmas tree in the corner between two black accent chairs.

Pressure builds behind my eyes as I turn, fully planning on throwing myself at Dex, only he’s not standing. He’s kneeling, holding out an open ring box with a white gold, solitary diamond ring inside.

I can no longer contain the tears as Dex gives me a brilliant smile. “Millie Jane Brooks, you have consumed my every waking thought and filled my dreams. You push me to be a better man. You encourage me and make me laugh. I was

living as half a person until you decided you wanted to get snowed in with me.” A half-sob, half-laugh escapes my lips. Dex takes my hand, pressing a kiss to the back of it. “Marry me, Millie? Please?”

“Yes,” I cry. Dex places the ring on my finger and then stands, wrapping his arms around me and twirling me around.

When he sets me down, I whisper, “You built me a recording studio.”

Cupping my cheeks, he looks into my eyes. “Do you like it?”

“Like it? No, I love it, Dex.”

Still holding my face, he leans down, capturing my lips with his in the sweetest kiss. “And I love you, Millie.” His breath fans across my face as his words settle deep into my bones.

Before I can respond, he’s kissing me again as if I’m giving him his next breath, his hands burying in my hair and tugging me closer. I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him toward me, deepening the kiss. Dex groans deep in his throat and I smile against his mouth.

After a few more moments, Dex’s kisses turn slow and languid, but still as knee-buckling as his more passionate ones. We pull apart slowly, breathless and smiling. I run my hand over his lightly stubbled jaw.

“I love you, Dex.”

“Yeah, well, I’m pretty loveable.”

“And conceited.”

“Meh. Only a little.” He holds his thumb and index finger up almost touching them together.

I laugh and shake my head as his arm comes around my waist again. He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear with his other hand, his gray eyes soft and brimming with love. And as his lips meet mine once more, I can't help but smile and thank God for giving me a second chance with Dex Hart.

Also By

Romantic Suspense

In the Midst of the Storm

In the Midst of the Darkest Hour

Women's Fiction

Neverending Mercy

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always point you to the One who loves you beyond measure.
Soli Deo gloria!

About the Author



Latisha Sexton has always had a love of reading and wrote and published her first book, *In the Midst of the Storm*, in 2023. Born and raised in Kentucky, she resides there with her husband of fourteen years and three small children. When not homeschooling her children, she's either reading, writing or watching Turkish romcoms. She is active on social media where she shares her love of books, faith, family, and bookish memes. You can follow her on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook @sincerely.latisha or at www.latishasexton.com where you can receive a free novella by subscribing to her newsletter.