

CHRISTMAS
Falls



UNDER THE
Whistle-tower

SAMMICEE

Under the Mistle-tome

Sammi Cee

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Contents

The Takoda Universe

Blurb

1. Prologue

2. Chapter One

3. Chapter Two

4. Chapter Three

5. Chapter Four

6. Chapter Five

7. Chapter Six

8. Chapter Seven

9. Chapter Eight

10. Chapter Nine

11. Chapter Ten

12. Chapter Eleven

Also By Sammi Cee

The Takoda Universe

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Blurb

Hoping to give his young daughter, Holly, the joyful childhood he had, Trevor moves back to the one place he's always considered home—Christmas Falls.

As happy as he is to be back in the festive atmosphere of the small charming town, it's nothing compared to how excited he is to spend time with his best friend, Trey.

Taking over the family bookstore in the town he grew up in was all Trey had ever wanted. Until Trevor walked back into his life, proving his childhood crush had never completely faded.

And Trevor's daughter? Well, the adorable girl quickly claims a piece of Trey's heart.

With the help of a little holiday magic, these two men and one very determined little girl may get exactly what they need—a family.

Christmas Falls is a multi-author M/M romance series set in a small town that thrives on enough holiday charm to rival any

Hallmark movie.

Prologue



Trevor

Every year, for every holiday meal, I hoped it would be different, only to have my dreams dashed. This year, my mom set the tone immediately upon entering the front door, lashing out that we needed to take Holly’s winter boots off as we stepped inside. I’d wanted to grab my little girl’s hand, turn around, and head back to the car, but these were my parents, and for better or worse, they were the only grandparents my daughter had.

“So, Mom. Why don’t we do something different next year?”

She lifted her head, her gaze snagging on my daughter. “Holly, elbows off the table.”

“Okay,” my daughter said cheerfully.

I bit back my own harsh retort for my mom since her hard tone hadn’t affected my three-year-old. Three, for fuck’s sake. Yes,

she needed to have good table manners, and I planned to guide her properly as she grew up, but did it have to be that big a deal all the time? It was Christmas, after all.

“So, Mom. Can we shake things up next year?” I persisted.

With her hand raised to take a bite, she stopped and rolled her eyes at me. “Why on earth would we change things? This is our tradition.”

Looking around the dining room at the one shelf done up for the holiday—two gold angels blowing trumpets on either side of a glass bowl full of red and gold ball ornaments, with garland strung with lights woven across the front—I admitted to myself that they were indeed tasteful and elegant. Sort of like you’d expect to see as a display in a department store to get ideas of why you should buy certain decorations. Just like when I was a child, there was nothing festive or fun. Even my parents’ Christmas tree had been set up by a designer and looked like it came straight out of a showroom. How in the world had my mother managed to live in Christmas Falls for all those years and still turned out so...blah?

“Holly, if you want apple pie for dessert, you have to eat all of the food on your plate.”

Holly side-eyed me from under her lashes, hiding her horror the best a three-year-old knew how. I’d told my parents at Thanksgiving that she didn’t like cooked fruit. But alas, my mother had apple pie for dessert because it was my father’s favorite. I guessed at least she had the ability to show some consideration for someone else since she’d always done her

best to accommodate my father. To hell with everyone else, though.

My mom clanked her fork down on her plate—the closest she'd come to slamming it. “Why is she looking at you like that, Trevor?”

I sighed. “She doesn't really like pie,” I said, going for the easiest answer.

“Well, that's what we're having for dessert.”

“I know, so I brought sugar cookies.”

Holly's green eyes sparkled at me with happiness, then she went back to picking at her asparagus. Luckily, I'd intervened before my mom made Holly's plate. She would've given her too much food, and not enough of the things Holly liked versus the things I knew she hated. And my parents were nothing if not strict about finishing what you were given.

“So, son, what were you thinking?” my dad asked gruffly.

My father was an interesting man. He'd never been around a whole lot. His life was aall about his work. At the same time, he'd been kind to me as a child, and even better to Holly now. Compared to my mother's superior, sometimes contemptuous, attitude, it was a nice change. “I thought maybe we could go to Christmas Falls for the season. Maybe rent a few rooms at The Gingerbread Cottage.”

“Why on earth would we do that?” my mother asked sharply.

“I have no desire to ever visit that town again.”

My father chuckled, smiling at my mother affectionately. “Edith, Christmas Falls gave us a good life and paid for this fancy house.”

Mom sniffed disdainfully. “All your years of hard work earned you this job. You would have gotten the experience somewhere, no matter what.”

It hurt something deep inside that my mother held so much contempt for the place I loved most in the world. It had been ten years since we moved away from the quaint town, but my memories hadn’t dimmed in that time.

My father shrugged his shoulders. “While I disagree with your mother about the town itself, Christmas Falls isn’t the ideal place for the holidays. Way too busy. Maybe we can look into going on a cruise. How does that sound, Edith? You’ve been wanting to do something like that.”

A hint of a smile played across my mother’s lips. “I wouldn’t be opposed to that. We’d have to look into it sooner rather than later so Trevor would have time to save up for it.”

Internally, I rolled my eyes. Of course she’d think I couldn’t afford it. She’d never bothered to hide her disdain for my work, even though I turned a pretty hefty profit. “It wasn’t exactly what I was thinking. I wanted to do something fun for Holly.”

“Yes, Holly. We would need to make sure they offer childcare for her.”

Now she was pushing it. Christmas or not, these snide comments were why we didn't have Sunday dinners or even necessarily see my parents every month. "Mom."

"Really, Trevor. You're twenty-five-years old. I think it's high time you address me as Edith." Her gaze slid to my beautiful daughter. "And I'm much too young to be a grandmother, don't you think?"

I gaped at her. Was she for real? Turning to my dad, I caught his narrowed eyes. I watched as he cleared his face of all emotion. I never knew how much he agreed with my mother or not because this mask was all I'd known from him every time my mom suggested or did something outrageously mean. In my heart of hearts, I didn't believe she was a cruel woman, but she wasn't emotional, either.

"Whatever you want, Edith," I said with a little venom. There was no point in arguing with her since my dad wasn't going to back me up.

"You should go," Dad said.

Mom gaped, and I sat back, looking at my father curiously. "What?" we both asked in unison.

My father nodded thoughtfully. "Trevor, you should take Holly to Christmas Falls for the holidays next year. Edith, I'll take you on that cruise."

Mom shook her head. "No, the holidays are for family. Trevor and Holly should just come with us."

Dad shrugged his shoulders. “Why? We can celebrate before or after. There’s no reason for Holly to miss out on all the things Trevor lived for as a kid.” His gaze flicked to Holly and softened. “She’ll be four next year, and I think she’ll love it. Remember the sleigh rides when you were young, Trevor?”

“Of course. That’s one of many things I want Holly to experience.”

Dad nodded. “Good. Then it settled. Edith, you can start browsing for cruises, and Trevor will make plans for them. See, everyone’s happy.”

My mom glared at her plate, but Dad winked at me. I guessed my old man had my back more than I thought. Should I really do as he suggested? It would mean pissing off my mom, but it would also mean tons of fun for my daughter and a chance to reconnect with my best friend. Trey, who we all called T to keep from getting confused with our double Tre names, and I hadn’t seen each other since I moved away at fifteen. We’d stayed in contact for a while, but eventually, we’d become nothing more than social media friends. He knew nothing about my life now—including Holly—since I didn’t post personal details of my life online. But I’d been able to glimpse all of his family holidays, his sister getting married, him taking over the family bookstore, and all of the other moments of his life that he’d shared.

The main one being the first time he’d posted himself with a boyfriend. He’d never done a big coming-out post or anything, but the different girlfriends and boyfriends he’d posted

through the years were a pretty big clue that he was bisexual, which meant I felt safe revealing to my oldest and dearest friend that I was gay. Something that I hadn't been sure how to do when I'd first realized myself. What would it be like to reconnect now as adults? Grown men with professions, responsibilities, and, in my case, a child? I didn't know, but an excited buzz filled my body.

Holly looked up at me with her big green eyes, and my decision was made. Come hell or high water, we'd be in Christmas Falls next year for the holidays.

Chapter One



Trey

Ahh. I loved the smell of my bookstore, Season's Readings, which opened in ten minutes. After celebrating Thanksgiving with my family on Thursday and making it through all of the Black Friday insanity, I was geared up and ready to go for another day of holiday shoppers. The bookcases were stocked with this year's top sellers, classics, most sought-after authors, and of course, all of my favorite books from childhood. Not to mention the light-covered garland lining the tops of each bookshelf, the oversized ornaments we'd hung from the ceiling, and the Christmas tree with the miniature books and baubles set up in the corner by the front door.

Since I was a little boy, I knew I wanted to take over the family bookstore. My parents were awesome and hadn't put pressure on me or my sisters that we should keep the business in the family, but it had never felt like a burden to me. Keeping

our legacy alive in Christmas Falls felt like an honor, and I cherished it. When I graduated from college, my father had been a little shocked by how serious I was about becoming part of the family business. My desire to make the bookstore my home away from home, just like it had always been for him, had given him the peace he'd needed to retire and leave me to it. I'd been thrilled. And happier still by the fact that my parents were still very present, showing up here and there and helping me out with special events.

Having a few last moments to pull myself together, I leaned my elbows on the counter and opened my *Instagram*. Several of my friends had stayed in Christmas Falls like I had, but for the most part, they'd left, seeking bigger and better. I knew our frenzied holiday community wasn't for everyone, but I loved it. Scrolling through, I smiled at all of the memories my friends were making with their families. That was probably the thing I loved most about social media, the fact that people might be gone, but seeing their pictures and reading their posts, gave me the opportunity to keep up with them.

Scrolling down, I came across my old friend Trevor's newest colored illustration. I wasn't sure if the things he posted were places he'd been before or things he'd seen in photographs, but I was thrilled when I realized this one was the front of my bookstore. Peering closely, I realized it wasn't exactly like the old place he knew from his childhood, but his drawing had all of the changes I'd made to the front of the place after taking over—like a new sign for Season's Readings. Had he copied

that from a picture I'd posted online? Was he missing Christmas Falls during this holiday season?

Trevor moving away had been one of the lowest points of my life. We'd been best friends from as far back as I could remember, meeting when we were still in preschool. We'd quickly become inseparable, doing everything together. My family and our friends had nicknamed us everything from the terrific twosome to double trouble to the terrifying two. It was like having a twin. Him moving away had been like losing a limb.

At the same time, his move had spared me the anguish my young fifteen-year-old heart had been experiencing when I'd realized that I'd fallen in love with my best friend. Well, puppy love, at any rate. Trevor had been the reason that I'd known beyond a shadow of a doubt that I didn't *only* like girls. When he'd walked into a room, my pulse had sped up, and my heart raced like I'd just completed a marathon. Even a text message from him had the ability to make me giddy. He'd also been who I'd guiltily fantasized about during the endless showers in my youth. Admitting to him I was bisexual had been the most confusing and anxiety-inducing thought I'd had for the last six months before we'd found out his father had taken another job outside of Christmas Falls. And then it was over. He was just...gone, and I'd never had the guts to tell him.

Shaking myself out of my thoughts, I decided that once Season's Readings closed for the day, I would DM him and find out how he was doing. I'd thought about doing it

countless times over the last five years—once we'd finally fallen completely out of touch—but I'd been scared. It had seemed to occur right around the same time I posted a picture of myself with my then boyfriend. We'd had a gay friend back in middle school, so I didn't think Trevor was homophobic, but maybe finding out I liked men, too, had been too much when he'd remembered back on our many sleepovers at my house.

Hell, he'd practically lived with us on the weekends. My sisters had considered him another little brother, and my parents had treated him like their son. But seeing this picture, maybe I'd over-thought it. Maybe he still thought of me. Maybe he'd missed our friendship as badly as I did. Maybe his life had just gotten busy. Who knew? He'd been in his sophomore year of college when the pictures of his real life had suddenly stopped, and all of his posts had suddenly become his artwork.

"You ready to open, boss?" my employee, Eddie, asked as he came from the back of the store in red pants with a white blouse, a red vest hanging from his fingers in one hand, and a red pointy hat with a big white fluff ball at the tip clutched in the other.

Snorting, I chuckled. "I sure do appreciate that you're willing to dress up for the kids for storytime."

He grinned big and bright. "Are you kidding? I love doing this. Don't forget, I'm a theater major. This feels like you doing me a favor."

“Believe me, Eddie, this is one-hundred percent a blessing for me.”

For a second, my thoughts went back to Trevor again. All the times my parents had made us dress up as elves for storytime during the holiday season. My mom would purchase us new outfits every year, and then she'd make us help the children find spots to sit. We'd distribute cookies or whatever fun treat she'd made for them, and oftentimes, we ended up with a little one in our laps while they listened to my father read to them. From the ages of ten to fourteen, that had been our lives when the store hosted special things for the kids, and it had been mortifying as young boys. When Trevor wasn't there to do it with me the year we'd turned fifteen, my mother had let me off the hook seeing how sad I was at the prospect of doing it without him. I'd dressed up for the kids who came into the bookstore since then, but it had never been the same as doing it with my best friend.

“Are you okay, T? You seem a little off this morning,” Eddie said.

And there it was again, another reminder of Trevor. My family had started calling me T back in the day because my sister had complained about getting mixed up having to say Trey and Trevor. His mom had been a little uptight, so nicknaming him had seemed like a bad idea. I, on the other hand, as a little kid had thought it made me special. Most people around Christmas Falls called me Trey, but for my family, close friends, and the employees who'd picked it up from my parents, I was T. With my resolve to reach out to Trevor

strengthened, I said, “No, I’m fine. Just reminiscing a little bit.”

“Should I unlock the door?” he asked.

Smacking my hands together. I rubbed them briskly. “Yep, let’s do it.”

The couple of hours before our eleven AM storytime passed quickly. Before I knew it, all of my employees were busy helping customers, and Eddie was stepping away from the counter to finish putting his costume on, including small circles of blush on his cheeks to complete the look. Children were already milling in the small carpeted area that we had set up for them to hang out while their parents monitored them from around the perimeter, waiting to be freed for thirty minutes while their kids hung out with the character of the week. When the door jangled with holiday bells announcing another customer, I smiled one last time at the person who I’d just checked out, and I looked over to welcome the newcomer.

The greeting died on my lips at the sight of the black-haired, six-foot man standing hesitantly in the doorway with a small smile on his face. “Trevor?” I whispered.

Lifting one hand in greeting, he grinned shyly. “Hey.”

Holy shit, it was him. I’d know that shy lift to his lips anywhere. Unlike the boy who’d moved away, Trevor was no longer my height and gangly but much taller than me and filled out in all the right places. If I was meeting him for the first time out somewhere, he’d definitely be a man who I’d

want to get to know better. But no, wait, this man had been my best friend, my shadow, and he was here. Really here.

Moving swiftly, I exited the back of the counter toward him. Right before throwing my arms around him and hugging the stuffing out of him, I hesitated. I still didn't know if our lack of communication these last several years was due to him finding out my truth. He removed all my worries by taking the remaining steps between us and pulling me into his arms, squeezing me tightly.

"It's so good to see you in person," he whispered into my ear.

An overwhelming desire to press against him and hold him a bit tighter for a smidge longer was real. I fit so perfectly in his arms, with my head resting naturally against his chest. Not wanting to embarrass myself or make it awkward for him, I stepped back and gripped his biceps. "I can't believe you're really here."

He reached up, rubbing the back of his neck. "They say there's nowhere like home for the holidays, right?"

I grinned. "That's true, but it's even better with the people you love."

Oh, Jesus, was that a weird thing to say after all this time? I felt my cheeks heat, but we had loved each other, right? We'd been brothers. He didn't know that my feelings for him had evolved into more at one time, and it wasn't like I felt that way now. Hell, I hadn't seen him in years. That didn't stop the way my heart stopped and skipped a beat when he flushed with pleasure. Holy hell, he'd really grown up so nicely.

“Daddy, is this the place for storytime?” a little girl asked.

My gaze followed Trevor’s hand as he reached down and laid it against the back of a redheaded little girl who stood clutching his thigh. “It sure is, Holly-berry.” Then he stared at me with concern.

It took me a moment to catch up to the fact that she was talking to Trevor. She’d called Trevor *Daddy*. My best friend was a father? Holy shit. Had he gotten married? A quick glance at his left hand said that if he did, he didn’t wear a ring.

“Surprise,” he said, sounding as nervous as he did before his first book report presentation in second grade. “She’s a girl.”

I hated seeing him so uncertain. Of anyone I knew, Trevor had been born to be a parent. “No way. Dude, congratulations.”

“Daddy, is that your friend you told me about? Is that Mr. Trey?”

The gentlest smile I’d ever seen graced his handsome face as Trevor nodded down to his daughter. “Yep, that’s him. That’s my best friend in the whole world.”

She tilted her head, big green eyes studying me. “I going to preschool like you and Daddy did. I going to make my best friend there, too,” she stated, voice ringing with determination.

Still reeling from the discovery that Trevor had a daughter, I made myself focus. I’d been raised to treat children like they were the most important people in the room. Dad had always said that we had an opportunity to turn the next generation into life-long readers. Since the precious little girl was talking to

me, I dropped to my haunches so we were on the same level.
“Oh yeah?”

She nodded her head up and down like a bobblehead. “Yep. After Christmas, I get to go to school all day long.” Her head tilted way up toward her father. “Right, Daddy?”

Trevor smoothed his fingers through the silky hair on the top of her head. “That’s right, Holly-berry. You’re going to make so many new friends.”

“Are you going to formally introduce us?” I asked from my spot in front of the adorable little girl.

Before he could respond, a female voice I knew well floated from the interior of the store. “Has anyone seen my son?”

I winked at Trevor’s daughter, whispering, “Uh-oh. She’s looking for me.” She giggled as I stood up. “I’m right here, Mom.”

“Oh, good. I know storytime is about to start, so I brought some treats for the kids.” She held up a Christmas bag that probably contained some sweet treats.

Smiling indulgently that she brought something special for the kids after I told her she didn’t have to, I watched in amusement as she caught sight of Holly and gave her that special grandmotherly smile she used on every child she met. My mom had loved being a mother, and she was dying to be a grandmother, but so far, my sisters and I hadn’t accommodated her, which really peeved her off.

“Well, hello, honey. I’ve never met you before. Are you visiting Christmas Falls?”

Holly shook her head from side to side. “Nope. Me and my daddy just moved here.” She pointed at me. “That’s his best friend, and we here for storytime.” Again, her gaze moved back up to her father. “Right, Daddy?”

Moved here? Had Trevor really returned home? When?

Glancing up at the face attached to the thigh Holly was clinging to, my mom shrieked, “Trevor!” Thrusting the bag in her hand at me, she threw her arms around his waist. “Thank you, Jesus, my prodigal son has returned.”

Trevor’s eyes glistened as he bent practically in half, enfolding my mom in an embrace. With wide eyes, Holly’s gaze moved to me. “I confused. Does my daddy have two mommies now?”

Laughing, I dropped back down. “No, my mommy has always really loved your daddy, so she’s kind of pretending he’s her son like I’m her son.”

Holly scrunched her little nose, which might have been the cutest thing I’d ever seen with all of the freckles on it. “But he’s still my daddy, right?”

Mom whirled around and dropped down to the floor, moving with an ease and grace that resembled a much younger woman. “Of course he is, sweetheart. And now I’m your Mimi.” I coughed once into my fist, reminding my mom of her

manners, and she tilted her head up toward Trevor, just like his daughter had done. “If that’s okay with your dad, that is.”

“Is it, Daddy? I’ve never had a Mimi before. Justin at daycares Mimi used to pick him up sometimes, but I only have an Edith.”

An Edith? Did that mean Trevor’s mom was making her first and only grandchild call her by her first name? A frown pulled at the corners of Mom’s mouth, but she forced a smile. “Well, then, you really must call me Mimi. Okay, Trevor?”

He blinked hard, and unless I was mistaken, there was a fresh sheen of moisture covering his deep brown, almost black, irises. He cleared his throat, then nodded. “Sure, Miss Jean. That sounds...really nice.”

“Well, that’s settled. What do you think, young lady?”

The little one chewed her bottom lip, then nodded. “Mimi it is.”

Instead of standing up, Mom and I stayed squatted, side-by-side, right inside the doorway of the bookstore. Mom smiled so sweetly at Holly that my teeth ached. “So I’m Mimi, but what’s your name?”

Showing the first signs of shyness, the little girl tilted her head forward, letting her long bangs fall to cover half her face. “I Holly.”

“Holly, huh?” Mom asked, flicking a glance up at Trevor.

With his composure back in place, he nodded. “Holly, otherwise known as Holly-berry.”

“Only my daddy can call me that, though,” Holly said in a non-sense tone. This kid was too cute.

“Thank you for telling me, Holly. So I’m Mimi, and this is my son, Trey, but we call him T.” Mom leaned her head onto my shoulder.

Holly leveled Mom with the sternest expression I’d ever seen on a mini-human. “I already know Mr. Trey. He’s my daddy’s best friend, but no one calls him Mr. T, do they? Daddy didn’t tell me.”

The adults exchanged glances, holding in our laughter. And Trevor grimaced. “Well, Holly-berry. Trey is his name, and I hadn’t seen him in a long, long time, so I didn’t know whether his family still called him T or not.”

The since I haven’t been around was implied, but I’d been T for over ten years by the time he’d left. It had one-hundred percent stuck. Plus, I thought maybe we all liked that slight reminder of the time when Trevor had been part of our lives.

“Mr. T, huh?” I asked Holly. She nodded, and I considered it. A big bald Black man blinged out in gold chains, I was not, but he’d been a badass in that old TV show, *The A-Team*. That was before Holly’s time; hell, it was before mine, but Mr. T sounded like a good compromise to me. “That’ll work, Holly. It can be your special name for me.” Curious, I asked, “And how old are you?”

“I four,” she said proudly.

“Four-years-old? Well, then, you’re a big girl. How would you like to leave your daddy here to talk about silly grown-up stuff with T, and we’ll go listen to Eddie the elf read about the *Elf On The Shelf*? Does that sound fun? And then tonight, you and your daddy will come over for dinner.”

Holly looked up at her daddy, seeking an answer I wasn’t sure she’d get. Trevor looked torn between wanting to let her go or protecting her and staying by her side, which was fair since she didn’t know us. But he did, and I could see his inner-child wanting to give her time to spend with my mom like he’d enjoyed doing. His mom hadn’t been awful or anything, but she hadn’t been a mommy-mom like mine.

Wanting to remove that uncomfortable expression from Trevor’s face, I said, “You can always go with Mimi, but if you want your daddy, we’ll be at the end of that counter.” I pointed to the far side where we had no registers. We used that space to consult with customers, or I’d stand while I compiled inventory and worked on other things while still being upfront and available to my employees. “While you’re at storytime, we’ll be catching up.”

“Unless you want Daddy to sit with you, too,” Mom offered. I had a feeling whether Trevor went or not, my mom would be sitting with this little girl.

The giggles of children floated through the bookstore from the kid’s section, and Holly sucked on her lower lip. Trevor opened his mouth, more than likely to eliminate his daughter’s worries by offering to go with her when Holly gave a jerky

nod of her head. “I’ll go with Mimi. But he’ll stay right there?” She gestured at the counter where I’d promised he’d be.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

She smiled a little hesitantly. “Okay, I go since you said my daddy would be where I can find him.”

Well, how cool was that? Trevor’s little one was taking my word for it. He wouldn’t even be allowed to walk away to use the bathroom now. I’d make sure of it. Having Holly’s trust without having really done anything to earn it felt curiously special, and I didn’t want to break it right off the bat. “I think you’ll have a blast. Eddie the elf is a lot of fun.”

“Eddie the elf,” she said, snickering. Then repeated it and covered her face with both hands while she giggled.

“On that note, we’re off.” Mom stood and held one hand out for her bag of treats and the other out to Holly.

Holly moved slowly, but eventually she left the safety of her dad’s leg and clung to my mom. They’d only taken a couple of steps when she raced back to Trevor, and he bent down, swooping her up. She squeezed his neck so hard I worried whether he was able to breathe, but then she leaned back in his arms and cupped his cheeks between her little hands. “Will you be alright, Daddy?”

“I will Holly-berry. Are you sure you don’t need me to come with you and”—he attempted biting back his pleased grin —“Mimi?”

She peered at my mom from under her eyelashes, then shook her head. “No. I’ll be fine with Mimi.” Then she leaned into her dad and gave a four-year-old’s attempt at a whisper. “Besides, she smells like chocolate and cookies. I want to see what treats she brought.”

The adoring way that Trevor smiled down at his daughter had me catching my breath for the second time since he’d shown up. “Okay, but if you need me, you can come get me, okay?”

She nodded, kicking one little *My Little Pony* sneaker alarmingly close to his family jewels. “Okay.” Then she sort of hopped out of his arms. Trevor must’ve been used to the move because he guided her drop to the floor, depositing her safely on the ground. She grabbed my mom’s hand again but turned around to address her father one last time. “Don’t worry about me, Daddy. You can go have fun and play with Mr. T.”

I snorted internally. I’d like to go have some fun playing with her daddy. *Wait. Bad, Trey.* My teenage crushing needed to stay dead and buried. For all I knew, Trevor was a married straight man. So what if his left ring finger was bare of any kind of jewelry. He had a kid, for fuck’s sake. But was there really anything wrong with finding your childhood best friend extremely desirable? Jesus, we hadn’t even had a real conversation yet, and I was ready to...what? Jump him? I really needed to get a grip.

Chapter Two



Trevor

Out of the mouth of babes. My sweet innocent little daughter didn't have any idea just how much I'd love to play some adult-type games with my old friend. He'd looked shocked to see me, and it was more than just my presence here. Unlike him, who I'd been watching grow up and blossom online, he hadn't seen a picture of me in five years. I'd been a bit of a late bloomer, gangly and awkward like a baby giraffe until I turned twenty-one. By then, it had been a long time since I'd posted anything but my artwork.

I stared in the direction that Ms. Jean and Holly had gone. "Do you think your mom will be okay with her?"

T waved my question away. "They'll be fine. The real question is, will you be okay with Holly out of sight?"

Rubbing the back of my neck, I asked, "That obvious, huh?"

He nodded. “Why don’t you meet me down at the end of the counter? We can catch up.”

That didn’t sound near as fun as Holly’s idea for us to go play, but it wasn’t like that was really an option anyway. We hadn’t exchanged a text in over six years or had a real conversation. We were virtually strangers. I was the one who’d given up any type of social life to be Holly’s father, while Trey had been here, growing his family business, dating, and living his best life. Not that I regretted any of the decisions I’d made or even one minute of time with my daughter instead of hanging out and having sexy-fun, but it would be nice to have some quality adult time. Some kind of physical contact, maybe even a little snuggling.

T went back behind the counter, stopping to speak with the two women working the cash registers, then he spoke with a customer while I walked over and waited patiently for him at the end. It was so weird standing here, getting my first glimpse of him as the actual bookstore owner. My mind traveled back in time to all the years that we’d come in here after school, riding our bikes up to see if his dad needed help so that we could make a little spending money. How things changed with time and age.

“Sorry,” he said when he finally made his way over to me.

“No problem. I’m the one intruding at your place of business.”

Again, he waved me off. “Well, that’s the good thing about being the owner. I can fuck-off whenever I want, especially to catch up with my oldest friend.” He gave me a cheesy grin.

Considering how bustling the store was, the ease with which T's employees spoke with him, and all of the greetings customers sent his way, I had a feeling he was all bluster and didn't take very many breaks.

"If you say so. Doesn't look like you've been fucking around too much," I said, lifting my arms to encompass the festive decorations both inside and out that had obviously been well planned and cost a pretty penny.

T smirked. "You know I've always loved decorating this place for the holidays."

"I do. It's good to see you running it. From the things you post online and now being here, it appears that you really took what your father had done and multiplied it."

He shrugged a little sheepishly. "Thanks. I really try."

We were both silent for a second. That awkward pause when two friends haven't seen each other in years. I'd been worried about this. Maybe the decision to move to Christmas Falls had been a little presumptuous. Maybe I should've brought Holly for a visit before I made such a big life-altering decision. What if T didn't have room in his life for me and my child? Not that I expected him to drop everything for me. Grown adults didn't rearrange their lives around their friends like they had as children, but it would be nice to spend some time getting to know him again.

"So how long are you here?" T asked. "Are you really moving home?"

Startled, I blinked. “We moved here yesterday. Actually, all of our belongings should arrive on Monday.”

T’s eyes practically bugged out of his head. “How did that happen? Why didn’t you say something? If you’d let me know you were coming, I could have helped yesterday.”

Even though I hadn’t been sure of our reception, I’d known that he was the kind of guy to drop everything to help a friend, if possible. I’d never have done that to him on Black Friday. “Uh. Well, it’s kind of a long story.”

T placed his elbow on the counter, then leaned over, cupping his cheek in the palm of his hand. “They’ll be in storytime for at least half an hour. I’ve got time to listen if you’re willing to share.”

“Geez, how did I forget that you’re so nosy?”

T arched an eyebrow. “I think the word you’re looking for is inquisitive. Now spill.”

Man, it felt good to be here. To have someone I’d once known so well care about my life. Ask real questions out of more than politeness. Hell, the way Ms. Jean had taken Holly right in, asking her to call her Mimi, almost made me blubber like a baby. Edith would’ve never done that. These were the reasons that I’d come back to Christmas Falls.

“So last year at Christmas dinner, I suggested we spend the holiday this year in Christmas Falls. I wanted to rent a couple of rooms at The Gingerbread Cottage.”

“Yeah, that would’ve been cool, but it’s a far cry from a visit to moving back here.”

“I know, right? My father had suggested that Holly and I come, just the two of us for the holidays since my mom wasn’t really into the idea.”

T gave me a knowing look. Even as children, we’d known that my mother didn’t love Christmas Falls. She’d never gone out of her way to make friends with anybody in the community, not even joining the PTA or something else where she would have met some people and possibly found a reason to get more involved. “Sorry about that, man.”

I shrugged. “It is what it is. You know how Edith is.”

“You’re calling your mom Edith now?”

“That’s another conversation that happened last year at Christmas dinner, but I’ll tell you about that another time. Let’s concentrate on the good stuff.” I hated even thinking about how my request for a fun holiday for Holly had gone. My mother really was unbelievable sometimes. We’d made the long drive here yesterday because I’d wanted to spend Thanksgiving with my parents, but it had been miserable. My mom was pissed and pouty, and my dad looked torn between wanting to dote on her or Holly. I should’ve left earlier instead of putting us all through that torment.

“If by good stuff, you mean that you really are back in town to stay, then hell yeah, let me hear it.”

His genuine enthusiasm for having me back in town filled my heart with something I hadn't realized I needed. It felt so good to know that someone wanted me around, someone who I knew had always cared about me. "I don't know. One minute I'm suggesting that we bring Holly here to visit, and the next thing you know, I'm scouring websites looking for a house here."

He popped up. "No way. Why? Was your life so bad?"

"No, but it's never been as good as it was when I lived here. I don't know. Maybe I'm picturing my life here through rose-colored glasses. That's possible, but I wanted Holly to have the childhood that we had, and she wasn't going to get that where we were. I didn't really have a whole ton of friends that I was close to, and I rarely saw my folks anymore, so I decided why not."

"Why not?" T laughed. "Please tell me you don't have to find a job now."

"Nope, between freelance illustrations and dabbling in some other stuff, I do just fine." Something that my mother hadn't ever recognized since she didn't consider art a viable career.

"And Holly's mom? Is she here, too?" he asked.

Remembering Annie always brought a pang to my heart, and I wasn't ready to tell T about her yet. Soon, but not today. "Her mother passed away two-and-a-half-years ago."

T reached out and set his hand on top of mine. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks. It was unexpected."

Like he always had, T sensed my discomfort and changed the subject. “So, did you buy a house here or are you renting?”

I chuckled. “T, have you looked at the rental opportunities in this area lately? It seems like every one is being used as an *Airbnb* for vacationers. Nope, I went ahead and bought a four-bedroom ranch not too far from your parents’ house.”

T snickered. “You better not let my mom find out you’re that close. She’ll be stealing Holly away from you at every opportunity.”

“She’s ready to be a grandmother, huh?”

He rolled his eyes. “How’d you know?”

“I literally can’t picture your mother without a child to dote on.”

“Isn’t that the truth? Her either. But now you’ve come and saved the day. Thank you, my friend. I can’t wait to let my sisters know that the prodigal son has returned.”

We both snickered remembering his mother’s greeting to me. The laughter faded, and T smiled softly. “Seriously, it’s so good to have you home. We have to spend time together and catch up.”

“Well, apparently, I’m having dinner at your parents’ house. Will you be there?”

He stuck his fist out for me to pound. “I will be now.”

Not wanting our conversation to end, but also reluctant to continue talking about myself, I steered the conversation

toward his sisters. “So how are Melissa and Larissa doing?”

“They’re great. Melissa married her college sweetheart, Declan. He’s a great guy. We all like him a lot.”

“And they haven’t given your mom any grandbabies yet?”

T barked out a laugh, startling the nearby customers. He held up a hand to them, apologizing, then said to me, “No. And unless things change, I’m not sure they ever will. They met in nursing school and both work in the hospital now on different floors. If those two aren’t working, they’re road-tripping. After they hit every state in the U.S., they plan on traveling the world.”

T’s older sister had always wanted to travel, so it was cool she’d matched with someone with the same interest. That was what I wanted. A perfect match. In my case, that would be someone who’d love Holly and would want to create a home with us. “That’s great. And Larissa?”

“Mom swears the baby of the family is why she has to dye her hair. She’s in her senior year of college for teaching, and she’s enjoying every minute. We’re all proud of her, and she’ll make a fabulous teacher, but she parties a little too hard for my parents. That, and she studied out of the country her first semester of junior year, then turned around and did it again the first semester of this year. She’ll be home right in time for Christmas, and Mom can’t wait. It gives her anxiety having her so far away.”

An image of my little red-haired girl all grown up and asking to study abroad popped into my head, and I felt a phantom

pain in my chest. What would that be like? I wasn't ready for the day that she wasn't within a ten-minute car ride.

T snickered. "I know where your head just went. It must be weird being responsible for another person. Having them totally reliant on you."

He had no idea. "It's the greatest, yet hardest thing I've ever done."

His expression softened. "I look forward to seeing you in action."

Chapter Three



Trevor

Ms. Jean opened the door with a big smile on her face. “Holly, you’re here.”

The deep chuckle I remembered from childhood, Ms. Jean’s husband, Mr. Patrick, sounded from behind her. “I’m assuming Trevor is here as well, sweetheart.”

Ms. Jean snorted. “Of course he is, but my son knows I’m happy he’s here, don’t you, honey?” She ushered us in. “Come in, come in. Don’t stand out in the cold.”

Holly clutched my hand tighter. She’d had fun listening to Eddie the elf read the story today, even making it all the way until the end. The minute we got home, she’d peppered me with a thousand and one questions about her new Mimi and what it meant to have a Mimi. I’d answered easily. Ms. Jean had always been the epitome of a mother to me, so there was

no doubt in my mind that she'd be the sweet, soft, maternal presence my daughter needed. The type to spoil and indulge a little girl who she'd claimed as her grandchild upon meeting her. Now, though, Holly's nerves were back with full force as she stepped into a home she'd never been before.

Ms. Jean dropped to her knees and started helping Holly remove her winter coat and boots. "Come on, sweet girl, let's get this cold stuff off of you, and you can come into the living room and warm up by the fire." And this was what I'd wanted for my kid. Someone to fuss over her like she was important and not a nuisance. Someone besides me.

Mr. Patrick stood over his wife with his arms crossed over his chest, shaking his head with fond amusement. "Geez, Jean, give the child a break. She looks scared to death."

Ms. Jean clucked her tongue. "If she's scared of anyone, it's you, old man. Holly and I became great friends earlier today."

Mr. Patrick, who'd been that present father-figure in my life when I was young, stepped around his wife with his hand extended. "Trevor. I was delighted to hear that our prodigal son has returned." He winked, then tugged my hand to bring me in for a hug. Goodness, these people. I found myself fighting tears for the millionth time today. I'd missed this family so much. It had been so cool wandering around town, showing my daughter all of the cool holiday displays in a place bursting with festivity, but this...these people were what I'd really felt deprived of.

Mr. Patrick let me go, then tilted his head down toward my daughter. “You want to introduce us, son?”

“Holly-berry, this is Mr. Patrick, Ms. Jean’s husband and T’s dad.”

Ms. Jean snorted. “Alright, young man. That’s enough of that Ms. Jean and Mr. Patrick stuff. You’re an adult now. You can call us Jean and Patrick.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Or you can call us Mom and Dad like our other kids do.”

Patrick huffed. “Can you please let me meet this little princess before you start running roughshod over the boy?” Holly giggled, and he hunched down, holding out a hand to her. “Pleased to meet you, Holly. I want you to know that I was already informed that the name Holly-berry is reserved for your father.”

She placed her little palm on his, and he tapped the top of her hand with his other one. “Nice to meet you.” She stopped and looked up at Jean. “What do I call him, Mimi?”

Patrick chuckled. “Oh, she really did tell you to call her Mimi, huh? Well, you can call me Patrick or you can call me Papa. It’s your choice, sweetheart.”

T stuck his head from around the side of the entryway into the kitchen. “How about you let them all the way into the house? And, Mom, I see you took Holly’s outerwear, but what about poor Trevor?”

Jean clucked her tongue for a second time. A move I remembered from when we were kids and working her last

nerve. “He grew up here. He knows where the coat closet is and where the shoes go, same as you. It’s not like this is his first time here, unlike my sweet girl.”

Apparently, Holly’s nervousness was gone. She slipped her hand into Jean’s on her own and said, “You have so many Christmas decorations. It’s like the North Pole.”

She was right. Glancing around, I noticed a few newer decorations—which made sense since I hadn’t been here in ten years—but it still had the same feel. The banister was wrapped with colored-light strung garland with different colored balls hanging from it. A runner with gingerbread men and toy soldiers and trees ran up the steps. In the center, before the stairs turned at a ninety-degree angle, there was a green four-foot Christmas tree, strung with white and red twinkling lights, with ornaments shaped like old-fashioned red and white candies, and the red and white striped candy canes. Completing the look was a white bow with little red and white candy canes all over it.

The front hall closet had bells hanging from the center hook to ring merrily every time it was opened, and the big mirror next to it had been wrapped in shiny green paper with a huge gold bow in the center. I knew that this was just the beginning, and Holly would discover so much more as she went into the depths of the house.

Jean beamed at her. “Honey, would you mind if I pick you up and take you around to see the house?”

“Okay.” Holly held up her arms.

A little alarmed, scared that Holly would be too heavy for Jean, I started to volunteer to carry her myself. Patrick caught my gaze and gave his head a little shake, then patted Holly gently on the back. “May I come with you ladies, Holly? I’d like to show you my favorite things.”

“Okay,” she said shyly, batting her eyelashes at him like the little flirt she could be when she started warming up to someone.

Patrick tapped his shoulder to mine, whispering, “She’s a little charmer, I see.”

“Oh yeah, you’ve gotta watch her. She knows how to work those lashes.”

Patrick barked out a laugh and followed his wife and my daughter down the hall toward the living room.

T leaned against the door frame, and I drank him in as surreptitiously as possible. He’d grown up to be a damn fine man. It had been harder online to tell that he was much shorter than me than I’d expected. But holy crap, it worked for me. His hair was as dark as mine, with a fashionably tousled look like he’d just crawled out of bed, and enough hair on his face to frame it, and I was here for it. You know, if he wasn’t my best friend. “It’s going to be fun watching your girl dominate my parents.”

A little worried, I debated going after them when T clapped a hand down on my shoulder. “Don’t worry about them. You know my parents adored all of us, but we really didn’t get

away with as much as we thought. My parents are just super clever.”

Thinking back, I realized how right he was. How many times had we thought we were getting our way, only to realize later that his mom had convinced us to do extra chores or check something off her to-do list for her when they’d planned on taking us exactly where we wanted to go anyway. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I just don’t want...” I trailed off, not sure exactly what I was getting at. Holly was an exceptionally sweet little girl, and she really never intended to use her charm for bad, but sometimes...

“I’m not sure what all you’ve been through with your folks, Trevor, but you’re loved in this house, and your daughter has already stolen my parents’ hearts. Everything will be fine. You’ll see. There’s absolutely nothing that you or Holly could do that would turn us away from you.”

Feeling a little overwhelmed at their reception and T’s sweetness, I gave an exaggerated roll of my eyes. “Listen to you. When did you turn into such a softy?”

Flipping his middle finger up, he said, “Bite me,” then turned and headed back into the kitchen.

The smell of his mother’s chili hit me like a punch to the gut the minute I entered the room. In all the years since I’d moved away, I’d never had a bowl of chili as tasty as his mom’s. T smirked and flipped the light on for the oven. “Come look.”

Bending down, I saw the cast iron skillet, and my heart warmed even further. “Oh my gosh. Did she make her

cornbread, too?”

Turning the light back off, he chuckled. “Yep. Just the way you like it. Must be nice to be so special.” He hip-checked me, then crossed over to sit on one of the stools at the island.

Why hadn’t I let these people know that I was moving back? They could’ve toured some of the houses I’d considered buying or been our first stop after arriving in town. It was a wonder that I’d made the decision to move back if some part of me had been so scared that nobody would care that I was returning. I hopped up onto the chair next to him and said, “So you grilled me earlier, how about you? What’s going on in your world?”

Scrubbing a hand over his face, he moaned. “I love the holidays, but the store is so crazy busy this time of the year that nothing but Season’s Readings is going on from Thanksgiving until New Year’s Day.”

“I remember that from when your dad ran the place. It looked today like you have a good crew working for you.”

He leaned his stool back, hands clutching the edge of the island, just like he’d done when we were young. “Yeah, I got lucky. There’s a couple of the older ladies who used to work for Dad that still come in and help out during this time of year, then I also have a couple of teenagers who work after school and weekends.”

“And the guy dressed up like an elf today? Is he a regular employee?”

“Eddie is a godsend, is what he is. He’s a great kid, such a hard worker. He’s in college, and a theater major, and completely obsessed with the classics. But acting is his first love, so he’s pretty much taken over everything that has to do with bringing children into the store. He’s got some great costumes lined up for storytime this month. Do you plan to bring Holly back?”

Rearing my head back, I widened my eyes in horror. “Like I’d dare to try to keep her away. Eddie the elf made quite the impression.”

T smiled. “Good. That’s the whole point, right? To give the kids a love for the adventures found between the pages of a good book.”

I bit back a smile. Holly knew all about that, but I wasn’t ready to give T all of my secrets quite yet. Everything was going so well, but I’d be disappointed if he wasn’t as excited about my biggest endeavor, so I’d hold onto that a little longer. “That’s true.”

“What else do you have lined up? You said your stuff gets here on Monday? So you hired movers?”

“Dude, yes. Just trying to pack our stuff with Holly *helping* was a little much.” I made air quotes with my fingers. My baby’s *helping* had resulted in her remembering she owned every toy I tried to pack and her taking it back out to play with. Then the stuff I’d tried to throw away, even if it was my stuff, had sent her into a tizzy. I got it. I did. We’d lived in the same place her whole life, and her mom had been there before

her death, too. It was a big change for such a tiny person who didn't really understand what was happening.

I scrubbed a hand down my face. "The whole process ended up being more stressful than I'd anticipated, and that's saying something. You know what a worrywart I've always been. Thankfully, the magic of Christmas Falls worked on her immediately. We pulled into town after dark, and it looked like a *Hallmark* Christmas card or one of the scenes in those *Hallmark* movies your mom and sisters always loved. Everything was all lit up, so I gave her a little tour and let her ooh and ahh over all the yard decorations and stuff. It helped that I'd been telling her stories about us as kids on the drive, so I got to point out the school and other places I'd told her about."

T tipped forward on his stool, almost putting the stool back to rights, before tipping it back again as far as he could go and still hold on. There'd been a time where I'd have happily joined in the fun, but my dad instincts were in high gear, and I wanted to beg him to put all four chair legs back on the ground. "Did you drive her by Dr. Burton's office so she could see where you spent so much time?"

Raising both hands, I flipped him off with both middle fingers. Most of my injuries had come from something he'd wanted to do. I mean, I'd gone in a lot because my mom was an alarmist. Sneeze. Dr. Burton. Runny nose. Time to go see Dr. Burton. Heaven forbid I had a fever. It took all of my father's persuasion to convince her to just check in with Dr. Burton instead of taking me to the emergency room at the hospital.

“Boys.” Jean smacked her hands together. Pointing at me, she said, “Do you want your daughter to see you flipping the bird? How would you explain that?” Then she glared at her son. “And you. How many times do I have to tell you to stop tipping the stool? Do you not remember the time that Trevor went too far back and ended up with a big goose egg on the back of his head? He could’ve given himself a concussion. Do you want Holly to fall, too?” He immediately put the stool down. “I swear, Terrible Twosome, indeed. I always stuck up for your friendship. I’m the one who came up with the Dynamic Duo, but if being together means you’re going to act like children, I’ll separate you like children.”

She hustled over to the oven, opening the door to check the cornbread. “You’re both lucky she wanted to stay in the den with Papa and watch the train go around the Christmas tree. I swear, you boys.”

T and I side-eyed each other, biting back smiles. Damn, it was good to be home.

Chapter Four



Trey

“Daddy, I no understand why we here.”

Trevor picked up his daughter in his arms. “It’s called the Parade of Lights, Holly-berry. You like parades, don’t you? Remember like the one we went to for Halloween?”

She nodded her head but peered cautiously at all of the people hovering around. “It’s so dark out, though.”

“Oh, Holly, look what they have for us,” my mom said. “There will be so many beautiful lights before you know it.”

Through the crowd came volunteers passing out battery-operated candles along with light-up necklaces and bracelets. Holly was too short to see, but people were beginning to glow throughout the crowd.

A lady with a basket of necklaces reached us and smiled down at the little girl. "I have just what you need, sweetheart." She reached into her basket and pulled out a child-sized necklace that slipped easily over Holly's head, making her squeal with glee. "See, perfect. Would you like bracelets for each wrist, too?"

Holly's gaze went to her father. "Can I, Daddy?"

"Of course, Holly-berry. Make sure you say thank you to the nice lady."

"Tank you," she said obediently, grinning from ear to ear as she was fixed up with her accessories. Since Trevor was helping his daughter, I snagged necklaces and candles for him and me.

"Here you go," I said to him.

"Thanks, man. I appreciate it."

"Daddy, what's next?"

My mom clapped her hands together. "This is so much fun. Much better with a little one around." She side-eyed me.

I held up my hands in surrender. "You have her now." I pointed at Holly.

Mom laughed. "I guess I do."

"Would you like to go to the front so you can see easier, Holly? I'll carry you," my dad said.

"Can I, Daddy?" she asked again.

Trevor shook his head, chuckling. "Sounds good to me."

My father swung the little girl up on one hip, and my mom clutched his arm as they made their way through the crowd. Trevor turned to me. “Are you going to come up front with us?”

It was a little embarrassing how much I wanted to stay in his space and bask in his presence. “Yeah, yeah, of course I will.”

His lips tipped up into a slight smile, then he turned and headed in the direction where my parents had disappeared. Not wanting to get separated, I grabbed the back of his coat. He craned his head around and stared at my hand for a second before the smile spread farther on his face, and he turned around and kept going. With that one little look, I felt much better. After our years of separation, he was enjoying spending time in my proximity, as well.

While we were standing in the midst of the excited crowd, it was easy to get caught up in the festive atmosphere. After a whole day at the bookshop during the holiday season, I generally didn’t want to do anything but go home and relax. These six weeks were our bread and butter. Like the other business owners in town, I depended on it. It also wore me out.

From farther down the street, movement with lights appeared. With sparkling eyes, Holly turned toward her father. “It’s almost here, Daddy. It’s the parade.”

“I know, baby girl. Are you so excited?”

“I so excited, Daddy. This is the best parade ever.”

Everyone close to us aww'd. She couldn't even see anything yet, but with the innocence of a child, she was letting go and enjoying the experience. How long had it been since I'd done that? Looking over at Trevor, I was pretty sure it had been since before my partner in crime moved away.

"Let's see. Oh my gosh, Santa's here. Santa's here!" Pointing down the street, Holly giggled like crazy. "He's flying. Mimi, Papa, Daddy, Mr. T. He's flying with his deers."

Sure enough, they'd arranged Santa and his sleigh to look like he was riding low through the air. It was pretty spectacular.

"Mr. T. Mr. T. Do you see Santa?"

Not wanting to disappoint a child, especially one I'd hopefully get to know well, I stepped closer to her and my father. "I do. That's pretty cool, huh?"

"It's the coolest." She went back to watching the other displays driving down the street, and I moved back so that Trevor could be next to them again. People in the crowd were oohing awwing, holding their candles up high, and letting themselves be swept away in the magic of the moment.

"Are you glad you came back?" I asked, leaning into Trevor so that he could hopefully hear me.

He shot me a happy grin. "Judging by my daughter's face, this was the best decision I've ever made."

I remembered how quiet the holidays around Trevor's parents' home had been, which was why he'd spent so much time at my house. Would this move still be worth it for him once the

hoopla of the holidays were over? Once it again became the quiet, yet charming, little town that us locals knew? I was almost too scared to hope. It felt good being here with him, seeing him attend to his daughter, and the joy on his own face each time one of us made a comment about how happy we were he was here. I prayed this was a good move for him, but we really hadn't had enough time to talk, so I didn't know what he'd left behind. I didn't know anything about his life or about Holly's mom or his relationship with her. I knew she'd been gone two-and-a-half-years. How badly did he still miss her?

"It's the Greenwich!" Holly clapped her hands and shrieked louder than she even had for Santa Claus. I almost sputtered seeing that she was referring to the Grinch. How stinking cute was that? I hoped that Trevor was recording the cute way she talked, mispronouncing words and such. I knew she'd grow out of it, but it was adorable.

"Shh. Calm down, Holly-berry. You're going to blow out everyone's eardrums," Trevor said.

"Sorry, Daddy," she said, trying to contain her excitement. "But it's the Greenwich!" Her little body vibrated in my dad's arms. This time, I actually had to stick my finger in my ear and wiggle it around. She sure did like the Grinch.

Speaking of, I slid a little closer to Trevor. He inched back, putting his arm slightly behind me and leaning down. "Are you okay?" he asked.

“Yeah, but I was just wondering, will you scratch a picture of this tonight and post it on your social media tomorrow?”

A faint blush worked its way up his cheeks, and I didn't think it was from the cold weather. Too cute. “How did you know?”

“After seeing your sketch of the bookstore this morning, it occurred to me that you're posting places as you see them. Am I right?”

He shrugged, and the brush of his arm against mine sent a tingle down my spine. What the hell? Maybe it was the cold. Maybe it was me sharing in Holly's excitement, except for me, it was being here with my old friend.

“That's exactly what I sketch. Places that I've taken Holly where we had fun or that we passed by that looked interesting. Like tonight, I want to capture Santa and his reindeer floating through the town.”

Jabbing him in the side, I teased, “Look at what a sentimental softie you grew up to be.”

He rolled his eyes. “Shut up.”

“No, I'm being serious. Pictures are such a great way to remember things, but how much cooler is it that you draw them and color them in yourself? Holly will have those to cherish her whole life, knowing that they were done by her very own father.”

He stared down at me. The light glowing from around his neck illuminated him just enough for this moment to almost feel romantic. All the chatter and the rumble of the vehicles

moving down the road faded away like we were alone. “Yeah, I hope so.”

I’d always known how important his art was to him, so this was starting to feel a little intense. Like I’d guessed something that not too many people realized about him, so I prodded a little. “But how come you never post anything else? There’s nothing personal on your pages. Like, dude, I would’ve thought you’d share the news when Holly was born. That’s so awesome that you’re a father.”

He huffed out a breath. “That’s a long story.”

I arched a brow, and he tugged my winter hat down over my eyes. “Hey,” I said, laughing.

“You’re being nosy again.” He pulled my hat back up, positioning it exactly where it had been.

I wanted to reach up and grab his hands and press them against my cheeks. Geez, I was in rare form today, and I needed to knock it off. Maybe these thoughts were just me wanting to know that he was really here with me again. Why he needed to touch me for that, I didn’t know, but whatever.

Trevor bumped his arm into mine. “Unlike you, who posts all the things.” There was a teasing gleam in his eyes.

“Stop. I don’t put up any more or any less than anyone else. Just the things that are important.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m actually pretty happy that you’re such a chatty Kathy online. I’ve been able to keep up with so much of your life.”

Here was my opportunity. This was my chance to find out if it bothered him when I came out as bisexual. I didn't know why it bothered me not knowing how he felt about it. I'd been out and proud for years, and the people in my life who mattered had all been accepting from the beginning. But this was Trevor, and no matter how long we'd been separated, I'd always valued what he thought. If I could do things over, I'd have told him my truth before he left, leaving out the fact that he was the reason I knew I liked men, too.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, leaning closer into my space.

Shaking my head, I avoided his gaze. “Nothing.”

“Come on, T. It's something.”

“Did it bother you when I shared my first picture with a boyfriend? Like, were you shocked or something?”

T threw his head back with laughter.

“What?” I asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “Why are you laughing?”

When he got himself under control, he smiled at me softly. “T, by the time we were thirteen or fourteen, I figured out that your eyes lingered on boys as much as girls.”

Standing up straighter, I glared at him. “No way, you didn't notice that.”

He bopped me on the nose. “Yes, I did. I'm an artist. Plus, remember, of the two of us, I was always the quiet one, people-watching. I saw a lot of things other people didn't.”

My heart raced. Had he noticed how much my eyes had lingered on him? No, surely he would have said something. Not sure I wanted to discuss this further right now. At least not with all these people around us who might overhear. I said, “So tell me about some of the places you’ve taken Holly.”

And so he did. With people laughing and talking and watching the parade around us, Trevor and I huddled close, and he told me about some of the places they’d been, and why he’d chosen to memorialize different locations with his art. At the heart of it, it always had something to do with his daughter. He’d been a sensitive kid. Kind and considerate. He’d grown up to have an abundance of all of those qualities, and it looked good on him.

I practically forgot we were in a sea of people, many of them who knew me—and him since he’d lived most of his life here—and were probably gawking at us, creating gossip as they watched us talk. Trevor walked away often and checked in with Holly, but she was having a blast with my parents, screaming at certain floats and waving her electric candle like it was a sparkler. I found myself enjoying the interactions between father and daughter as much as I loved catching back up with him. In some ways, it felt like no time had passed. The way we came right back together, the ease with which conversation was flowing again, and our light teasing.

But then he’d check in with his girl, making sure she was warm enough, asking her if she was hungry, and keeping close watch of the time since she’d had a big day and needed sleep. The responsibility and care he showed her was damn

attractive. I'd never had anything against dating someone with children, but then again, I'd never really thought about it. I'd never been in a situation where I *had* to think about it.

I'd do well to remind myself that I wasn't in that situation now either. Trevor had a child. He needed me to be his friend. He and Holly obviously needed my mother and father. I needed to stop letting my mind wander to the fact that Trevor seemed to have become everything I ever wanted in a partner.

Chapter Five



Trevor

As wonderful as last Saturday with T and his family had been, it had also been a little overwhelming. Holly hadn't stopped talking about Mimi and Papa, which I was happy about, but it made the chasm between my parents and my daughter even more apparent.

Then, on top of that, I'd experienced all kinds of confusing feelings from spending time with T. I'd hoped and prayed that too much time hadn't passed, and I would still have my old friend. The fear that his life had become too full and he wouldn't have time for me hadn't even hit me until the day I buckled Holly into the carseat for us to make the drive here. But once that idea had hit me, it was all I could think about. Maybe he had a friend group, and I wouldn't fit into it. Maybe he was dating someone who he hadn't posted about yet and would be too busy.

What hadn't occurred to me was how busy he'd be running Season's Reading during the holiday season. Which was kind of silly since I'd known how many hours his father had spent in the store when we were younger.

But truthfully, that wasn't why I hadn't seen him since Saturday. Between our furniture and other boxes arriving and needing to unpack, there had been the fear I'd come across as too needy. What was I going to do, stalk him at the bookstore? Holly would've loved that, but it might've been a bit too much for T. So I'd opened all of the boxes with Holly's name on them and let my little girl reunite with her stuffies and the other toys we'd kept. While she did that, I'd unpacked everything else.

At night, though, exhausted from setting everything to rights, I wondered what T was doing. Was he as tired as me? Had the store been super busy? Had he been hanging out with his friends in the evenings? Like a complete bonehead, I hadn't asked him for his phone number before we left his parents' home that night. Sure, I could've DM'd him, but just the thought of it made me break out in hives. That was the whole reason I hadn't reached out to him at all through the ups and downs of the last five years. There'd been too much going on, too much to say, to suddenly reach out to the person I trusted the most in my life, but hadn't spoken to in years.

“Daddy, I so excited to write my letter. You're going to help me, right?”

I squeezed my little girl's hand in mine. "Of course I am, Holly-berry."

She beamed up at me. "Your friend, Mr. T has the coolest stuff in his store. He has elves and treats, and now we get to write a letter, and Mimi said she's bringing milk and cookies. Isn't that the coolest, Daddy?"

She didn't wait for me to answer as she kept chattering away about all the neat things here in Christmas Falls. Hopefully, she'd still think it was this awesome after all of the decorations came down and the town returned to normal life. Hopefully, she'd make friends when she started preschool like I had T, and she'd adore everything about this town like I had.

I opened the door, and the jingle above made me smile. They'd hung some form of bells from the door during the holidays from as far back as I could remember. It was good to see T keeping his family's traditions alive.

We weren't but one step in when Jean swooped down in front of Holly. "There's my girl."

Holly giggled. "Hi, Mimi. I here to write my letter."

Jean held out her arms. "May I have a hug first?"

Holly threw her whole body into the older woman, practically knocking her back onto her butt. Instead of getting mad or annoyed, Jean giggled along with my spunky little redhead. "That's just what I needed, Holly. We're already set up the milk and cookies, and Papa has paper and pencils and crayons and colored pencils on little tables for all of you kiddies. We're

going to help you and all the other children, so your dad's welcome to wander around or maybe go find T," she finished, winking up at me.

"Oh, I promised Holly that I—"

Jean cut me off, shaking her head emphatically, while pulling Holly's winter hat off the top of her head. Catching the interaction, Holly patted my hand like I was a child and she was comforting me. "That's okay, Daddy. You can go play with your friend. I be with Mimi, so I be okay."

Jean smirked. "Yeah, you heard her. She'll be fine with me." She stood up and grabbed Holly's hand. "Oh, by the way, my son is back in his office working on some paperwork. You know where it is." Then she turned around and hustled my daughter away.

The kid who'd been in the elf costume on Saturday startled me, clapping me on the shoulder. "Well. Ms. Jean bulldozed right over you. I'm pretty sure she just stole your daughter."

"Right?" And how cool was that? If I was Holly, I'd say it was the coolest. Not wanting to ignore T's employee, I stuck my hand out. "Hi, I'm Trevor."

He shook my hand. "I'm Eddie, and I already know all about you. Ms. Jean has popped into the store every day all week to see if you're around."

"You mean to see if I'm here with Holly?"

Eddie cracked up. "Pretty much. I definitely think we've all been upstaged by that cute little redhead."

“Upstaged?” I asked, amused.

“Oh yeah. I’ve heard all about the terrible twosome or dynamic duo or terrific two, depending on what story she was telling. I was also informed that you’re her long-lost son. And then she launches right back into what a pretty little girl Holly is, or how cute she talks, or what a little darling she is, and how she has Mr. Pat wrapped around her finger.”

Again, that warmth that had spread through me last Saturday returned. Why had I avoided these people all week? Why had I thought I needed to wait until today when they were hosting the letter writing to Santa to have an excuse to return? I guess I’d been a little worried that the other day was kind of a fluke, that initial excitement that had more to do with me popping in unexpectedly and with a daughter in tow. But no, they’d missed me as much as I’d missed them, and that felt pretty damn incredible.

I shrugged. “Well, if I’m going to lose top spot, at least it was to my own kid.”

Eddie grinned. “Right? Well, I better get to work. If you’re looking for T, he’s back in his office. You know where that is, right?” He must’ve assumed I did because he went to help a customer before I had a chance to answer.

I felt a little uncomfortable going back into the office without T knowing I was coming, but there was no way I wanted to face Ms. Jean later and tell her that I’d ignored her suggestion to go find her son. Going back into the employees-only section

of the store, I took a deep breath. T's office door was cracked open just enough to see the light, so I knocked.

"Come in."

Opening the door enough to poke my head in, I said, "Your mom told me I could find you back here, but If you're too busy..."

The fierce concentration left his face as he smiled brightly, waving me in. "No, I was hoping you'd bring Holly in today. I was actually going to head up soon and see if you were here."

"I told you we would be."

T pushed the laptop in front of him away, sat back in his chair, and crossed his arms over his chest. "True, you did, but I haven't seen or heard from you all week. You told me that your house was close to my parents, but I didn't have an address or your phone number."

"Well, I didn't want to bother you. I know we spent every minute together before I moved away, but you have a life here now that doesn't include me, and you're busy with the business, so I didn't want to bother you."

T leaned forward, gripping the front of his desk. "Dude, what are you talking about? I'm psyched you're back."

"Oh." Feeling unusually flustered, I rubbed the back of my neck and glanced around the office. There were stacks of boxes, both opened and un-open on the couch against the back wall and some in front of it. His desk was littered with paper on either side of the laptop, and the office supplies on the

cabinet next to his desk didn't seem to have a designated place of their own. "Dude, your office is a mess."

He started laughing. "Yeah, Dad never comes back here. It gives him hives."

"I bet he doesn't. Your father kept this place immaculate."

T shrugged. "I know. I should probably be ashamed of myself, but..."

At the same time, I said "You're not," he said, "I'm not."

We exchanged easy smiles. It was odd how natural it felt to be around him after all these years. We'd had a few awkward spots the other day, slight hesitations with some silent pauses, but for the most part, the conversation had been flowing easily.

He pointed over at all of the boxes. "Generally, none of that is there, which helps. I have a book signing here on the sixteenth, so I ordered some extra copies. Plus, I always have the extra children's books for after storytime."

I snorted. "Thanks for that, by the way. Holly asked me several times why she doesn't have an elf on the shelf."

T snorted. "That's a very good question, Trevor. Why doesn't she?"

"My excuse was that we'd just moved. I dodged a bullet, and she didn't ask me why we didn't have one last year."

He got up and moved around the desk, and I swallowed down a gulp. I'd halfway convinced myself that I'd built up how hot he'd looked the other day. But nope. Not even a little. His lithe

body was mouth-watering, and that tousled bedhead look he rocked made me want to mess it up for real. Jesus, I really needed to get physical with someone before I jumped T. Maybe now that Jean and Patrick were so enamored with Holly, I'd actually have someone to ask to babysit so I could go out. That was a novel concept.

T brought me back to the conversation, teasing, "I would think that a man as creative as you would totally be into the elf-on-the-shelf concept. I've seen some really creative ideas online."

I scrunched up my nose. "Doesn't the idea of an elf moving around the house at night while you're asleep creep you out a little bit?"

His eyes bugged, then he bent over laughing. "Trevor, what are you talking about? You know you're the one moving the stupid thing. How in the world can it scare you?"

"I don't know. There's something about its face. It looks like it could animate at any time."

He rolled his eyes. "Alright, I'll fight for Holly's right to an elf on the shelf later. Obviously I need to let the idea grow on you a little."

"Ugh. Please don't."

T wagged his eyebrows at me. This was how he'd talked me into every bad idea he'd ever had. He'd love to let ideas *grow on me*...until suddenly, we were just doing them. Smart things like jumping off the side of his roof into the swimming pool or skipping school because it was too nice a day out not to go

fishing. I just knew that I'd end up with that scary-ass elf tormenting me in my own home.

T snickered but pointed at the couch. "I don't suppose you want to help me figure out which of these boxes are what and move them to wherever they need to go?"

"Sure. I have nothing better to do until Holly's done. Put me to work." Helping out here would be familia... comfortable.

"Nothing better to do?" he asked, feigning hurt feelings for all of two seconds. "Hanging out with me is a freaking treat."

"Sure, it is, buddy. Such a treat." It really was, but I'd never admit that. Not that I really had to if the smirk on his face was anything to go by.

At the couch, I flipped open the top of one of the unsealed boxes. Inside, I found the latest edition of Holly's Adventures by A. Mae. T came up next to me and reached out, tapping the top cover. "This series only started a couple of years ago. I keep it on the shelves, but the first few copies I ordered of this latest edition already sold. When I met Holly, I thought it might be fun to buy her the whole series for Christmas, so I ordered more."

And this was what I'd always appreciated about T. Even as a kid, he'd been kind like this, so I felt bad bursting his bubble. "I hate to tell you, but she's got all of them already. They're her favorite stories."

"Oh man, I should've known. They really are wonderful. The author sent out promotional stuff when the first book

published, and there was something that pulled me in about the whimsy of them right away. Especially the illustrations. It might sound stupid to most people, but I don't mind telling you that they spoke to my inner-child."

Since now seemed like the perfect time to tell him my truth, I opened my mouth to speak, but then Eddie came through the door. "Hey, boss. Mrs. Alvarez was wondering if that book you ordered for her came in? I would have looked for it myself, but she couldn't remember the title or the author." The tone of his voice suggested just how unimpressed he was by Mrs. Alvarez.

T chuckled. "I'm not surprised. It was on her son's Christmas list. She brought the whole thing to me, and we had everything else in stock, but I had to order that one." He looked over at me. "I'd never met this woman in my life until her son turned twelve. He's a huge reader, so she's in here for every birthday and holiday, loading him up. It's on the shelf under the register, Eddie. Is everything else okay? Do you need me for anything?"

"Nope. Unless Mr. Grinch himself comes in with any questions or demands, I've got everything else under control."

T made a tscking sound. "Give Griff a break. Can you imagine having to plan and execute this every year? I think he's pretty calm, considering all he's responsible for. All I have is the bookstore, and I get a little overwhelmed. Plus, he's got to herd the whole town. I only have to deal with a few of you, and I pay you to listen to me."

Eddie snorted. “If you say so, boss. Hey, Trevor, they’re almost done with the letters. They kept it pretty basic since most of the kids drew what they wanted to Santa.” He gave me a bemused smile. “Your Holly drew you, her, some sort of animal, and another person. I’m not sure who it was since it’s a stick figure, but they were on the other side of her. You dating someone?”

Confused myself, I shook my head. “Um. No. I have no idea who that would be.”

He tilted his head and stared at me, like he was considering something. “Then you might go with getting her a dog or a cat or something. She definitely had an animal at her feet. Welp, I better get back out there. Mrs. Alvarez is waiting.” Then he whirled out the door as quickly as he’d come in.”

T’s laughter pulled my gaze back to him.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. Just curious what kind of pet you’re going to buy her, since there’s no question in my mind she’ll be getting an animal for Christmas.”

I shrugged. “That had been the plan anyway. We rented before. Now that we own the house, I thought it would be fun.”

“For her or for you?” he asked seriously.

And we were back to how amazing it felt to talk to someone who knew me so well. T knew that I’d begged my mom for a dog as a kid, but she’d had a million and one reasons why there would never be an animal in her house. She’d never

backed down on that, but I had my own house now, and I'd make both my and Holly's dreams come true. But who was the other person in her picture? Was she missing her mother? She didn't really remember Annie aside from me doing my best to keep her memory alive, but plenty of her friends had come from two-parent homes. It made me sad if that was her Christmas wish since that was one that not even Santa Claus could do anything about.

Chapter Six



Trey

Trevor appeared a little shell-shocked, and I was pretty sure it had to do with Holly drawing another person in her letter to Santa. Providing her with a pet would be just as great for him, but I wasn't sure he'd be able to find a *wife? partner?* in the next few weeks. "Why don't we go up front and check on my parents and your daughter?"

Trevor huffed. "Is that a sentence you ever thought you'd say?"

"Dude." I clasped my hand on his shoulder. "I'm just happy you're here to say it to at all."

We headed up front and found most of the children who'd come already gone. Dad held a stack of red envelopes in his hand and shook them at me. "All done. I have a bunch of very important letters to get in the mail."

From where she sat on the floor, Mom leaned back on her hands with Holly on her lap. “Trevor, if you don’t mind, we’d like to steal your daughter for the afternoon. We’re going to head over to the post office, then have lunch before heading over to the Christmas Falls Museum of Festivals for the Arts and Crafts Holiday Fair.”

“Can I, Daddy? Can I go with Mimi and Papa?”

Trevor glanced around the bookstore like it held all the answers. “Sure, honey. If you really want to.” He sounded cautious, and my heart went out to him. Was he worried about sending Holly without him or about letting her out of his sight? Probably a little of both.

“I do. I do. Mimi says there’s all kinds of cool things there.”

“Sure.” He got down on one knee next to them and held out his arms. “You have to promise to listen to Mimi and Papa and do everything they say.”

“I will.” She threw her arms around her father’s neck, and he nestled her in close. I had to admit I was a little jealous that she had the right to snuggle so close. Not that I’ve been fantasizing about canoodling with him or anything. But we weren’t the little kids who wrapped their arms around each other anymore. Those days were gone.

Trevor looked so lost as he got Holly ready for the outdoors and waved goodbye to the little trio that I made a quick decision. “I was thinking about taking a break. You want to head over to Jolly Java with me for a cup of coffee?”

Eddie, who'd been cleaning up the leftover debris from the letter writing, stopped in his tracks next to me. "You're leaving the store?"

A quick glance around confirmed that most of our customers had cleared out when the kids left. I had Eddie working, along with another employee, so they should be fine. "Yeah, why not? You two should be fine without me for a little bit."

"Why not? Because you never leave during the holiday season," Eddie stage whispered.

Trevor's hand went to the back of his neck, massaging furiously. "Don't feel like you have to entertain me, T. I can..." He trailed off.

"You've got two hours to yourself, so you can come have a cup of specialty coffee with me, and then we'll come back, and you can help me finish unpacking those boxes." Then I hesitated. "Unless you don't want to."

His face softened, the tension draining away. "I'd actually like that a lot."

As I headed back to my office for my coat, I heard Trevor say, "Well, one thing hasn't changed. He's still super bossy."

Eddie cackled, and I grinned to myself like an idiot. This was sort of like old times. I came up with the ideas, and Trevor went along with it. It didn't seem like a bad set-up to me. Especially if it meant we got more time together, which, wasn't that what I'd always been after? Even as kids? More time with my best friend.

Once we were next door, piping hot coffee in hand, I sat back and groaned. “I know it’s still the morning, but Eddie’s not wrong. I don’t take many breaks during this time of year, and it feels really good to sit down for a few minutes and relax.”

Trevor glared at me. “Why don’t you take breaks? Even your dad used to run home for a quick lunch with your mom, or he’d sit and hang out with us for a few minutes in the afternoon. You have plenty of employees, so what’s your excuse?”

I took a sip of the pepperminty deliciousness. “I don’t know. I guess, since I’m a single guy with no one waiting for me or expecting me anywhere, it’s easier to just throw myself into work.”

Trevor quirked a brow at me. “So you’ve never dated anyone in November or December?”

“Not exactly,” I admitted. “The first year that I ran Season’s Readings, I started with a boyfriend, but he couldn’t handle the hours I put in.”

Trevor shook his head. “I had a feeling.”

I glared at him. “Okay, well, what about you? What’s your dating life look like these days?”

He barked out a laugh. “Dating? With Holly? You’ve got to be kidding me. By the time that fireball goes to bed, I’m ready to pass out, too.”

Scared to address a potentially touchy subject, but dying of curiosity, I asked, “So you haven’t been with anyone since

Holly's mom passed away?"

Trevor bit his bottom with, then shuffled in his seat. "I'm going to be really transparent here, and it's a little embarrassing. I haven't been on so much as a hook-up since Holly's mom was six months pregnant with her."

"Ah, Trevor, I'm a little confused. Were you and Holly's mom not together when she got pregnant with her? I'm not trying to be nosy, I swear. I'm just interested in your life."

He tilted his head, smirking. "You're the epitome of nosy." Then he held up one finger in the air. "Oh, I'm sorry, that's right. You're inquisitive."

I pointed at him. "And you're trying to change the subject."

"No, I'm not. I want to tell you about Annie." He sighed, leaning forward on his elbows. "You might have actually seen a picture of her before. Back in college, when I still posted my life, I used to post a lot of selfies with her. Annie was such a beautiful girl. She was a biracial mix of Black and white, and she had this flawless light brown skin with the same smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose and cheeks like Holly has."

Thinking back, I vaguely remembered seeing photos of a tall, willowy woman with really amazing hair. "Was she the one who always had the different colors running through her braids?"

Trevor's lips tipped up at the corners. "Yeah, that was my Annie. Other than you, she's the only best friend I've ever had.

I adored that girl.”

I felt my eyebrows crawl up my forehead in surprise. “Best friend? You didn’t date?”

Trevor snorted. “My friend, since the day I realized I was gay, there’s never been a moment where I was interested in a member of the opposite sex.”

I leaned up in my chair, almost launching myself halfway across the table and whispered, “You’re gay?”

He nodded, smirking. “You probably assumed since I had Holly that I was straight?” He quirked an eyebrow. “Not very open-minded of you, T.”

I huffed, slouching back into my seat. “No, it’s just...” I shook my head. “I didn’t know. You really haven’t posted anything in so long, and you’d never said anything dating anyone before that.”

“That’s fair. Part of that was because I never found someone I felt truly comfortable with, you know? There were several first and second dates, but very rarely did I make it to three. Annie and I had been roommates since the middle of our sophomore year, thick as thieves. We went everywhere together. I was her wingman, and she was mine. Then she got pregnant, and everything became about her and the baby. She was super private about the whole thing, and her business wasn’t mine to share.

“But from the beginning, right when her pregnancy test showed that plus sign, her and her baby were my business, so I

started posting my artwork instead of our faces. In fact, the first time I did that was after one of her doctor visits. We got halfway to the car when she decided she better pee so we wouldn't have to stop on the way home. She didn't like me treating her like she was some sort of invalid, and she was pretty early in the pregnancy, so I sat on a bench outside of the building while she went back in. It was a pretty spot with a fountain out front, and it had been a good day. That was the first time we heard Holly's heartbeat."

"Aw. That must've been amazing. I'd have wanted to preserve that memory, too."

"Yeah, that was the appointment where Annie started getting happy about her pregnancy. Before that, it sucked, man. She was crying all the time. Here we were, our senior year of college, the sky was the limit, and boom."

"What about the biological father? Where did he play into this?"

"We went to Florida for a couple of weeks in the summer before our last year. I don't know. Annie hooked up with some guy, and she couldn't even remember his name. We'd been partying pretty hard. He wasn't from Miami, either, so when she found out she was expecting..." He shrugged. "I stepped in to be there for her."

"Well, of course you did. If she was your best friend. You'd have been there for her no matter what."

He smiled softly. "That's true. Anyway, I went with her to all of her appointments. After the visit where we found out she

was a girl, Annie asked me if she could put me down as the father on Holly's birth certificate. She knew I loved her child already and never wanted to worry about Holly ending up in foster care if something happened to her. Annie didn't have any family to speak of and had been doing everything on her own for years until we became friends."

"Wow. She sounds like a tough cookie."

"The toughest. You would've really liked her." He chuckled. "Actually, I'd have had to keep you two separated. I can't even imagine what kind of chaos you guys might have cooked up together."

I smirked. "Obviously you like it, or you wouldn't have found someone else like me."

He shrugged. "That's fair."

"So that's it? She filled you in on the birth certificate as Holly's father, and so you were?"

"Yeah. I already knew I wanted to be a dad," he said, cheeks reddening with the admission. "Honestly, more than being scared at the responsibility I was taking on, I felt honored."

"I understand that. But what happened to her, Trevor?"

"Car accident. The weather was shitty that day. It had been pouring for hours. It was her day to pick up Holly, but I was already home, so she asked if I'd swing over and get her since she was running late. She was only two blocks from home when the other driver hydroplaned and hit her head on. It was a horrible, unfortunate accident." His eyes took on a faraway

look, like he was back in that moment. “I feel guilty sometimes at the direction my thoughts take. Like, if I hadn’t picked up Holly, I could’ve lost both of them.”

Placing my hand over his on the table, I squeezed. “I’m so sorry for your loss. But don’t you feel bad. I didn’t know Annie, but I know she wouldn’t have wanted your daughter in that car.”

“Yeah, I know. You’re right. Holly was her everything. She never once regretted having her, not even for a minute. Annie’s death felt like losing part of myself, but I had Holly to think about, so I picked myself up and did what had to be done.”

I couldn’t even imagine what he’d been through. So much joy and loss in such a small period of time. I wished more than ever that we hadn’t been so young when he’d moved away or that we’d kept in better contact. I’d have done anything to be there for him when he went through that. “We don’t have to continue talking about this if you don’t want to, but I *am* curious about one other thing.”

“Go ahead. I already told you the hardest part. You can ask me anything now.”

Hoping I wasn’t adding salt to an open wound, I asked, “How did your parents handle you becoming a father?”

He rolled his eyes in his head like a sixth grader who’d just determined that his parents weren’t the smartest people in the world. “My mother handled it about like you’d expect. She

couldn't understand why I would sign on for being responsible for a life I didn't create."

Ouch. I squeezed his hand again. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay. It was about what I expected, if I'm being honest. I'd only taken Annie around her a couple of times anyway. Once I moved out of the house for college, I didn't really feel like my life or my friends were any of my parents' business."

I wondered if he realized that even when we were kids, I rarely went to his house, and his life seemed to revolve around me and my family. He'd been keeping his life separate from his parents since he was too young to ever know what he was doing.

"I was pleasantly surprised with my dad, though," he said, pulling me out of my musings.

"Really? He accepted it? Accepted Annie and Holly?"

"In the beginning, while Annie was still pregnant, he didn't say too much. He'd sit and stare off into space while my mom yelled at me. But then she went into labor, and I don't know, I was scared, man. All she had was me, and I was twenty-one-years-old. Hell, I still felt like I didn't know my head from my ass, yet. So I shot my dad a text just to have someone to tell what was going on, and a minute later, he called and said he was on his way. My mother came, too, but I'm not sure if it's because my dad made her or what, but they were both there. When I went out to the waiting room to announce that Holly was here, he couldn't wait to see her. He'd even brought roses

for Annie and a stuffed elephant for Holly.” He smiled fondly. “She still keeps it in the center of her bed, calling it her special stuffie.”

“Aw. And how are they with her now?”

Trevor scrunched his nose. “I can tell my dad adores Holly, but you know he’s never been the most demonstrative person. My mom is my mom. She’s not the warmest person, so…” He shrugged. “It doesn’t seem to bother Holly, so I try not to let her get to me.”

“That’s good.” After sharing so much, he looked tired now. “If you want to give me your phone number, you can head home, and I’ll call you when they’re back with Holly. A few minutes to yourself might do you some good.”

He turned his hand over under mine and held on tight. *Oops*. I hadn’t realized I was still holding his. “If you don’t mind, I’d rather you put me to work. The last thing I need after dredging all that up is to be alone with my thoughts. I’ll just end up sad.”

“Sure. Let’s get out of here.”

We went back to the store and unloaded the boxes. I didn’t know if staying with me had really helped Trevor since we both were lost in our thoughts. When he’d been here, he’d always been my favorite person, and after he’d moved away, I’d missed him desperately. But life had moved on, and while my thoughts of him had remained fond, I really hadn’t expected to ever see him again. But I was glad he’d come back. He’d grown up to be one of the most amazing humans

I'd ever known personally, and I felt so honored that he'd let me into his and his daughter's orbit.

And. He. Was. Gay. That was something I'd have to think about later when I was alone. The more those words echoed in my mind, the more I wondered if I'd been happy to see him when he'd walked into Season's Readings because I'd missed my best friend or the boy who'd inspired the first sparks of love in my young heart. Hell, maybe it was both.

We were unloading the last box when Trevor's legs were attacked from the back by a little red flame. "Daddy."

He turned, his face going so bright and happy that I wanted to bask in the glow. He swung his girl up in his arms and pulled her in close. "Holly-berry. I missed you so much. Did you have fun?"

"Soooo much fun, Daddy. And I get to go to Mimi and Pap's another day without you because they had so much stuff at the arts place that while Papa ate his third cookie"—she held up five fingers and gave my dad a disapproving glare—"Mimi and I found the perfect present for you, so I have to go over and wrap it. The hats were so pretty there, Daddy, but I can't tell you, or I ruin the su-prise."

We all hid our laughter, but Trevor's eyes gleamed with humor, and it was...enchanted. Oh boy. Who knew I'd have a thing for men with children? No, that wasn't what attracted me. It was how much he adored her and how openly he expressed that love that drew me in.

"Thank you for taking her," Trevor said to my parents.

Dad snorted. “Ha. We should be thanking you. I wasn’t looking forward to following Mom around, pretending to think every handmade thing was amazing when clearly some of it was—” He glanced at Holly and cut himself off. “Anyway, having Holly with us made it a merry experience. She’s a blast.”

Holly yawned, and Trevor kissed her forehead. “And she’s also a tired girl, so we better get home.”

Holly looked over her shoulder at me. “Did you and Daddy have fun, Mr. T? I like playing with my friends, and my Daddy is sad sometimes, so I hope you played with him.”

Oh, if she only knew how very badly I was starting to want to play with her father. Staring at her to avoid giving anyone a reason to suspect what was going on in my mind, I said, “Your daddy and I had fun. We went and had coffee, and then he helped me in the store. Thank you for sharing him with me today.”

She beamed at me, even as she rubbed her eyes sleepily. “I’m glad, Mr. T. You can come over and play anytime. Daddy even has his own room.”

Oh boy. Was it getting hot in here? My face felt like it was burning. My dad barked out a laugh, and Trevor quickly shrugged on his coat, tossing Holly from arm to arm like a pro. Before I knew it, they were gone, and I was pretty sure that my life would never be the same.

Chapter Seven



Trevor

We were waiting for T to come out of Season's Readings, and then we'd be headed over to Sugar Plum Park to take Holly for pictures with Santa Claus. When we'd arrived earlier for storytime, Eddie, dressed like the conductor from *Polar Express*, had come right over and held out a hand to my daughter, saying, "All aboard."

She'd giggled and immediately let go of me and grabbed on to him to go in for storytime. The truly shocking part had been T waving me over to his register and suggesting we take Holly over to the park for pictures with Santa.

"We? As in the two of us?" I'd asked.

With a cheesy smile, he'd winked. "Someone suggested that I take some time for myself during this busy season, and I haven't really had a chance to spend much time with your

daughter since my parents keep hogging all of her attention. Luckily enough, they already had plans today, so it's my turn."

Of course I'd said yes, but I hadn't told Holly yet. As of now, all she knew was that we were going for a walk with Mr. T.

"Is he coming soon, Daddy?"

Wrapping my hand around her head, I pulled her in tight to my leg. "He should be out any minute, Holly-berry. You just have to hold your horses."

"Oh no, no, no. Have you been away for too long, Trevor?" T approached us, then dropped down to Holly's height. "Your father has it all wrong, Holly. It's Christmas time. What he meant to say was you have to hold your reindeers."

My little girl giggled. "You silly, Mr. T."

He shrugged. "This is how we do it in Christmas Falls."

As he stood back up, I bit my lip. "Is it? Is it really?"

"It is now. Are you ready to go, Holly?"

She batted her lashes up at him. "I am. Daddy said we're going on a walk with you."

"You didn't tell her where we're going?" he asked.

"Nope. It was your idea, so I'll let you be the one to tell her. Expect shrieking."

"Tell me what?" Holly asked, stomping her booted foot. My little girl was as curious as T and hated to be kept out of the loop.

“Hey, miss.” I patted the top of her head, gently reminding her of her manners.

“Sorry, Mr. T. Will you tell me where we’re going?”

“Why yes, yes I will. I thought maybe you’d enjoy going to the park to meet Santa.”

As expected, my daughter shrieked with glee, clapping her hands. Seriously, was there a sound more piercing than that of a young child? “That’s the best idea ever, Mr. T. I can tell Santa I sent him a letter.”

“That’s a great idea.” Then Holly surprised T, reaching out and grabbing one of his hands and one of mine. He looked at me over the top of her head.

It was my turn to wink. “See?” I mouthed. He didn’t know it, but I’d just made T a God amongst men to my child. His little suggestion involved all of her favorite things—being outside, visiting a magical man who made wishes come true, and, most importantly, planning a surprise just for her.

A smile slowly spread across his face as the full impact of what he’d done and how Holly would perceive it hit him. “Ha. Mimi and Papa only thought they were going to be her”—he stopped, glanced down into Holly’s big green eyes, then spelled—“f.a.v.o.r.i.t.e.”

I chuckled. “Trust me, this child has more than enough love for all of us.”

“Jump me over the cracks, Daddy. Mr. T, do you know how to play that game? All you have to do is lift me up as high as you

can as soon as you see a crack on the ground, okay? Can you help Daddy do it, please? It's no fun when it's only one person."

"It looks like she has more than enough energy for us all, as well."

"You can say that again," I said, meaning it more than he could know. But he'd find out. He'd probably decide that he'd picked the absolute worst choice for a break if he truly wanted to decompress a bit.

We settled into a steady rhythm as we moved along with the flow of pedestrian traffic. Sometimes we'd slow down to let other people get ahead of us to make sure Holly's little feet wouldn't hit anyone. Strolling through Christmas Falls again felt like being part of something while also feeling like this was just the three of us off on our own small adventure.

I stayed silent, people-watching, while listening to Holly chatter at T. He held his own, though, agreeing and nodding when appropriate. I let their words fade out as my mind wandered. What would it be like to have this all the time? Someone to go and do things with Holly and me? I'd originally planned to take her to see Santa tomorrow, spreading out some of the activities that Christmas Falls had to offer in a way where she experienced as much as possible without wearing out, but this? This was better.

Having another adult accompanying us and interacting with my daughter transported me back to when Annie was still alive. It made me miss her, but it also reminded me that Holly

and I had full lives ahead of us. Internally, I laughed at T. He seemed to be on a mission to win Holly over, and it was adorable. I'd have to see what else he came up with before I filled him in on the fact that she already thought he was the most handsome and coolest person around. I wasn't sure why she'd drawn that conclusion, but she was adamant about it.

Last night at dinner, she entertained me with all sorts of stories about her day with Mimi and Papa, but she always came back to asking me about Mr. T. Although, it made me sad that she'd drawn a picture of someone else with us. I knew my precious child was concerned about me being lonely and that she wanted me to have a friend. So maybe her obsession with Mr. T did make sense. Kids were a wonder. Oftentimes, adults didn't understand just how well children understood concepts like loneliness, but while they might not have the verbiage, they got it as much as grownups did, happiness and sadness. It wasn't all black and white or cut and dry for them. They hadn't been tainted by this world yet, so they trusted their gut. Too bad more adults weren't that way.

Reaching the park, we immediately found Santa and his sleigh, and it was adorable. "It's Santa! It's Santa!" my girl hollered.

T laughed, sounding as excited as her. "It sure is. I sure do love his white beard. How about you, Holly?"

"I like his shiny black belt," she said. T tilted his head and stared down at her curiously. "His belt? Really?"

"I like shiny things, Mr. T."

He snorted. "Noted, my new little friend."

Holly's head whipped from admiring Santa over to T. "Your friend, Mr. T? But I thought you were my daddy's friend."

He squatted down in front of her. "Well, I've known your Daddy for a long time, since way before you were born. But that doesn't mean we can't be friends, too. I have plenty of room for lots of friends."

She nodded her head sagely, like she had the wisdom of a ninety-nine-year-old. "Me, too, Mr. T. I don't like when the other kids at school don't want to all play together or share like we supposed to. Someone always cries. Johnny cries a lot, but he just wants to play. I want everyone to have fun together." She threw up her hands and spun.

"I think that would be wonderful, Holly." He glanced up at me. "Should we go get in line now? It'll probably take a while."

Lines for Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny were always long, but this one looked particularly daunting. "Yeah, we'd better. You ready, Holly-berry?"

"Yes, please. I forgot to ask Santa for my favorite candy in my letter."

I gasped, then pretended like I was horrified. "Oh no, Holly-berry. Whatever will you do?"

The way she stared at me when she couldn't get a read on my tone was one of my favorite things. It clocked in somewhere between annoyance and concern. Ultimately, she ignored me

in favor of T. “You’re going to come, too, right?” she asked him.

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world. We have to make sure and get a picture for your Daddy of you sitting on Santa’s lap. If you don’t mind, I want one, too.”

Her eyes lit up. “And one for Mimi and Papa, too?”

“Yep. And as soon as we’re done there, we can go over and you can have your face painted, or you can go play in the bouncy house,” T said.

Holly’s eyes went wide with wonder. “This is amazing. It’s the best day of my whole life.”

T rubbed his hands together, looking sort of like a demented elf. “Did you hear that, Trevor? The best day of her life.”

I wouldn’t break his spirit now, but once he was around long enough, he’d find out how many times a week she said that. I kind of looked forward to the expression on his face when he heard her say it to his mother.

“Mr. T, can I have my face painted before we see Santa? I want candy canes on my cheeks for the picture.”

“I don’t have a problem with that if your dad doesn’t mind holding our space in line.” He gazed imploringly at me. Geez, he was really sucking up to my kid. “Is it alright with you?”

“Sure, but maybe I should go, too.”

Holly held up her hand. “No, Daddy. You wait here so you’ll su-prise.”

The surprise being she wanted candy canes on her cheeks? Which I'd literally just heard her tell T. There was no fighting the logic of a four-year-old, though, so I asked T, "Are you alright with that?"

He waved me off. "Piece of cake. It'll be me and my best girl."

They started walking toward where the face painting was set up when a pack of kids ran past, spinning Holly so that T almost lost his grip on her hand. He looked completely horrified and a bit panicked, then bent over and said something to my daughter. She nodded eagerly, and the next thing I knew, he picked her up and was carrying her to their destination.

I'd laugh if I didn't get it. How many times since Holly started walking had I been terrified when she took off running or someone came between us? It only took a couple of heart-stopping moments before the rule became that she either had to hold my hand, let me carry her, or hold onto my leg. She was starting to get a little taller, so she didn't do it as much, but she used to love holding my leg and standing on one of my feet. I wasn't sure if it was me walking like a monster or the free ride that she'd loved more. Whatever. It was nice seeing T be so mindful of her.

I watched him talk to her, getting her to cover her mouth and giggle like crazy. I didn't mind her wanting to go without me. Like yesterday with Jean and Patrick, I recognized this was healthy for her to have other adults she trusted. Hell, it was probably good for me, too. But I had to admit that I was curious about what he was saying to her. By the time they got

back, the line for Santa had shortened considerably. They approached with Holly firmly in T's arms, both of them beaming.

"Daddy, Daddy, how do I look?"

"You look gorgeous, baby. You should wear candy canes on your face all the time."

She giggled. "That's silly, Daddy."

They went back to chatting like I wasn't even there, but this time I paid attention. Hearing all the things Holly loved about Christmas Falls so far reassured me that I'd made the right decision. As soon as the holidays were over, she'd be on to her next adventure, starting preschool. Slowly, it felt like the weight of the world was coming off my shoulders.

Finally, we reached the front. I came prepared to purchase pictures for us all, but T pushed me aside. "I want three of the eight-by-tens in the frames, please," he said.

Then he carried Holly up to Santa Claus and settled her firmly in his lap. I followed along slowly, wanting to give them this bonding opportunity. After all, this was my daughter and my childhood best friend, and I wanted them to like each other. Once Holly was comfortable and focused on the man who'd been stuffed and costumed for this afternoon, T came back to me.

"Look at her," he said with pride. "Some of the kids cried when their parents tried to leave them with Santa for pictures,

but Holly's doing fine." He laughed. "Look at her talking away to him."

"Unfortunately, most of the time, my daughter has never met a stranger. It can be anxiety-inducing."

He chuckled. "I bet."

When Holly was done, she waved us over, and T ran up and grabbed her, bringing her back toward me. "Daddy, Daddy, can I go bounce now?"

It was growing chillier, and her cheeks were flushed, but she was having such a good time. There was no way I'd deny her a chance in the bouncy house. "Sure, Holly-berry, and then we need to head home and let Mr. T go back to work."

Her face fell with disappointment, and she grabbed his cheeks between her mittened hands. "Mr. T, you have to work some more? But you're always with the books. Don't you have your own house? You can stay with me and Daddy if you need a place to live."

He audibly sighed. "Aren't you the sweetest? Thank you for the offer, sweetheart, but I have my own house, too. I just work a lot around Christmas time so I can make sure everyone who wants a new book gets it."

Holly wrinkled her nose. "That's nice, but Christmastime is for fun. Right, Daddy?"

Feigning the saddest expression I could muster, I nodded. "Yep, T. You're missing the sleigh."

A slow smile filled T's face. "Now that was a good one, Trevor. You have made me proud."

"I don't get it," Holly said.

"That's okay. You'll hear plenty more Dad jokes in your lifetime."

She still looked confused, so T swung her around, effectively distracting her. "How about the bouncy house?"

"Yay," she screamed.

Again, the two of them took off, leaving me behind. Once he helped her out of her boots, he waited until another child was lifted out of the bouncy contraption before setting Holly right inside the doorway. With a yell, she took off hopping in farther to play with the other kids.

"Wow. She has a whole lot of energy."

Uh-oh. Was today enough for him to realize that having a four-year-old around was a lot? "I warned you."

He shook his head. "No, I'm not complaining. It's great. Damn, man. I invited you guys today because I thought Holly would enjoy this, but I've had a blast, too. I guess I forgot how magical this place is."

I bumped my arm into his. "It's easy to take things for granted when they're right there." I stared at all the families loitering around and let the sounds of children squealing with delight settle into my soul. "I missed this."

He leaned into me. “Thank you for coming home and helping me remember why I never wanted to leave Christmas Falls. I haven’t been unhappy at all, but maybe...maybe now I’ll enjoy it a little more, as well.”

Deciding to push my luck, I said, “We’re heading out to Milton Falls Christmas Tree Farm one day next week. I finally have the house put to rights, but Holly is ready for our house to be as festive inside as everything surrounding us is. I don’t suppose you have time to come with us?”

“I’ll make time.”

If there was one thing I knew about this man, he didn’t say things he didn’t mean. “Shoot me a text whenever you have time, and we’ll be good to go.”

He nodded. “Okay, yeah. Now that we finally swapped numbers, I can do that. Hey, you never told me why your cell phone number changed before.”

I groaned. “I dropped my phone my first week of college, and Edith told me it was time to go on my own plan. It turned into a big project, and the next thing you know, I had a new phone but none of my old numbers. I don’t know, it seemed like we’d all moved on by then, and I knew I could always reach out through DMs, so...” I shrugged.

He nodded. “I get it, but...let’s not ever lose touch again, okay?”

“Ah, I plan to stay in Christmas Falls indefinitely. You may never get rid of me.”

He tilted his head up toward me and touched my hand.
“Sounds good to me.”

Chapter Eight



Trey

The minute the last employee left, I closed and locked the door, shut off the lights, and headed straight back to my office. A couple of hours ago, my text message thread with my two sisters and my sister's husband had gone off. The youngest, Larissa, had typed, "*T, call us as soon as you're done with work.*"

Melissa had followed it up with, "*Don't forget.*"

By then, my heart had been racing, worried that something was wrong with one of them, when my brother-in-law, Declan, sent, "*T, this is not an emergency. Don't let your sisters freak you out.*"

Sitting at my desk, I pulled up our group chat and hit video call. Melissa and Larissa both answered their phone

immediately, and in the background, I heard Declan yell, “Hey T. What’s up, man?”

“What happened? Why did you two message me like that in the middle of the day and freak me out?”

Melissa glared at me. “Why didn’t you let us know that Trevor was home?”

“Yeah,” Larissa said. “We had to hear it from Mom and Dad.”

“You mean Mimi and Papa?” I chuckled. “And I didn’t text you because I figured Mom would let you know, and see, I was right.”

“And he really has a daughter?” Melissa asked.

I’d thought about what to tell my family regarding Holly and her mother. In the end, I decided that she was Trevor’s daughter no matter what, so if he wanted to share the details with my family, he could, but I wouldn’t be passing along any more information than necessary.

“He does. I can’t wait for you guys to meet her. She’s adorable.”

Declan’s face popped up over my sister’s shoulder. “What do you mean by Mimi and Papa? Does this mean we’re off the hook for giving your parents grandbabies?”

I tipped my hand in a so-so manner. “I don’t think any of us will ever be completely off the hook, but for now, Holly has become the center of their universe.”

Larissa snorted. “That makes sense. Mom told me all about the cute little redhead she’d found at Season’s Reading and adopted into our family before she bothered mentioning that she was Trevor’s daughter.”

“You mean she didn’t tell you all about how her prodigal son had returned?” I asked dryly.

Declan snorted. “Your mom is too much. But, better him than me.” He disappeared off the screen.

Melissa rolled her eyes at her husband, shaking her head fondly. “I think that’s amazing he’s back in Christmas Falls. Mom said he didn’t have a significant other with him.”

“No, Holly’s mom was killed in a car accident a couple years ago. Not that she was Trevor’s wife, anyway. They were best friends. If anything, he’d have a boyfriend or husband with him since he’s gay.”

Larissa leaned toward her screen, eyes wide. “Please, please, please tell me that he’s as handsome as ever.”

“He is,” I said hesitantly. My little sister had thought Trevor was attractive? Did she miss the part where I said he’s gay?

“Awesome!” she yelled. “I always wished he was really my brother, too. Now you can make that a reality, and he’ll never leave us again.”

“What?”

Melissa snickered. “Yeah, yeah. We know he was your best friend, but don’t forget I’m your older sister, T. I know what a teenage boy crushing on his friend looks like.”

I felt a blush rise up in my face. What sucked was I couldn't even deny it. "Shut it."

"Seriously, though, is he still your type now that you're both older and wiser?" Melissa asked.

Obviously, the answer to that was emphatically yes. Not that I'd be admitting that to my sisters. But was I his type? That was the big question running through my mind on repeat since Saturday afternoon. I'd really enjoyed my time with him and Holly so much. And was she really open to her father finding a special someone?

"Number one, I'm not too sure Trevor's even thinking about romance. He's got a lot on his plate with his daughter."

"Yeah, I can imagine," Melissa said. "Also, not an answer to the question."

"Yeah, we want to know if he makes you feel all fluttery on the inside."

I groaned. Little sisters were ridiculous sometimes. I wouldn't trade mine for the world, but...*fluttery on the inside?* Gag. "Listen, Trevor needs a friend while he acclimates back to small-town living, and I plan on being that to him. Anything else is irrelevant right now."

"So you've been spending time with them?" Melissa asked.

"Yeah. Some." I couldn't control the smile that spread across my face. "He's still floating on cloud nine right now, enjoying Holly's first experience in Christmas Falls. Other than that,

I'm not too sure he's thinking about how he feels about being back."

"I'm sure he is. When do you see him again?" Melissa asked.

"I planned on texting him tonight about his invitation for me to go tree shopping with them at Milton Falls Christmas Tree farm this week."

"Well, I think you should feel him out. See if he's open to a little somethin'-somethin' happening between the two of you." Larissa waggled her eyebrows. Such a goof.

"Seriously, you're ridiculous."

"She's not wrong, though," Melissa said. "Seriously, little brother. You deserve to be happy and have more than just the store."

"I've been in plenty of relationships."

Both my sisters blew raspberries at me. "You date duds," Larissa said.

"No." Melissa shook her head. "Some of them are very nice people, but you do manage to find men and women who are never going to be satisfied with how much you love Season's Readings and the amount of time you want to devote there."

"I don't do it on purpose, but they have to understand, the bookstore is my life."

"Suuure," Larissa said. "Kk, I gotta go. T, work on landing me another brother-in-law. And by that, I mean, Trevor. I've

missed him. And make sure he's at Christmas." Then she hung up.

Melissa chuckled. "I love that girl, but she's a mess."

"I suppose that was planned so that you could give me the real big sister lecture."

She smirked. "It's like you know us. Trey—"

"Woah. Now you're bringing out the big guns. Trey? Really? Did I do something to hurt your feelings?"

Her glare was piercing, so I mimed zipping my lips. Whether I liked it or not, Melissa had something to say, and we weren't hanging up until she said it.

"T, let me ask you a question first." I nodded. "Would you say Dad ever put the bookstore before us?"

I reared my head back. "Of course not. We were always his priority."

She arched one elegant eyebrow. "Thank you for making my point for me."

"Shit." I rubbed my hand over my face. "You really do think I seek out people who won't understand my commitment to the bookstore."

"I think that's half of it. I mean, let's face it, what did you really expect to happen with the ski instructor who traveled from one ski lodge to another? He was an adventure seeker, and you're perfectly happy and content in Christmas Falls, which is *fine*, T. But you can't act like watching other people's

social media to live vicariously through them is enough, either.”

“I don’t do that,” I said, sullenly.

She frowned. “Have you gone over and adopted a pet yet?”

“I haven’t had...” I trailed off before I said *time* and further proved her point. She was right. My father had a wife and three children. Plus, there’d been Trevor, who’d confided to me at ten-years-old that he wished his dad was as present in his life as mine was. And my sisters hadn’t enjoyed spending time at the store like I did, so their interaction with Dad hadn’t been at the store.

“Listen, T. I’m not telling you that you have to pursue Trevor, but we both know he’s a great catch, and he’s always loved the bookstore as much as you. Maybe you should think about it.” She grimaced. “Unless you’re not into the kid thing.”

I barked out a laugh. My sister liked children, as long as they weren’t hers, so I knew she didn’t mean any offense toward Trevor and Holly. “I’d never thought about it before, Melissa, but...wait until you meet Holly. She’s special.”

“Aw. You’re smitten,” she coo’ed. “Tell me about her.”

I appreciated this about Melissa. She’d made her point, simply and easily, and so we moved on. And talking about Holly, especially how Trevor was with her and their bond, was no hardship. My sister stayed on the phone with me while I finished closing up the bookstore, then I took her and Declan on a little walk through town to see the sights as I headed

home. By the time we hung up and I texted Trevor about going to the tree farm the next day, I'd made a decision. The busiest time of the year or not, I wanted time—*real time*—with Trevor and Holly, and I needed to make time for it to happen.



“So we get to pick our own tree?” Holly asked.

“Yup,” Trevor said. He rubbed his hands together. “It’s been years since I’ve done this. I’m so psyched.”

I thought back on our childhood and how much he’d always loved coming with my family when we went to pick out our two or three trees, depending on my mother’s mood. His parents put up the same fake tree each year, so he didn’t have that experience at home.

From her carseat, Holly yelled, “But, Daddy, what about our tree in the bag?”

“Don’t worry, Holly-berry, I gave our old tree a nice home.”

I glanced over at him in the passenger side quickly. “Would that be in a dumpster?” I asked quietly.

He nodded with a sly grin on his face. “That thing was shot,” he said back softly. For Holly’s sake, we’d keep that to ourselves.

I’d only seen Bruce from the tree farm a couple of days ago when he’d dropped off the tree I planned on having the kids decorate. It would be our Grinch tree, or as Holly pronounced

it, our Greenwich tree. It hadn't occurred to me when he stopped by to tell him that I'd see him this week. Really, I hadn't been sure how to bring up I'd be coming with Trevor and his daughter.

"Do you remember Bruce from when we were kids, Trevor?"

He angled himself in the corner of his seat. "I sure do. I've seen several faces I recognize as I walk around town, but I'm never sure if they remember me, so I just kinda smile in their general vicinity in case they do."

"Ha-ha. You're taller, but you still basically look the same. You spent so much time in Season's Readings that there's no way they don't know it's you. I'm surprised they haven't stopped you."

He hooked his thumb over his shoulder toward his child in the backseat. "We're usually together, so I'm not sure they know exactly what to say. It is a small town. There's no way the rumor mill hasn't deduced that it's only the two of us."

I considered that for a second, deciding he was more than likely right. "Well, that aside, Bruce came into the bookstore the other day and introduced me to his new employee. I think his name was Felix or something like that, but he looked to be about our age. Maybe after the holidays, we can invite him out or something. He's new to town, and you're back after a decade. It'll be fun to get to know him."

Trevor snorted. "T, are you trying to arrange a playdate for me?"

I shrugged. “What if I am? I’ll be with you, too, and Holly’s not the only one who’s going to need people to hang out with. There’s a few of our friends still around from before you left, but for the most part, they’ve all moved on. We can always go to one of the Holiday Cocktail Hours at Rudolph’s one night and see who’s around.” His lips pulled down into a frown, so I continued, “I mean, when you’re ready for Holly to spend the night at my mom and dad’s place. I’m not trying to rush you.”

“Why would Holly spend the night there?” he asked, sounding perplexed.

“Has my mom not spoken to you about that yet? Apparently, she’s been working on turning my old bedroom into a room for her grandkids. As of now, that means Holly.”

He stared silently ahead out the windshield.

“Trevor, are you okay?”

He sniffed, rubbing his nose. “Yeah, it’s just...my parents never offered to take Holly overnight. Not once.”

I’d always thought his mom was a little cold, but it irritated me that she hadn’t been there for her son when he needed her.

“Not even after...”

“After Annie died? Nope. Which, even if she’d asked then, the answer would’ve been no. Holly wailed for her mom for days. I don’t think anyone but me would’ve been able to console her. Honestly, I think I needed her as badly as she needed me. But still, it would’ve been nice to have the offer.”

“Yeah, I get that.” I reached over, intending to pat his hand, but he turned it over so we were palm to palm and caught my fingers in his, weaving them together. Yeah, I was here for this.

“I... I really can't thank you and your family—”

“You have nothing to thank us for,” I said, cutting him off.

“You've been a chosen part of this family since you were Holly's age, and that's never going to change.”

He finally looked back in my direction. “Yeah, I've always known that.”

I squeezed our joined hands. “Good.”

We made the rest of the ride in silence, both lost in our own thoughts. For the millionth time, I wished I'd been better about staying in touch with Trevor. I knew he wasn't as confident in himself, and that, with distance, raised doubts, but my crush on him had confused me. I hadn't wanted him to guess how I felt, so instead, I'd let our friendship drift in a way where I wasn't there for him when he needed me.

I didn't know what he'd been dwelling on, but he was back to his cute, hesitant self, as soon as I parked my SUV. It was as I turned off the engine, and Holly asked, “Are we here yet?” that I noticed that our hands were still joined.

Were we, like, holding hands? Like, for real? I mean, yeah, we'd walked around with our arms around each other's necks as kids, wrestled, shared a bed, and even peed on the same tree in the woods at the same time, but we were grown men now.

Adults generally didn't have that kind of physical contact as friends, right? Not unless they were hooking up or whatever. What the hell was happening here? I'd planned to pursue Trevor, but was he doing the same thing? Did he like me?

To cover my confusion, I pointed out my window at the six-foot-two owner of Milton Tree Farm. "Hey, look, there's Bruce."

Trevor dropped my hand like we were kids again, playing hot potato. He rubbed the back of his neck as Bruce noticed my car and headed in our direction. "I better get Holly out of her carseat." He jumped out.

I followed at a more leisurely pace, stopping to take a couple of deep breaths first. By the time I got out and walked around the vehicle, Holly was huddling next to her daddy and Bruce was standing in front of us in all his hotness, with the equally attractive blue-eyed blond he'd introduced me to on Monday right on his heels. "Trevor Wessox, is that you?"

"Yeah." He raised a hand in an awkward little wave.

Bruce held out his hand. "Good to see you." He almost startled when the blond scooted closer. "Uh, and this is Felix."

Felix said hello politely, but he was obviously distracted by the barnacle connected to Trevor's leg. "And who is this cutie?"

Both Holly's arms encircled her father's leg, while she peeked up at Bruce and Felix shyly from under her long red lashes.

Trevor gently pulled on the pom-pom on top of her hat. "This is my daughter, Holly."

Bruce nodded his head. “I heard rumors...” He harrumphed. “But you guys know me. I don’t pay any attention to the town busybodies.” He hunched down in front of Holly. “Hello, Holly. I’m Bruce. Are you here for a Christmas tree?”

She wrinkled her nose. “I no want one, but Daddy gave our tree in the bag—wait.” She held up one finger. “Our bag was red, right, Daddy?”

He grinned. “It was, Holly-berry.”

She nodded, then turned back to Bruce. “I want the red bag tree, but Daddy said he likes it here, so...I guess.” She shrugged.

Bruce smirked, and Felix held his hand up in front of his mouth to hide his smile. “Well, I guess you better listen to Trey and your daddy very closely. They know exactly what to do. I’m looking forward to seeing what you find.”

She gazed at him doubtfully and reached a hand out for me. Still clutching Trevor’s leg with her other arm, she said, “Okay, I ready. And if we can’t found one, Daddy, maybe Mr. T will buy us a tree in a red bag.” She blinked up at me, her green eyes shimmering with concern. “Will you, Mr. T?”

“Whatever you want, Holly,” I said, meaning it to the depths of my soul.

She stared at me hard, then nodded. “You can call me Holly-berry like Daddy does.” She gave Bruce and Felix the stink-eye. “But only Daddy and Mr. T.”

Bruce held up his hands in surrender, fighting a smile. Felix leaned into his arm and said, “How freakin’ cute is she?”

And me? I melted into a besotted puddle of goo.

Chapter Nine



Trey

When I thought back to my childhood and remembered all the happy times going with Trevor and my sisters to the tree farm, I thought it couldn't get any better than that. After Trevor had moved away, I'd been happy to leave my sisters to it, often volunteering to stay and work at the bookstore. Now I understood why my parents had always accommodated how long it took us to find the perfect tree. Why they'd let us go from tree to tree, judging height, fullness, and every other little thing to determine what would be perfect for that year. Watching Holly run around, examining and inspecting each tree had filled me with a joy I never could've imagined.

"I think she had fun, don't you?" Trevor asked from the passenger seat.

“Are you kidding me? She’ll never let you go back to a fake tree again. No more red bags for you.”

Trevor sighed with happiness. “That was even cooler than I expected it to be.”

“Man, I don’t know what I expected. You asked me to go, and I wanted to spend more time with you and Holly, so I rearranged the shifts so that I could go with you. I don’t think I thought about anything more than it would be cold outside, and I hoped we found what you were looking for quickly. But wow, did you see her face when she saw how many trees there were to choose from?” I chuckled. “And then once you explained how you needed a tree that was the perfect height and width, she got so serious. It was precious and comical in equal measure.”

Trevor snickered. “I almost regretted it when it seemed like she was going to inspect every single tree Bruce had.”

“Yeah, thank goodness her legs got tired.”

“True story.” Trevor reached over and settled his hand on top of mine. “Seriously, it means a lot to me that you came with us, T. I know how hard it is for you to leave the store right now.”

This time I turned my hand over and entwined our fingers together. “No, you were right. Even my sisters urged me to spend some time enjoying the season. I can’t think of two better people to hang out with than you guys.”

He gave me a disbelieving look. “You might need to get a life if that’s really true.”

We were almost to his house, so I decided to wait and call him out on that until after we got there. I didn’t like that he made spending time with him and Holly sound like a hardship. I didn’t know if his parents had made him feel that way or what, but I wasn’t having it. Steering clear of that for now, I said, “Holly’s final decision is a beauty. Are you sure you have the space for a seven-foot tree?”

“Oh yeah, wait until you see the inside of our place. The thing I liked about it most was the vaulted ceilings. It’s going to look perfect over by the fireplace.”

“You have a fireplace? I’m so jealous. Did your old apartment have one?”

“No way. Annie and I moved in there as two broke college students. Once Holly was born, she slept in her mom’s room until...” He trailed off.

I squeezed his hand, but stayed silent. I wasn’t sure how hard to push or even what to say. Were there right words for the death of a friend, a woman who he’d shared a life and a home with, and then a child? It made my overwhelming desire to address this handholding we kept doing seem trivial. But I couldn’t help it. I hoped it meant something more to him than just being happy for us to be around each other again. It certainly made me feel more than that.

“Oh, turn right here,” he said. I practically rolled my eyes at him. When I’d texted him last night and told him what time I’d

be able to leave Season's Reading, I, in no way, had been implying that I expected him to meet me there. Yet, there he was, five minutes before I intended to leave, with Holly clinging to his thigh while he juggled a car seat in his hand. It was another sign that he didn't think he was important enough for someone to go out of their way, and it pissed me off that anyone had ever made him feel that way.

"It's this one." He pointed to the cutest little cottage I'd ever seen.

"Wow, how did you find this gem?"

"I was having so much trouble trying to find something on my own from so far away that I ended up hiring a real estate agent and telling her exactly what I wanted. I didn't expect her to come through so spectacularly."

"And you always dreamed of owning one of these cute little gingerbread-type houses." His parents' home had seemed large enough to get lost in, and I thought Trevor had often felt that way. When we'd ride our bikes around town, delivering books for my father or just hanging out with friends, Trevor would often point at the smaller places, homes where you'd have no choice but to spend time together. "Oh geez, it even has green shutters."

He snickered. "Yep, it sure does. When we first got here and Holly saw them, she was disappointed that they're not pink."

"I'm surprised you didn't repaint them immediately," I teased, without admitting that I probably would have if she'd asked me to.

“No, this is exactly what I wanted,” he said, sounding proud.

I pulled into the driveway and turned off the car. “I’m surprised the munchkin is being so quiet.”

He chuckled. “I think she fell asleep as soon as we turned on the car.”

It was a chilly day, and she’d definitely gotten her exercise running from tree to tree. I wasn’t shocked that she’d fallen asleep. “Hell, I could use a nap myself,” I said, wondering if Trevor would offer me the couch.

“Me, too.” He yawned, like our conversation had sparked his own need for a nap. “Do you mind if I carry her in before I help you carry in the tree?”

“No, actually I’ll come in with you. I’d like to get a look at where you want us to set this beast up, anyway.”

He hopped out, going straight to Holly’s door. I walked around the back and came up next to them right as he pulled her out of her seat. She immediately snuggled into him, and my heart melted a little. “Do you want me to pull out the carseat now?” I asked.

“Nah, we can come back out for that when we pull the tree off the top of your car.” I followed him up the walkway, waiting while he unlocked the front door, and marveled at how he managed to hold Holly and do everything else at the same time. I wanted to offer to help, but he did it all so efficiently that I didn’t even know what I could offer to do.

The inside of the cottage was an open concept with the living room and kitchen all within eyesight. A quick glance around confirmed how truly perfect the tree Holly picked was. I'll be right back."

Instead of waiting while he carried Holly into her room, I followed them. It didn't shock me to find her room solely decked out in *My Little Pony*. I'd noticed that not only were her shoes *My Little Pony*, but so were her boots, and one of her winter hats. Trevor laid her down, unzipping her coat and gently pulling her arms out of the sleeves. He plucked her hat off the top of her head and then removed her boots. "I don't want her to overheat," he whispered.

While he finished getting her settled, I wandered back out into the living room to give them a moment. Spotting a bookshelf along the back wall, I went over to see what Trevor's reading tastes looked like these days. With amusement, I wondered if he even owned a book that wasn't a children's book. Surprisingly, what I found were shelves of Holly's Adventures by A. Mae. What the heck?

Noise alerted me to the fact that Trevor was in the room. I whirled around. "Dude, what is this? I get that Holly loves these books, especially since this is her name, but why do you have multiple copies of each?"

He reached his hand up, rubbing the back of his neck in his characteristically nervous gesture. "I, uh, planned to tell you about that."

Wanting him to relax, I walked over to the couch and sat down. “I’m listening.”

He huffed. “First off, I’m not just some weird book hoarder. This shouldn’t be so hard to say, but it is.” He sat on the other end of the couch. “Only a few people know about A. Mae. As in Annie Mae.”

Annie? His Annie? “You mean Holly’s mom?”

“Yeah. I started writing fun little adventures when Annie was pregnant with her.”

My eyes widened. “You’re saying that you’re the author of these?”

He licked his bottom lip, and my eyes tracked the motion. I was torn between wanting to scramble across the couch and catch those pretty lips in a kiss and demanding a further explanation about Holly’s Adventures. For now, finding out about his writing career took precedence. “Why didn’t you tell me? Hell, you had a perfect opportunity in my office the day we were unpacking the ones I ordered.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess because I’m a little self-conscious about it. My mom still doesn’t see it as a real career.”

“Are you kidding me? These books fly off the shelves.” I slumped back. “No wonder the illustrations seem so familiar. You do those too, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah, of course. In the beginning, I was just so excited that there would be a baby in the house that I started

drawing pictures. Then later, as Annie's belly grew, I started adding stories and reading them to her baby bump, wanting the baby to hear the sound of my voice." He frowned. "When Annie passed away, I wanted to do something to memorialize her life, and so I created the pen name A. Mae and started publishing them."

Could this man's heart be any bigger? "No wonder Holly loves this series so much. It really is about her."

Trevor sighed and rubbed his hand across his face. "About her and the adventures she'll never actually get to have with her mom."

Scooting across the couch, I grabbed one of his hands in both of mine. "I'm so sorry you guys lost her. But, Trevor, I can't think of a greater thing for you to do to honor Annie or for a father to do for his daughter. This is incredible."

He searched my face. "You really think so?"

"God, yes." And, because I couldn't help myself, I leaned in and caught his lips with mine. Trevor stilled for a fraction of a minute, then he groaned and gripped the back of my head, deepening the kiss. And holy shit, what a kiss it was. All wet heat and passion. I pushed closer, practically putting myself into his lap.

He broke our connection and leaned his forehead on mine. "Shit, T. Is this really happening?"

"I hope so. Unless..." I began pulling away.

“No, stay here.” He moved his large hands down to my waist and gripped me firmly. “I’ve wanted to kiss you since we were in the car driving away from Christmas Falls. All of a sudden, I realized what all of my confusing thoughts had meant. Why every time we were in a room together, I popped a boner. At the time, I tried blaming it on out-of-control hormones, but that didn’t make sense. I didn’t randomly get hard with any of the girls we hung out with. It was just you.”

“Really? You mean that? Because I have to tell you, Trevor, about six months before you left, I realized that I had a crush on you.”

His head jerked back. “You’re teasing me.”

Reaching up, I cupped his cheek, rubbing my thumb over the scruff of his five o’clock shadow. “I wouldn’t lie about something like that. Especially not to you.”

“Wow. Okay, so...is this weird?”

I stared into the dark brown, borderline black depths of his eyes. The emotion swirling there matched what I felt happening in my own heart. It was a ridiculous thought, but it felt like destiny. Like maybe we were always supposed to be together. “Real people don’t have fated mates, right?” I blurted.

Trevor smiled sweetly. “Ah, there’s my book nerd. Your mind just went to some epic paranormal fated-mates fantasy, didn’t it?”

I grinned back. “Maybe you can write an epic tale of magical beings with best friends falling in love next. It can be a graphic novel.”

This time, he launched himself at me and fused our lips together. I loved kissing, I always had, but his mouth on mine transcended every experience I’d ever had before this. Lying back, I pulled Trevor down on top of me, gasping when I felt his hard length pressed firmly against my thigh. Holy shit. He really did want me. Wanting him to know just how mutual this was, I shifted around, rubbing my stiff cock against his leg. He gasped. “I guess neither of our crushes have faded, huh?” I used that word lightly, not wanting to freak him out. I was pretty sure that the puppy love I’d had for him when he left had already bloomed and morphed into full-fledged adult love now that he was back.

“I already knew mine hadn’t,” he said in a whisper. “Not to sound all stalkery, but the first time you posted a picture with a guy, I wanted to jump in a car and drive here and find you. I’ve had that thought so many times over the years, but there was Annie, then I became a daddy, and then suddenly it was just me, and I was completely responsible for this precious child and...”

“I wish you’d have reached out. I would’ve been there for you. Hell, I wish you’d have sent me a DM at some point and told me you were gay. I might have thrown all my stuff in my car and come to you.”

He rolled his eyes but ran a finger down my cheek tenderly. “You’d have never abandoned Season’s Readings or your family, and I wouldn’t have ever expected you to.”

I reached up, locking our lips together again, then whispered, “So what’s next?”

“Daddy. Daddy. Is Mr. T still here?” Holly yelled from her bedroom.

He dropped his head, snickering. “We attend to the princess.”

I cupped his head with my hands and planted one more firm kiss on his lips. “We’ll come back to this, what’s happening between us later. In the meantime, you go get Holly, and I’ll wrangle the tree inside. It’s time to make your house look like a Christmas wonderland.”

Chapter Ten



Trevor

Was I nervous about tonight? Why yes, yes I was. More than I could say, honestly. In the week since confessing our renewed? Blossoming? Feelings for each other, T and I hadn't managed to get a moment alone. Sure, there'd been some quick, stolen kisses, but between how exhausted he'd been from work and my kid—who had completely adopted Mr. T and seemed to think he only came over now to see her—the opportunity for sexy adult time hadn't happened yet.

When T knocked on the door, I checked my shirt and hair in the living room mirror one last time, then went to let him in. “Hey.”

He peered around me. “Holly's still not here, right? It's just us?”

Laughing, I shook my head. “Nope. I talked to your parents, and they said she’s doing just fine. She’s excited about spending the night there in her Greenwich room.”

He smirked, then put a hand on my chest and pushed me inside. “As cool as I think it is that my parents decorated a room completely in the Grinch for your daughter, and as proud of you as I am for letting her stay there overnight, I don’t want to talk about any of that right now.”

“You don’t?” I said, feeling a little breathless as he crept forward, crowding me into the wall by the front door.

“Tonight is all about us. Double Trouble.”

Resting my arms across his shoulders, I tilted my head. “Hm. I think I prefer the Terrific Twosome.”

Leaning closer, he said against my lips, “It’s going to be terrific alright.” And then he was kissing me, solidly, fully, consuming my mouth in a way no one ever had before. It was like he needed to inhale the air straight out of me to live.

His hands yanked my shirt out of my jeans, and I laughed against his mouth. “I thought we were going to Rudolph’s for the Holiday Cocktail Hour.”

“Mm, after.” He ripped my shirt up over my head and dropped it on the floor. “Jesus, Trevor. You’re delicious.”

Self-consciously, I patted at the little bit of stomach I had from sharing too many ice cream sundaes with my daughter without enough exercise. I hadn’t thought a lot about it in the past. It wasn’t like I was getting naked for anything other than a

shower. T's hungry gaze devouring me reassured me, though, so I dropped my arms back to my sides. "You take your shirt off, too."

He'd practically yanked his over his head before I finished speaking. The few random strands of dark hair that he'd had at fifteen had grown into a nice matting across his chest. Damn. I was here for that. Coming back toward me, T reached his hands out and undid my jeans. "This okay?"

Swallowing, I nodded my head. This is where I'd been hoping this night would lead. "I didn't expect you to jump right to dessert," I said, pushing down my nerves. It had been such a long time for me.

He shook his head slowly. "Baby, this is the appetizer." He dropped to his knees, smiling up at me as he pulled my jeans and underwear down my legs, my dick almost hitting him in the chin as it sprang up. I leaned back against the wall while he removed my shoes and socks, then he tugged my clothing the rest of the way off. "You're so freaking beautiful, Trevor."

My first impulse was to make a joke, anything to downplay how freaking special it felt to be here with him like this, but we'd known each other and been through too many awkward seasons in our life for him to let me get away with that. "Thank you."

Standing back up, he removed all of his clothes, and my gaze took in all of the beautiful hair covering his whole body, with a neatly trimmed thatch at the base of his long, thin cock. "Who'd have ever thought you'd be such a hairy beast?"

“Do you hate it?” he asked, sounding uncertain for the first time.

I licked my lips. “I want to rub all over you and feel it against my skin.”

“You’re killing me.” He was back in my space in the blink of an eye, eating at my mouth, rubbing against me so I could feel all that delicious silky hair coating his body. Scooting my back down the wall a little, I lined up my thick length with his and squeezed them together. We both groaned at the pleasure of it. He tried pushing my hand away. “I wanted to make you feel good.”

“You’re here, letting me touch you after fantasizing about it for so long. I don’t need you to do anything else but be here in the moment with me.”

“Trevor.” He licked down my jaw, biting at the juncture of my neck like the fated mates from the books he’d referenced, and I pumped our cocks together, slowing only over the heads to gather the precum. It felt so good. Unlike anything I’d ever felt.

But it was my first time in so long, so while it wasn’t unexpected to feel that tell-tale tingle in my spine, I wasn’t ready for this to be over. “No,” I whined.

T laughed against the skin on the side of my neck. “Don’t worry, babe. I’m nowhere near done with you.” And with his words, my release shot through me, coating my hand and dripping between us. T held me as I shook against him, letting

me ride out my first orgasm with another person in ages. “You ready to go out?”

Snorting, I flipped him so that he was against the wall and dropped to my knees. Looking up at him from under my eyelashes, I said, “We can catch up with whoever next time. Tonight, I’d rather stay in and eat.” Then I swallowed him down.



Pounding on the door pulled me out of the pleasant cocoon of T’s arms and back to reality.

“What time is it?” he asked on a yawn.

Taking my phone off my bedside table, I saw that I’d missed eight calls from Jean and Patrick, along with several text messages from Jean, then noticed it was only seven-thirty in the morning. “Shoot, something must be wrong with Holly. Your parents have been trying to get a hold of me.”

Clicking on Jean’s name, I quickly scrolled through her messages. “Crap. Crap. Crap.” I jumped out of bed and headed to my dresser drawers for sweats and a t-shirt. “That’s your parents knocking on the door. Holly woke up at six am, ready to come home.”

“Oh boy.” T rolled out the other side of my bed. “Do you know where my clothes are? Are they in the living room? Still?”

“No.” I pointed to the little stool by my closet. “I folded them and brought them in sometime between rounds two and three.”

He stopped, grinning. “Last night was pretty epic, huh?”

The pounding started again, so I tossed a pillow that had fallen on the floor at T’s face. “We don’t have time for that, goof.” Leaving him to get dressed, I ran out of my room and straight to the front door.

As soon as I opened it, Holly launched herself at my legs. “Daddy!”

“Hey, Holly-berry.” I bent over her and picked her up. “Are you okay?” I asked, examining her face.

She beamed at me. “I great. I had so much fun at my sleepover with Mimi and Papa. We’re going to do it all the time.” She twisted in my arms, looking at Jean. “Right, Mimi?”

“You got it, precious girl. We can’t wait to have you over again.”

Patrick stepped in past his wife, setting Holly’s small rolling case next to the wall. Right where T and I had—

Cutting off that line of thought, I said, “Thank you. And thanks for bringing her home. I’m sorry I didn’t wake up to your calls.”

Patrick smirked. “Well, I’m assuming since you had company, maybe you boys just stayed up too late.”

Holly startled me, clapping her hands. “Yeah, Daddy. I saw Mr. T’s car. Did he come over and play with you?”

Jean giggled, then covered her mouth with her hand, but the mirth in her eyes was enough to send embarrassed color flaming into my face.

“I sure did,” T answered, coming into the room. He stuck his tongue out at his mom but smiled widely at my daughter. “How’d you sleep last night, Miss Holly? Did you have fun?”

She nodded eagerly. “I did, and I so happy now.”

“Happy about what?” I asked, confused.

“My friend Johnny at school said that his new daddy stayed the night with his mommy all the time, and that’s how they got married. You have to be Daddy’s boyfriend first,” she said seriously, staring at T. “But then you can have a lot of sleepovers with Daddy, and then you can move in with us, and we can get a—”

“Dog,” T whispered at the same time Holly said it. He looked like he was about to burst into tears, and I wasn’t sure if they were happy or sad.

“Holly, honey? Was that Trey in the picture you drew for Santa Claus?”

She nodded so hard this time I almost dropped her. “Yep. I wanted another mommy because Johnny said another daddy made his mommy so happy, and she stopped being sad after his first daddy ran out like a good fernothing hoebag.” Her gaze moved to me. “I don’t know what that is, Daddy, but I know my mommy wasn’t one of those, but she did leave us, and you have to go to all my school stuff by yourself, which is

no fun for you. I feel bad leaving you when I play with my friends.

“But then I heard you talking to Mommy while you packed up your room, and you told her all about Mr. T., and how maybe you’d take her ad... uh, do what she said and talk to Mr. T about how he’d always been the one. I didn’t know what that meant either, so I asked Johnny the last time I went to school, and he told me that maybe you wanted me to have another Daddy since you like boys.” She beamed at Jean. “That makes sense, right, Mimi?”

Jean’s eyes were filled with moisture, and I was pretty sure I had tears running down my face. “Anyways,” Holly said, sounding a little exasperated that she had to explain all of this to us. “Then I met Mr. T., and he’s so handsome and nice, and he smells good. Doesn’t he smell good, Daddy?”

“He does, Holly-berry.”

“Yep. So I decided to ask Santa for him to be my new Daddy so that he’ll be around *alllll* the time, and you can be happy. Now all we need is a dog and my candy, and Santa will give me my whole list. Cool, right?”

“It’s like a Christmas miracle,” T said, stepping close and leaning into my side. He buzzed Holly’s cheek, making her giggle. “You don’t know it, but you made my Christmas wish come true, too.”

She shook her head. “Not me, silly. Santa did it. And now you can be MY T, instead of Mr. T. Cool, right?”

T swiped at the tears under his eyes, wrapping his arm around my waist and laying his cheek against my bicep. “So, so, so cool, sweetheart. I’m not sure how I lived before you.”

“It sucked. Daddy tells me that all the time.”

T snorted, and Jean choked out a laugh through her tears. “You’re not supposed to tell people that,” I said into the side of Holly’s head, then kissed her temple.

Patrick cleared his throat. “Well, how about I go open the bookstore this morning? Give you some time with Trevor and Holly, T.”

“Thanks, Dad. I appreciate that. Holly and I need to start talking about what kind of dog we want.”

Rearing back, I stared at him. “We’re getting a dog? I mean, you’re getting a dog? Wait, I’m confused.”

My daughter kissed my cheek. “Don’t worry, Daddy. Me and MY T got this.”

Wow. How quickly life changed.

Chapter Eleven



Trey

Holly screamed, “Santa came. Santa came. How did he bring in my gifts without waking me up?”

Stretching, I groaned as my body uncramped from sleeping on the floor.

Trevor turned his head toward me and smiled sleepily. “I just want you to remember that you’re the one who gave into the evil genius’ idea to sleep on the floor.”

Sticking out my tongue at him, I sat all the way up. “No touching the presents under the tree, yet,” I reminded the cute little redhead.

“Okay, MY T, I won’t,” she said, sounding a little annoyed.

“But give me a minute, and I’ll take your stocking down, and you can go through it while your daddy and I brush our teeth

and make coffee.”

“Yay.” She ran over and tackle-hugged me back to the floor.

“Thank you, MY T. I love you.”

Jesus, how did Trevor get through life without blubbering all the time? Every day Holly shocked me with another declaration of how invested she was in me remaining part of her life. Every day, her daddy did the same. “I love you, too, Holly-berry.”

We were sipping our coffee on the couch and watching her go through the treasures my mom had assembled for an extra-special holiday treat. Trevor’s phone buzzed on the side table. “Geez, for someone who says he doesn’t really have anyone, your phone goes off more than mine.”

He snickered. “Except it’s generally your mom or dad.”

“Or one of my sisters,” I mumbled into my mug. They hadn’t met Holly yet, but I was pretty sure they were in competition for World’s Greatest Aunt because they’d both been blowing Trevor’s phone up trying to determine the perfect gifts for the little girl.

He picked it up, then paused. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It’s my dad.”

“Okay, well, it is Christmas.”

“But they’re on a cruise. This doesn’t make any sense.” He sounded so lost, my heart hurt for him, but he fumbled the phone, answering it on speaker. “Hello.” He looked so

vulnerable that I placed my coffee on the floor and moved over to sit right next to him.

“Hi, son. Merry Christmas.”

“Uh. Hey, Dad. You’re calling from your cruise?”

He chuckled, sounding kind of jolly. “I am. I couldn’t miss talking to you on such a big day, could I?”

Trevor’s eyebrows crawled up his head. “Uh, no?”

His dad snorted. “Why did that sound like a question?”

“I don’t know, I guess I just thought—”

“Is that Grandfather?” Holly hollered across the room.

This time, Trevor’s dad’s laugh sounded exactly like society’s portrayal of Santa Claus. “It sure is, Holly. How are you doing, sweetie?”

She crawled up in my lap, pulling my arms around her waist. “I’m good. This is the best Christmas *ever!* I got MY T, and Daddy’s got a boyfriend, and we’re getting a dog after the new year, and I have a Mimi and Papa, and MY T said I’m going to meet my new aunts later at Mimi’s house, and they have presents for me.” She paused long enough to gulp in air, then continued. “Also, I have a Greenwich room at Papa and Mimi’s house, and at the bookstore, MY T put up a Greenwich Christmas tree, and Eddie the Greenwich was there and read us the story. Oh, Eddie was also Scrooge one week, and he was an elf, and it was all so fun. And Daddy has to send you our picture with the grafti.”

“Graffiti, Holly-berry.”

“That’s what I said. The grafiti was on a side of a building, and we pretended like we were part of the wall, and someone walking by used Daddy’s phone and took our picture. It was so fun, Grandfather.”

The old man chuckled. “Hey, kiddo. Grandfather sounds like a mouthful for you. Why don’t you just call me PopPop.”

“Like my friend Johnny calls his grandfather? Okay.”

“Geez, with this Johnny-kid,” I said under my breath.

Trevor lost his bemused expression just long enough to grin at me, then tapped Holly’s arm and put a finger to his lips for her to be quiet. “Hey, Dad. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, Trevor. I don’t really think the cruise life is for me and your mother.”

I hadn’t realized that he’d been on speaker until Trevor’s mom said, “Oh for goodness sake. We hate it, Trevor. And we miss you and Holly.” My boyfriend’s eyes went wide as saucers.

“Oh, hi, Edith. I didn’t realize you were there, too.”

She sniffed haughtily, sounding more like the woman I remembered, but then said, “Well, where else would I be? Christmas is for family, and I don’t know any of these people. For heaven’s sake, Trevor, it’s hard enough for me to be open with you. Can you imagine me with a boat full of people? I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Mom,” she said, breaking in before he called her Edith again. “I...I’m sorry, son. I’ve done a lot of soul-searching since you decided to pack you and Holly up and move back to Christmas Falls. Maybe spending the holidays at The Gingerbread Cottage next year wouldn’t be so bad. Your dad’s planning to retire, after all.”

“He is? Wait. Dad, you’re retiring?”

“I sure am, son. I want to spend more time with your mother, and if you’re going to be so far away, then we’ll need the flexibility to travel more.”

He blinked. Tired of holding her tongue, Holly said, “If Daddy can call you mom, what should I call you?”

Edith was silent for a heartbeat, then in the softest tone I’d ever heard from the woman, she said, “Whatever you want, my sweet girl. I miss you so much, and I can’t wait to bring you your Christmas presents and see all of your other gifts.”

Holly beamed at me. “My best gift is MY T, Granny. Do you know MY T? He’s Daddy’s best friend.”

“Granny?” Trevor mouthed at me, smirking. That definitely didn’t fit the stuffy woman I knew, but hell, maybe Holly saw something in her I didn’t. That seemed to have been happening since the minute I meant the little girl.

Trevor’s dad barked out a laugh. “Ha-ha. Found your way back to each other, did you?”

“We did, Mr. Wessox,” I said, finally speaking up. “Merry Christmas to you and Mrs. Wessox.”

“Oh, you’re there,” Edith said. “But it’s so ear—”

“Honey,” her husband cut her off. “Merry Christmas to you. Pass on our good wishes to your family, as well.”

She cleared her throat. “Merry Christmas, Trey. Let’s work on what you should call us after we get home. I can only handle so much change in one day.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I winked at Trevor.

“Trevor, is it okay if we come visit when we get home? I realize I spoke out of turn saying something to Holly before asking you.”

“Of course, you can come, Granny. Daddy was sad to not have you and PopPop with us. It’ll be fun. You can even sleep in my *My Little Pony* Room with me.”

There were tears in Edith’s voice as she said, “Thank you. I’ll see you soon.”

“See you soon. Bye, PopPop.” Holly jumped off my lap and went back to her stocking on the floor.

“Trevor. Son, you still there?”

“I am, Dad,” he said, his normal warmth creeping back into his voice and a genuine smile emerging on his face.

“You’re going to the Readings’ today?”

“I am. After Holly opens her gifts from us and we get dressed, we’re heading over.”

He blew out a breath. “I’m so relieved to hear that. I wasn’t sure which of your friends were still in Christmas Falls, and I

worried about you being alone. I should've known better. Patrick and Jean always loved you like one of your own, so I should've known they'd take care of you."

Trevor looked on the verge of tears. Happy tears, but still. "We've got him, Mr. Wessox. My mom told everyone that her prodigal son had returned."

He laughed. "That sounds like your mom. Okay, well, we'll ring off here for now. I have to check on my wife, anyway. Have a wonderful day, and we'll make plans to get there as soon as we get back, Trevor. Love you." Then he hung up.

Trevor snuggled me into him, moving around so we were shoulder to shoulder. "Did that really just happen? Did my parents sound like they missed me? Did my mother really say she'd be willing to spend time in Christmas Falls?"

I kissed his temple. "Maybe the Ghost of Christmas Future haunted them on their cruise."

He snorted. "It does feel a lot like a Christmas miracle."

"This whole holiday has felt like a miracle." Turning my head on the couch, I looked into his eyes and said, "You are my miracle."

Holly crawled onto my lap, frowning. "Me, too, MY T?"

Hugging her close, I kissed her cheek and said, "Both of you."

She jumped back down again. Trevor smiled after her fondly, then his gaze moved to meet mine. "I love you, Trey. Thank you for making all my dreams come true." He leaned in, kissing me sweetly.

Pulling back, I lifted a hand to caress his cheek. “Thank you for reminding me that I had dreams beyond Season’s Readings in the first place. I’d forgotten. You and Holly have given me more than I ever knew I needed.” He drew me back in, worshiping my mouth.

“My Daddy and MY T, kissing in the tree, d. B. r. t. G.” Holly laughed. “Johnny taught me that.”

We broke apart, snickering against each other’s lips. “I think moving your daughter away from this Johnny character was the greatest gift you ever gave yourself.”

He smiled softly. “Maybe he’ll find his way to Christmas Falls twenty years from now. After all, in the arms of the boy who told me everything and I followed around at that age ended up being exactly where I’m meant to be.”



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