

A romantic winter scene at night. A man in a dark jacket is lifting a woman in a red jacket and pink hat. They are in front of a cozy, snow-covered house with warm lights. The scene is framed by a decorative border with holly leaves and stars. The sky is dark blue with falling snow and warm string lights.

# MARIANNE RICE

## WRAPPED IN Comfort

A BALSAM GROVE  
CHRISTMAS

Decorative snowflakes and holly leaves are positioned around the text at the bottom of the page.

Wrapped in Comfort  
A Balsam Grove Christmas

# Wrapped in Comfort

A Balsam Grove Christmas

Marianne Rice

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By Marianne Rice

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For more information on the author and her works, please see  
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## CHAPTER ONE

---

“What do you think the mayor is going to come up with tonight?” Evie whispers in my ear.

“Who knows? She’s been on a mission for cross promoting our businesses ever since you and my brother joined forces.”

“Hey. It turned out pretty well.” My sister-in-law beams.

I give her a gentle elbow to the ribs as we make our way up the stairs to the town hall. “Not at first. You and Grant were fiercely competitive in the beginning.”

“Aw, come on, Marley. There’s nothing wrong with healthy competition.”

Evie and Grant had both wanted the same rental space for their respective bakeries, and Mayor Pearl made them have a bake-off contest during the Fall Festival last year. Since the votes were a tie, the mayor suggested they share the space, dividing it in half.

They made it work, with Grant’s Sweet Rewards on one side and Evie’s allergy-friendly donut shop, The Friendly Donut on the other. It didn’t take long for them to fall in love and for my brother to propose. Their spring wedding was stunning, and they’re both still glowing in marital bliss.

I’m a million percent happy for them. “True. I did score the most amazing sister-in-law from the mayor’s matchmaking scheme.”

“You still think that was her intent?” Evie holds the door open for me and she follows me inside.

“I wouldn’t put it past her.”

The meeting room is already full of business owners murmuring about what shenanigans the mayor has up her sleeve. For the nine years she’s been mayor, she’s done an awesome job at putting our small town in the middle of Maine on the map. There are still the naysayers who aren’t a fan of our town being Christmas-themed twelve months out of the

year, but it seems to keep businesses in the black, so the complainers are few and far between.

No doubt tonight's town hall meeting will unveil a new addition to our holiday festivities. Evie and I find three seats near the middle, and she sets her purse on the one next to her, saving it for Grant.

"Hey, guys. Any inside scoop on the mayor?" Amelia gives us a hug from behind. Her signature scent, a blend of coffee, cinnamon, and earth, swirls around us.

"Not even a teaspoon." Evie turns and shakes her head. I know the moment my brother arrives by the ear-to-ear smile on her face. She waves to him unnecessarily. She's a beacon of light to my brother. He can pick her out of a mosh pit.

"Hey, beautiful." He kisses her on the cheek before taking the seat next to her.

"Seriously. No need for PDA. You see each other all day at work."

"I've been helping Dad out all afternoon." Grant picks up his phone. "I haven't seen my blushing bride in three hours."

I tilt my head to Amelia sitting behind us and roll my eyes. "Can you ask Mr. Bigelow to switch seats with me so I don't have to listen to them gush all over each other for the next two hours?"

Amelia giggles and glances next to her where Mr. Bigelow hangs his head in deep sleep. He's an honorary part of the community. Partially blind, mostly deaf, and Mayor Pearl's older brother. She takes him to every meeting to get him out of the house, although I'm pretty sure he'd be perfectly content missing out on all the town happenings.

"By the lack of open seats, I'd say most business owners are here." Mayor Pearl bangs her gavel, more so because it's fun than out of necessity.

When the room quiets, she starts with accolades on the Fall Festival. It was another success with the addition of the pumpkin catapult bringing in media attention. I never made it

out to the fields but heard from many of the guests at my inn that they had a blast.

“As we know, being the Christmas capital of the state of Maine, if not New England, has its responsibilities. It’s a constant balance of adding more to our festivities to draw in visitors without taking away the intimacy of our small town. One of our biggest draws is our tree lighting after Thanksgiving and the snowman contest mid-month. This year, we’ll be adding a special parade the first weekend in December.”

“We host nearly a dozen parades in town. What makes this one different?” Of course it’s Blaine Foster who asks.

He may have grown up in Balsam Grove, but he’s not a small-town guy. He and my brother have been best friends since preschool and ventured off to Connecticut for college with big dreams of working in the corporate world in the city, only to come back to Balsam Grove a few years later.

It’s always made sense for my brother; he’s happy and content with a simple life, whereas Blaine is more... just more. His personality is too big for the town, even if his pub, Frosty’s, is always busy.

From what I’ve heard over the years, he never wanted to take over his family’s pub. It’s why he convinced Grant to leave the state, but they both came back. I’ve always sensed reluctance on Blaine’s part, not that he’d tell me as much.

The only time he talks to me is to poke fun at me. I’m the annoying little sister of his best friend, and he never lets me forget it.

“This parade is called The Festival of Lights, and all of you will be putting it on.” The mayor spreads her arms out at the crowd.

There’s rumbling, some good, some negative.

“I don’t have time to run my business and make a float,” Willa Fitzgerald whines. She’s nearing retirement and rumor has it she plans on putting Pawsitivity up for sale after the holiday season.

From what I've seen, she has a constant flow of customers buying her homemade pet food and treats, as well as her handmade toys.

"We're not expecting floats," the mayor says. "Be creative. It doesn't have to be fancy. It can be your company or personal truck, a trailer, or anything you want. Decorate it with lights and flash your business logo. We'll be pairing you up as well. Working together is smart for business. Cross-promotion shows we're a close-knit community. It's low-key but fun for families to watch."

She spins the Bingo wheel that the town uses for their Tuesday night Bingo games and motions to her younger brother, Bob Myers, to join her up front.

"Each ball represents a business. We'll draw two, and those two businesses will work together on their entry."

"Entry?" Sam from Cut Me Some Slack, whines. His barbershop hasn't changed since I remember going in with Grant when he was a little boy. "I thought this was low-key."

Mayor Pearl laughs. "Oh, it is. But to get the community more involved, they'll be voting on their favorite... moving display, we'll call it. The winners get free advertising in the Balsam Grove Chronicle for a year."

"This will be fun." Evie rubs her hands together.

There are a few more questions before the mayor starts drawing the balls. There are twenty-two businesses and she's four teams in when she draws Sweet Rewards.

"And joining Grant Hudson is..." She pulls another ball and chuckles. "His lovely bride and The Friendly Donut."

"Rigged," Blaine hollers from the other side of the room. Even with his dancing blue eyes and that deep dimple, he still irritates me. Although, I have the same sense he does. It would be just like the mayor to pair them up. Quite unfair.

More businesses are matched, and I scan the room looking to see who hasn't been picked yet. The Mug Shop is drawn, and Amelia taps her feet in nervous excitement behind me.

“Maybe we’ll get paired up, Marley.”

That would be fun. My guests love her coffee. Amelia is a breath of fresh air. Always so positive and cheerful. She’s the one who initiates our girls’ nights, otherwise Evie and I would rarely go out. Well, Evie would still be out and about with my brother, but I rarely leave the inn.

The Christmas Farm Inn is the only accommodation in Balsam Grove, but there are a few other small hotels in nearby towns. My grandparents opened it fifty years ago before there were zoning regulations limiting hotels and inns to open in town. When they retired four years ago, I was more than eager to take over.

Grant and I grew up here, and we loved spending summers at the inn while our parents took grown-up vacations, as we called them. Following in my grandmother’s footsteps and running the inn has always been my dream.

“Bearbrook Insurance.” The mayor announces Amelia’s partner.

“Bummer.”

“Bob and Linda will be great to work with.” They’re a sweet couple and will be a nice complement to Amelia.

I drum my fingers on my thigh waiting my turn. Mayor Pearl smiles across the room at me. “The Christmas Farm Inn. Let’s see who the lucky person is who gets to work with Marley Hudson. We all know what a wonderful job she does decorating the inn.” She cranks the Bingo machine and takes out a ball, the smile on her face revealing her excitement at the match. “The Frosty Glass. Blaine, you’re fortunate to be matched so well.”

“Fortunate? Are you kidding me?” He pushes off the wall. “Marley’s gonna micro-manage this to death. She’ll have us dressed in old-fashioned lace and pink flowers. Not the image I’m going for at Frosty’s.”

Heat floods my face at his blatant rudeness, and I expect people to stick up for me, at least my brother. Grant chuckles

and reaches across Evie to pat my knee. “I’ll keep her in check, bud,” he calls across the hall to Blaine.

Rage and embarrassment rush through my veins, and I no longer hear the final pairings. I don’t care. I don’t care about this stupid parade or Blaine or his stupid dimple. As soon as Mayor Pearl ends the meeting, I jump to my feet and rush for the door.

“Hey, sis.” Grant grabs my arm. “We’re heading over to the pub for drinks and apps. Come join us.”

“I’d rather stab my eye with a Christmas tree.”



## CHAPTER TWO

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It's just my luck I get paired up with her. There are perfectionists, and then there's Marley Hudson. Nothing is ever good enough, and she can find the tiniest detail to criticize me in everything I do. Yeah, so I may do the same to her, but only because it's fun to rile her up.

If she wasn't always so put together, she'd be easier to deal with. No matter the day, her blonde hair is in a high and tight ponytail, her cheeks rosy—mostly from working so darn hard, not from makeup—and long, dark lashes frame her Christmas tree green eyes.

It's not that I spend much time checking her out. I practically grew up with her. She was always trying to tag along with Grant and me when we were kids. We didn't mind so much when we were all in elementary school, but when we entered middle school and discovered girls were pretty and not covered in cooties, we wanted nothing to do with Mars.

*She* was still covered in cooties. By the time she started middle school, and her cooties went away, Grant and I were in high school and busy with sports. The girls that held our attention played sports as well. *High school* sports, not middle school volleyball. Not dance class on the weekends. They didn't choose to spend their free time in the kitchen with their grandmother or organize cabinets for fun.

"No need to look so down." Grant gives me a soft punch in the arm. "At least you don't have to worry about coming up with an idea for the parade. You know Mars is gonna have it all planned out before she gets back to the inn tonight."

I watch Marley hug Evie and Amelia before she gets into her economical Subaru.

"Yeah. Sure." I tug my winter hat lower on my head and nod over my shoulder toward my pub. "You guys coming over for some grub before heading home?"

"That's the plan. Evie's almost as organized as Mars. No doubt she has a plan for my truck already."



I shove my hands deep into my coat pockets and walk next to Amelia as Grant and Evie giggle behind us.

“I never pegged you as the Grinch’s cousin.” Amelia bumps her shoulder into mine.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She snorts. “Please. Your outburst was a bit over the top. Someday you and Marley are going to have to hash out whatever has you both on edge around each other.”

“I’m not on edge.”

Amelia snorts again. I’ve known her just as long as Marley, but Amelia has never... annoyed me. We dated for about ten minutes. She treated me like gum stuck to the bottom of her shoe for another ten minutes, then all was forgotten.

With her bright blue eyes and bubbly personality, she catches the eye of nearly every male who steps into her coffee shop, but there’s no spark between us. At least, not in a romantic way.

“You were kinda rude to Marley. And in front of the entire town.”

“No need to be so dramatic, Meels. There were maybe forty people in the town hall.”

“All prominent business owners.”

I hold back my laugh. Prominent isn’t exactly a word I’d use to describe our small town of Balsam Grove. We’re quiet, quaint, and according to social media, cute. Residents either own a small business, run a farm, or drive an hour into Portland for work. Those who commute don’t have as much time to be involved with town events and politics. Leave that to the small business owners.

Something I never wanted or thought I’d be. My time at UConn with Grant was exactly what I needed to escape the walls that closed around me in Balsam Grove. It’s not like my childhood was bad, it just wasn’t storybook-perfect like Grant and Marley’s.

“Marley can really use a friend right now, so try not to be a jerk to her, okay?”

Amelia’s words bring me back to the present. I hold the door open to Frosty’s for her. “Why? What’s going on with her?”

“Please tell me you still have hot apple cider. I’m freezing.” Evie rubs her hands together as she moves past me into the pub.

“Throw in a basket of fries and a heaping plate of chicken nachos.” Grant pats my shoulder and guides the ladies to the bar.

I want to ask Amelia about Marley again but not with an audience. Grant hasn’t said anything about Marley going through a tough time. Maybe she had a bad breakup? But I’d hear if she was dating someone. Not only because we live in a small town but because Grant is an overprotective brother and would make me go on a stakeout with him to investigate the guy.

We’ve done it before, which could be why her boyfriends never last very long. I can’t remember the last time she was serious about a guy. Not since Grant and I were away in college, is my guess.

I shouldn’t care. I *don’t* care. Well, maybe a little bit, but only because she’s my best friend’s sister and it would hurt Grant if Marley got hurt.

I make their drinks before heading back to the kitchen and tossing some fries in the fryer.

“Thought you were off tonight, boss.” Greg slides a burger on a plate and garnishes it with a pickle. “Order’s ready Kim.”

“Do you still need me to work the bar, Blaine?” Kim stacks two plates on her left forearm and balances a platter of chicken wings in the other hand.

I hadn’t planned on working tonight, but since I’m here, I might as well multi-task. Especially if Grant and Amelia are going to give me a hard time about being rude to Marley.

“I can cover the rest of your shift unless you want to stay on.”

“You sure?”

“We close in an hour. Might as well get a head start home.”

She smiles wide. “Thanks, Blaine. Madison may still be awake. I hate the nights I’m not home to read her a bedtime story.”

Normally Kim works days while her kids are in preschool and elementary school, but she offered to help me out tonight while I went to the town meeting.

“I’ll put your tips in the safe. Head on home.” I take the plates from her. “Where are they going?”

“Table six. Thanks again, Blaine.” She hurries to the back door and is gone before I even take a step.

A few minutes later, after I set a heaping plate of nachos and fries in front of my friends, I pour myself an ale and tap my glass with Grant’s. “How much did you pay off the mayor to get *randomly* paired up with your beautiful wife?”

Evie giggles next to him. “There’s no way she could have rigged the ping-pong balls. I chalk it up to fate.”

I snicker. “You haven’t been around long enough to trust Pearl had it staged. Did you notice she never once showed us the names written on the balls? We all trusted her pairings.”

“So what does it say about her matching you with Marley?” Evie smirks behind her wine glass.

My eye twitches and I glance at Grant’s furrowed brows. “My guess is she knows how close our families are and that Blaine will need all the help he can get in decorating. Guys aren’t into this kind of thing. If you think about it, we’re all kinda matched that way. Including you, Amelia.”

“Um, gender stereotyping much, are we?” Amelia tilts her head to the side.

“Not really. Willa Fitzgerald got matched with Sara Kendrick.” Grant shrugs.

“Willa’s arthritis prevents her from doing too much, and Sara always has the lobby of Balsam Grove Savings decked out no matter the holiday. I have no doubt they were matched because of *need* and not gender roles.”

“That makes sense,” Evie adds.

“No matter her strategy, what’s done is done.” I finish my beer and put my empty mug in the dirty dish bin.

“What’s up with the mood? Working with my sister isn’t exactly a death sentence. Knowing Mars, she’s back at the inn drafting a plan already.”

“Exactly what I’m worried about.”

Grant rests his elbows on the bar and leans toward me. “You okay, B? It’s not like you to get so worked up over something like this.”

He’s right. If anything, I get called out for being happy-go-lucky all the time. The life of the party. Carefree. Funny and flirtatious. Except around Marley.

“Long day, I guess. And a busy season ahead of us with no break in sight.”

Grant nods. “Busy also means business is good.”

Evie rests her chin on Grant’s shoulder and whispers something in his ear. Like the lovesick husband he is, he ignores me and gets lost in conversation and giggles with his wife.

I can’t explain the issue I have with Marley to Grant. Heck, I don’t even understand it myself. We argue like brother and sister, only we don’t have the good moments to balance it. Deep down, I’m sure I can psychoanalyze our weird relationship, but I don’t.

Not because I don’t want to, but because I’m afraid of what I’ll discover.

••••

IT’S BEEN FIVE DAYS since Mayor Pearl *volun-told* business owners in town we’d be participating in the light

parade. I've done everything I can to avoid thinking about it—and Marley—but I'm not a jerk. I won't leave her to do this whole stupid thing on her own, not that she'd mind.

Tuesdays are typically slow around town, and I don't have to be at the pub until five, so I head to the Mug Shop for a morning burst of caffeine.

“Hey, Blaine. You're not usually up and about this early.”

I glance at the wall clock behind Amelia. “It's nine.”

“Exactly,” she says with a smile. “What can I get ya?”

I work late nights and have a hard time sleeping after work, so sleeping in until eight isn't exactly *sleeping in*. If I'm lucky, I get a solid seven hours of sleep. Usually six since I have a hard time pulling myself away from my bookkeeping. It's the part of my job I enjoy the most. I'd love to be behind the bar less and managing accounts more. That's what I have a degree in, not slinging drinks.

But I'm a social person and working a nine-to-five in front of a computer screen would get old real fast. For now, the balance between the two works for me. Someday, I'd like to put my accounting degree to better use.

“I'll take the biggest coffee you've got. The darker the better.” I watch as she reaches for a tall paper cup. When she slides the coffee across the counter to me, I tip my chin at the chalkboard hanging on the wall. “Uh, what does Marley drink?”

The corner of Amelia's lip lifts. “You're bringing Marley a coffee?”

I roll my eyes. “We're working together on that ridiculous parade of lights thing, remember? I've been ignoring her and figured I should kiss up a little with some of the finest coffee in town.”

“Kissing up to both of us now, huh?” She reaches for another tall cup and fills it with coffee and a few other ingredients I can't place. “Tell her I said hi.”

“Better yet. How about I barista for you and you go over to the inn and fill in for me?”

“That offer was on the table five days ago. Except for you being my barista. Beers and cocktails, you know. Latte, cappuccino, easy on the foam, with a shot of espresso, you don’t.”

“My head already hurts.” I take a sip of my simple black coffee and let out a deep sigh. “If you don’t hear from me soon, send in the calvary.”

“I never knew you to be so dramatic.”

“Have you ever worked on a project with Marley?”

“Yeah. We’ve been on the Fall Festival committee together for years. She’s detail-orientated, thorough, and a perfectionist.”

“Can’t we wrap my truck in a few strands of lights and call it good?”

“Did I forget to mention competitive? It doesn’t matter the prize.”

“This is exactly what I’m worried about.”

Amelia nods. “I guess I see your point. Maybe you should go over to Frosty’s first and put a shot of whiskey in your coffee.”

“Not a bad idea.” I give her a wink and shove a few bills into her tip jar. “Thanks for this.” I hold up Marley’s coffee. “Although, maybe adding a sedative to it would be better. Or at least decaf.”

I hear Amelia’s chuckle as I leave the shop. She’s right. I am being overly dramatic about working with Marley. Chances are she’ll be happier if I sit back and let her take charge. I’ll do the heavy lifting, offer the use of my truck, and call it good.

We can get along for a few hours of planning. The parade is in two weeks. After that, we can go our separate ways again, only dealing with each other with Grant as a buffer.



## CHAPTER THREE

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I'm on my hands and knees, my head deep in my oven, when I hear the kitchen door open and close behind me. Grant, Evie, and Amelia are the only ones who use the back door. Even my parents come in the front when they stop by.

This is a busy time of morning for their shops though, so I'm surprised one of them is here. I lower myself to the ground and take off my rubber gloves.

"Slow business—" I lift my head and am shocked to see Blaine standing in my kitchen, a coffee in each hand.

He's never come by the inn without Grant in tow. We don't have that kind of relationship. Friends. Acquaintances. I'm not even sure what we are. He's my brother's best friend. He's like a second son to my parents. To me, he's just... Blaine.

"Hey." He holds out a cup from the Mug Shop to me.

I wipe my hands on my knees and push myself to stand. Eyeing him suspiciously, I take the coffee. "Um. Thanks. What are you doing here?"

I take a sip to distract my eyes from noticing how his chest fills out his hoodie and how his bright blue eyes stand out against the darkness of his hair. The coffee goes down smoothly, and I can't help my moan. It's Amelia's vanilla roast with a touch of cinnamon and maple flavoring.

"How did you know? This is my favorite."

Blaine's big shoulders lift in a shrug. "I asked Amelia what kind of coffee you like."

It shouldn't have warmed my heart that he asked. Nope. It doesn't. Not at all. It's the coffee that warms me on the inside. We stand in awkward silence as we both sip from our paper cups.

This is new. No Grant to lead the conversation or other people to distract us. We've known each other for more than twenty years yet I can't think of a time when it was just Blaine and me.



“Sorry to pull you from what looks to be a great time.” Blaine glances at the open oven door. “I figured I’d come by so we can talk about the parade. Grant said Tuesday is usually your slow day.”

“You told Grant you were coming by?” Funny. That’s something he normally would have mentioned this morning when he stopped by with breakfast pastries for my guests.

“Not today. Just... in general.”

And he remembered. My stomach betrays me with flutters of appreciation. I take another sip of my coffee and move to the sink to wash my hands.

“I sketched out a few ideas.”

“I’ll take a look.”

“They’re not exactly legible. I hadn’t drawn them expecting anyone to look at them but me.”

I don’t miss the low growl coming from his chest. “You realize we’re in this together, right? That both of our businesses will be displayed and talked about? Or is it just about you?”

I spin around and jab my finger in the air. “Just about *me*? I’m the one who’s been thinking about this nonstop for the past five days and coming up with ideas. What have you done?”

“I knew you’d be like this.”

“That I’d be like what?” He heads for the door, and I pick up my discarded rubber glove and fling it at his back.

“High maintenance,” he says, scooping my glove off the floor.

“How is spending hours and hours planning our float while you do nothing but flirt with your patrons *high maintenance*?” I air quote.

“It’s who you are, Marley.” He slams the door behind him, and I pick up the other glove, chucking it across the room.

“Stupid, arrogant, annoying, jerk.” I stomp over to my gloves, yank them on, and go back to scrubbing my oven. Next, I’ll tackle the six toilets in the inn.

A job much preferred over being with Blaine stupid annoying face Foster.

••••

I’M FOLDING LAUNDRY later in the afternoon in my private living quarters when Evie stops by. “Hey, Evie. Are we still on for dinner and a movie next Monday night?”

“I don’t know how you do that.” Evie picks up the perfect square. “This is a king-size fitted sheet, right?”

“Queen.” I shake out the matching top sheet and begin folding.

“I need to learn your secret. No matter how hard I try, it always looks like I wadded up the sheet and shoved it in the linen closet.”

“Want a lesson?”

“Not really. It’s much easier my way.”

I love my sister-in-law. She’s refreshingly honest and is perfect for my brother. “No shame in that.”

She plops in the blue and white plaid lounge. “Yes to Monday, only if you tell me about this morning.”

“This morning?” I feign confusion. “My oven sparkles, as do the toilets. I’d offer you tips and secrets on the best cleaning products, but your house is always immaculate, so I doubt you need them.”

“Nice try.”

“Okay. Maybe not immaculate, but very clean.”

“The fact that you’re purposely avoiding and evading, poorly, I might add, tells me things either went really well or terribly wrong.”

“*Things?* They look brand new.”

“Marley. I know Blaine was here.”

“Figures he’d go to Grant and complain about me.”

“He didn’t say anything to Grant.”

“He whined about me to you? The nerve of that man. He should assume you’d take my side over his despite your loyalty to Grant. You do, don’t you? Take my side?”

“If only I was aware of the argument on each side.”

I slide the stack of folded linens to the side of the couch and sit across from her. “What did Blaine say?”

Evie tucks her feet under her and tilts her head to the side. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? What, he storms out of here and marches to you guys and says nothing? If that were the case, what’s with the third degree?”

She raises a brow and I’m about to apologize for being harsh with her when she belts out a laugh.

“Oh, honey. I don’t think I can wait another week for our dinner and a movie night. Tell me what happened today.”

“First, tell me how you knew Blaine stopped by.”

“Amelia came running across the street this morning after he bought you your favorite coffee.”

After reflecting on it, it wasn’t a big deal that he brought me one. It only made sense to ask Amelia what I drank. Anyone would have done the same.

“He came by, gave me the coffee Amelia made because *she* knows what I like to drink, we argued, and he left.”

“What did you argue about?”

“The parade.”

“What’s the problem with it?”

I think back to our argument. “Honestly? I have no idea. It doesn’t matter what I say or do. He treats me like an annoying gnat.”

“I’ve always wondered what the deal was between you two. Grant isn’t helpful with information.”

“You’ve talked to my brother about Blaine and me?”

“Subtly.”

“Why?”

“Because the tension between you two makes no sense.”

“Sure it does. I’m mature and Blaine is immature. I’m serious and he’s... well, he doesn’t take anything seriously.”

“He’s taking this parade thing seriously.”

“If that were the case, he would have a plan in place already.”

“Isn’t that why he came by this morning?”

“So he says.”

“What happened?”

I shrug. “I offered to show him some of the sketches and notes I came up with and he flipped.”

“He didn’t like your ideas?”

“I never got the chance to show him.”

Evie scratches her head. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“Exactly. He’s a petulant child who stormed off because he had nothing to offer.”

“Well, it’s a good thing the parade isn’t for two weeks. Maybe in a few days, you’ll both have cooled off.”

“I don’t need him anyway. I’ve got it all figured out.”

“Could that be part of the problem? Maybe Blaine wants to be part of the planning process as well.”

“Doubtful. He’s more about showing up for the party than planning it.”

At least, that’s what I’ve told myself over the years.



## CHAPTER FOUR

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**M**onday nights aren't terribly busy, so I'm usually able to multitask. I've got my laptop set up at the far end of the bar where I play around with my stock market portfolio while toggling back and forth between payroll and inventory.

"What's on special?" Grant slides into a seat across from me.

I glance around and raise my brow. "No Evie? You two are usually glued to each other. Don't tell me there's trouble in paradise."

My best friend grins from ear to ear. "Paradise is amazing. She's out with Mars and Amelia having a girls' night."

"Burger and a beer then?"

"You know me well." I pour his drink and type in his order. "How's it going with my sister?"

"As you'd expect."

Grant gives me a sympathetic sigh. "Hey, at least you don't have to worry about her not pulling her weight. It's just a fun parade. Stakes are low. With Mars, I've always found it easier to let her do her thing and go with the flow."

That's normally how I roll as well, but Marley passing me off as incompetent annoys the heck out of me.

"You and your parents have always let her get her way. It's why she's a spoiled brat now." I regret my words before they even come out of my mouth.

Grant isn't offended, though. He laughs in agreement. "You're probably right. Except for being a brat. Sure, we thought so when we were kids, but Mars has her head on straight. She works hard and has made some big improvements to the Christmas Farm Inn."

They've always been close, even when we pushed her away when we were teens. Grant has a big heart, as does his sister. Their squabbles growing up were typical for their ages, and I had fun joining in.

As an only child, I loved feeling like part of their family not only for the good times and family outings but during the arguments as well.

“I take it Marley’s gonna outshine us all with what she has planned, huh? Did she promise you to secrecy?”

Guilt washes over me. The fact that she hadn’t run to her brother to complain about me is telling. Telling of what, I have no idea. I suppose I owe her an apology for being so temperamental.

“I’m unable to tell you about the plans for our lights.” There. I didn’t reveal what I jerk I’ve been and didn’t lie to my best friend either.

Tomorrow I’ll tuck my tail between my legs and apologize. I don’t have a clue what I’m apologizing for other than being annoyed that Marley worked on the ideas without me. I close my eyes and tip my chin to my chest.

Now that I playback our weird argument, I see the ridiculousness in it. Why should it matter that she jotted down some ideas? I should have done the same. I wish I understood why Marley ties me up in knots.

“What’s up with the face?”

I run a hand through my hair. “Just figuring out a few things I’ve gotta juggle this week.”

“Overbooked yourself with too many dates? You’ve always been a ladies’ man.”

If only. I haven’t been on a date in a few months. I don’t like to date women in Balsam Grove. Since I’m not interested in the long haul, it only makes things awkward running into women in town, so I don’t date often, much to Grant’s disbelief.

“Since my wingman ditched me for married life, it’s all I can do to stay on top of my social calendar.” Not exactly a lie. I’m not keeping up with it because it’s practically empty.

Grant’s burger comes out, and I help myself to half his fries. He sticks around and we watch the Bruins game on one

of the five flatscreen TVs I have around the bar. When his phone vibrates and his face lights up, I know our impromptu guys' night is over.

“Evie’s on her way back home.”

“Man. I hope I never get lovesick the way you two are. It’s kinda disgusting.”

“You should try it sometime, B. Maybe we can go on a double date. Evie and I can vet your women for you. Find you someone nice to settle down with.” He shrugs into his coat and tosses a few bills on the bar, even though he knows how much I hate taking his money. He and Evie give me an endless supply of donuts and pastries to keep us even.

“Who says I want to settle down?”

“When you meet the right woman, you’ll want it too.”

The bar is empty and only a few lingering customers are finishing their late-night dinners in the dining area, so I open up my laptop and get back to work.

Only it’s not today’s stock market numbers or financial reports that I pull up. Instead, I research holiday light displays.

••••

“WOW. TWO TUESDAYS IN a row. You and Marley must have some pretty big plans for your display.” Amelia makes my simple, dark coffee and starts on the concoction for Marley.

“What makes you think I’m going over to the inn?”

“I’m a trained professional. It’s my business to know these things.”

“Isn’t that my line as a bartender?”

“Oh, but you’re so much more than that.” She hands me the two coffees. “Owning and managing such a popular pub is a full-time job and then some. The Mug Shop eats up fifty-plus hours of my week and I’m not open for nearly as many hours as Frosty’s, nor do I have the kitchen or staff you have. Don’t sell yourself short, Blaine.”



“Wow. That’s quite the compliment, Meels.” I’ve known her my whole life and we’ve always gotten along great. She’s fishing for information by trying to get on my good side. Which she’s always on. “What is it you want from me?”

“Oh, nothing.” She lets out a dramatic sigh. “I just find it interesting how close-lipped you and Marley are about your display.”

“She hasn’t said anything to you?”

“About what?” Amelia bats her eyelashes at me. “You mean what happened last Tuesday?”

I won’t take the bait. She’s not a spreader of gossip, but Amelia sure loves to hear it.

“What do you know about what happened last Tuesday?” As soon as I say the words, Amelia’s eyes grow round with interest. “I didn’t mean it that way. Nothing *happened* last week.”

She rests her hip against the counter and folds her arms across her chest. “Why so defensive, Blaine?”

“I didn’t do anything wrong.” Her brow lifts so high it practically touches her hairline. “I didn’t. Stop making trouble where there isn’t any.”

“Wow. Must have been an intense few hours together.”

I laugh. “Hours? I was there for less than five minutes before Marley started—” I stop myself before I dig my hole any deeper.

Amelia and I may be friends, but she and Marley are tight. If there are sides to be taken, she won’t be on mine. However, getting her to see my side wouldn’t be a bad idea.

“It’s no secret Marley and I don’t always see eye-to-eye. We’re too different, and we have different ideas when it comes to this project.”

That wasn’t why we argued last week. I didn’t even get to see her ideas or share mine. Not that I had any at the time.

“What are they?”

I narrow my eyes at her and give her a cheeky grin. “Nice try, Meels. I see what you’re doing, trying to steal our plans. Not a chance in the world. Marley and I are gonna win this competition. Thanks for the coffee.”

With a new mission to actually work together with Marley and show everyone else up, I hop in my truck and drive out to the inn. I should have given her a heads-up that I’d be stopping by again, but it’s only ten minutes down the road. There’s no point in calling now.

There’s only one car in the guest parking lot, and I pull my truck next to it. I grab the two coffees and head down the path to the back door. This time, I knock before letting myself in. I wait a minute, and after no response, I knock again. She either didn’t hear me the first time or is intentionally ignoring me.

I try the handle and am not sure if I’m pleased or disappointed when it turns. The kitchen is empty and smells like garlic and basil. I’d eat steak and potatoes for breakfast any day of the week, but savory is an unusual choice for breakfast for Marley. At least, I’d think it unusual for her.

I’ve had breakfast with her dozens of times over the years. I spent more evenings and mornings at the Hudson family home than my own right up until Grant and I took off for college in Connecticut.

“Marley?” I call out and pause to listen for movement about the inn. When I hear nothing in reply, I set the two coffees on the butcher block island and go in search of her. She’s not in the living room.

The living area spans the entire front of the house, broken up only by the entryway and staircase. The wood stove is putting out some serious heat, which tells me she’s been feeding the fire for a few hours if not all night.

I glance around the room, taking in more details than I’ve noticed the other times I’ve been here. Always with Grant and always with a purpose, I’ve never been here just to hang out.

Not that I plan on hanging out with Marley today either. We have work to do. I move to the mantle and pick up the

framed photographs. Grant and Evie on their wedding day, a family photo with her parents on Christmas a dozen years ago, Marley and Grant on a boat out on the lake. Marley sandwiched between her grandparents in front of the inn.

I move to the other side of the room by the arrangement of chairs and a small burgundy sofa. A loveseat, her parents would call it. There's enough furniture to comfortably seat ten people. A bookshelf filled with a variety of genres decorates one wall. On the bottom shelf is a stack of games and cards.

Next to the staircase is a game table with four chairs. The room is meant to be lived in, even though it's part of the inn. I've been by before and heard guests in here playing cards. That's the appeal of the Christmas Farm Inn. It's a home away from home.

I've listened to Marley talk about the changes she's made since taking over for her grandparents. With limited accommodation options in the area, she didn't add on to the eight rooms she rents out. I remember Grant talking to her about adding a bump-out at the far end of the living room and putting in another room to rent.

She adamantly refused, wanting her guests to have more space to relax and unwind at the end of their night, or to gather while they make their plans for the day. Even with the wood stacked neatly by the bricks, there isn't a spot of dirt or dust anywhere to be seen. The windows are clear of streaks, and the lingering smell of citrus and wood polish hangs in the air.

I've hung around the Hudson family long enough to learn what wood polish smells like. Grant and Marley's grandparents welcomed me here for many family meals. The changes Marley made are small yet have a big impact.

Instead of the old-fashioned lace thingies Mrs. Hudson had draped over the backs of the outdated furniture and on the end tables, Marley keeps the knickknacks simpler. Other than the photographs, there are a few plants and candles disguised as pottery.

She replaced the heavy floral curtains with Roman shades and sheer scarf-looking things hanging over the windows. It

looks nice. Still rustic yet not outdated. Not that I have any interior decorating knowledge.

I hear the door in the kitchen open and close. “Blaine?”

She calls my name, and my insides twist a little. In a good way. Maybe it’s because it’s one of the few times she’s said my name without it sounding like a curse. She comes around the corner and stills when she sees me.

“What are you doing?”

“I came to work on our float. Or lights. I’m not sure what we want to call it.”

“Oh.” She opens her mouth, then closes it, and looks around the room before settling her gaze on me. “Okay.”

Progress. We’re not snapping at each other. Maybe she gave herself a talking-to as I did after our last encounter. Or maybe Evie or Amelia got to her like they did me.

“I’d like to hear your ideas.” There. Olive branch. That wasn’t so hard. I lower myself to one of the chairs by the woodstove.

“You want to talk in here?”

“We can talk in the kitchen if you’d rather.”

She bites her bottom lip and glances around the room as if she’s nervous I’ll spot some secret. A skeleton. I follow her gaze and only see an inviting space.

“Is something wrong?”

“No. I... it’s weird seeing you in here. Especially without Grant.”

Now that she mentions it, I don’t think I’ve ever spent time in the living room. We’re usually in the kitchen or outside helping with the siding or replacing wood on the front porch.

“I thought you should know,” I push myself to stand, “Grant thinks he and Evie are going to beat us.”

“Beat us?”

“Your brother is blinded by love and believes whatever he and Evie come up with will be better than everyone else’s light exhibit.”

“Oh, really?” She stands taller and folds her arm across her chest.

Marley has always had a competitive streak. If we focus on winning and not on trying to best each other, we may actually survive the next few weeks.

“Amelia doesn’t think we’ll win either,” I add, just to cement the competitive spark in her.

“She doesn’t, does she?” Marley quirks her lips and nods toward the game table. “I’ll get my notes. We can look over them and adjust accordingly.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll grab our coffees.”

“There are some leftover muffins by the stove Grant dropped off yesterday,” she calls over her shoulder as she goes down the hall to her private living quarters.

I pick up the coffee and baked goods and take them over to the table and take out my folded piece of paper that has my notes on it. I add another log to the stove and make myself comfortable at the table. Comfortable wasn’t a word I thought I’d use a few minutes ago.

Now that Marley and I have a common goal—to win—I think we’ll be able to get along without ripping each other’s heads off.

“Grant really thinks he’ll outdo us?” Marley asks as she comes back into the room and sits across from me. She opens a spiral-bound notebook, the kind you load up on in the fall when you’re back-to-school shopping, and flips through filled pages of notes.

“He didn’t come right out and say it, but he implied as much. We’re the underdogs because...” I stop myself, not wanting to ruin these few minutes of getting along.

Marley pauses from scanning her notes and looks up at me. “Because I’m the little sister and he doesn’t want me to

outshine him?”

I’m insulted at the *me* since we’re supposed to be in this together, but I think about her point of view for a second. She’s always competed with her brother. Not in a bad way. It’s what drives both of them, and they seem to love their games. I’ve loved being a part of them over the years as well.

Granted, that’s probably what annoys Marley. Her brother is not only older than her but he’s had someone else around to help him while she followed in his shadow. When they were seeing who could build the coolest sandcastle at the beach, Grant had me to help.

When their parents let Grant and Marley plant a vegetable garden and made it their summer chore to maintain it, they turned it into a competition as to who could produce the most vegetables. No doubt he had me help him expand his side to win, not because he cared about eating his veggies.

They even made cleaning their rooms a competition. Marley’s was always neat and Grant’s was your typical nasty teenage boy’s room with smelly socks mixed in with clean clothes all over the floor. No judgment here since my room looked the same.

But when they were out for a battle, I stepped in and we not only cleaned and rearranged Grant’s room, but we also built a complex shelving unit for his closet.

It’s not like I ever came to the table with new and innovative ideas. Those were all Grant’s—and Marley’s. I was simply the help. The extra muscle. Something Marley never got. Well, now she has me, not that she needs me. She can kick butt on her own.

I’m not the too-cool jock anymore, and she’s no longer the annoying little sister. The fact that her evergreen eyes capture my attention more, and her full, pink lips smile more—not ever at me, though—and she’s running a successful business doesn’t annoy me at all. But it sure as heck distracts me.

“I’m pretty sure the reason he thinks you’re the underdog is because you’re paired with me.”

Marley scrunches her brow and tips her head to the side. “What do you mean by that? You and Grant are always the powerhouse team.”

I ignore the way my heart palpitates in my chest at her compliment, even if it isn’t intentional. “I was the sidekick. You and Grant had—have—all the creative ideas.”

“That’s not true. Grant would have never beat me in anything if he didn’t have you to help.”

I can’t help the smile tugging at my lips. “Let’s see what you’ve got.” I point at her notebook.

Carrying on as if we didn’t just have the first normal conversation ever, she turns her notebook so I can see the images and her notes beside them.

A chuckle erupts from my chest. “Only you would call this a messy scrawl of notes that can’t be read by anyone but you.”

In typical Marley Hudson fashion, the drawing is detailed and perfect, her penmanship so neat it should be used as a new font in Word, and the description is detailed enough to write up in a news-press.

She lifts her shoulder. “I, um, rewrote them and did a new drawing.”

*For me.* Okay, maybe she redid her notes because that would be a typical Marley thing to do. Grant used to tease her about rewriting her notes in school. She said it was the way she studied, writing them over and over again.

At the time, I teased her about being a nerd. Ironic since Grant and I were in the top five percent of our class. Marley did well academically as well, but her grades weren’t as high as ours, something Grant would innocently tease her about. She was an honors student and well-respected. I’m sure if she struggled in school, Grant wouldn’t have teased her.

While he graduated with a perfect 4.0, she graduated with a 3.8. Why I remember her GPA, I have no idea. I remember too many unnecessary details about Marley.

I read her ideas. They're good. "I like the twelve days of Christmas trees. They match what you do at the inn." I scan the room, surprised her trees aren't up yet. Thanksgiving is only a week away. "Don't you usually have them up by now?"

I've poked fun at her many times before about rushing the holidays.

"Yeah. This is the week I normally put them up, but if you liked the idea I was going to wait until after the parade so we wouldn't have to figure out where to find twelve artificial trees. Or we could purchase twelve trees from one of our Christmas farms and donate them at the end of the parade."

I give her a lopsided grin. "That's a great idea. I can't imagine how hard it's been for you not to break out all the holiday decorations."

"I've done the bedrooms already. The holiday quilts and throw pillows are on the beds, as are the snowmen and Santa decor." She picks up her coffee and sips, hiding her nervousness, I'm sure. "So, um, what do you think?"

"I love it. I have a generator we can use to plug in all the lights, and a flatbed to haul behind my truck."

The smile that stretches on her lips has my chest filling with pride. I've never been on the receiving end of it, and it reminds me I need to be nicer to her. Not that I'm mean. I tease. A lot. Maybe too much.

She glances at the paper to my right. "What's that?"

I slide my folded notes under my hand. "Nothing. A few ideas I thought of, but I like what you came up with."

It must be the clean citrus smell in the air and the warm ambiance the wood stove puts off that has me wanting to make Marley happy.

"Show me." She rests her elbows on the table and leans forward, trying to peek at the scrap of paper I'm covering.

"I think the tree idea will work."

"Let me guess." She rests her chin in the palm of her hands. "Beer, burger, and fry shaped lights dangling from the



truck bed.”

I’m insulted that she thinks so little of me. “I’m not tacky.”

I may not go all out in the decorating department like she does, but Frosty’s looks cool. Simple, rustic, some white lights at Christmas time. I’m not into the colored flashy commercialized decorations.

“What are you afraid of then?” Her competitiveness taunts me.

I let out a deep sigh. “I’m no artist so don’t judge on the sketch. I didn’t write flowery paragraphs like you. Bullet points get the idea across.” I open the paper and slide it across the table to her.

Marley picks it up and reads, the furrow between her brows unreadable. She’s either trying to decipher my penmanship—which is horrible—or she hates it.

I tossed around a bunch of ideas in my head, and when I came up with this one, I figured it would be a nice way to calm the crashing waves between us. Now I’m embarrassed with the idea.

“Wow.” She sets the paper between us. “I, um…” She nibbles on her thumb nail, then drops her hands to her laps and nibbles on her bottom lip.

The first time I imagined kissing Marley Hudson was when she was sixteen and I was heading off to college. She looked so sad. I’m sure it was because she was going to miss Grant, not me. Tears had pooled in her eyes, and I had wanted to wipe them away.

There was no way I could ever cross that line. Not only would Grant unfriend me for being attracted to his sister, but Marley was still so young. I was glad to be going to school five hours away. The distance helped erase her from my mind.

Temporarily. When I came back to Balsam Grove at Thanksgiving, the attraction was even stronger. It was like she blossomed overnight. The only way to make sure I didn’t cross the line was to focus on everything about her that annoyed me.

Her perfectionism. Her competitiveness. Her always having to have the last word. The way she looked down at me—I may have force fed myself that lie.

“I can help bring up the trees.” I’ve come over before with Grant to lug up the decorations from the basement. Over half the space downstairs is dedicated to Christmas decor.

“Tell me more about this.” She taps her finger on my chicken scratch. “I see how we can make the connection with the Christmas Farm Inn but where is Frosty’s worked in?”

I look away and rub my hand across my jaw. “There’s nothing that says we have to work in our businesses with the light display. A cool-looking light show on wheels is all we need.”

“Sure. But I’m sure everyone is advertising in some way.”

I clear my throat. “Unless you have a basement full of mannequins, I thought we could use real people for the nativity scene. Your parents know everyone in town. Someone’s gotta have a baby we can borrow.”

Marley giggles. “That sounds terrible out of context.”

“I guess.” I chuckle. “Christmas is commercialized so much these days, not that Santa doesn’t draw in a huge crowd, so I thought it would be nice to balance it out a little. I’m not sure if it’s sacrilegious having a Christmas Farm Inn sign above Mary and Joseph.”

“I think we’ll be forgiven.” She giggles again. “What if…” Marley flips her notebook to an empty page and starts sketching.

While the pen moves fluidly across the paper, I’m drawn to the pink tint in her cheeks, the way her lips curves in a delicious smile, and the way her blonde hair falls over her eyes. Eyes so green and mesmerizing, I have to look away when she glances up at me.

“What about this?” She spins the notebook so I can see what she’s drawn. “I like the idea of the nativity scene and the inn taking up the flatbed. And bringing in baby goats and sheep? That’ll earn us some points. But we need to incorporate

the pub. Here's where we combine the serene with your sense of humor."

She taps her pen on the notebook.

"What if we have the three wise men carrying food and drinks from Frosty's?"

I tip my head back and laugh. "And I thought naming the inn was sacrilegious."

"Bad idea?"

"No. I love it." Mostly, I love that she cares so much about including Frosty's. "But I love the tree idea as well."

"Nah." She waves her hand through the air. "It's not as original."

"A nativity scene isn't exactly original. There's one in front of Balsam Grove Church every Christmas."

"True, but it's not on Evergreen Avenue. Think of it this way, we're also advertising for the church. Or at least for people to attend, if only for Christmas service."

The fact that she so easily ditched her idea and is excited about mine has my heart racing again. "It'll take some work to build a make-shift inn for the flatbed, and we'll need to ask some of the local farms if we can borrow some well-behaved animals."

"Oh! At the end of the parade, we can have an area for a petting zoo. Now we're incorporating local farms as well. I love this idea, Blaine. We're doing so much more than just showcasing our businesses. We're bringing the town together."

"That wasn't my original plan. That's all you."

Her eyes shine bright at my compliment. "And it's going to make us crush the competition."

There's the competitive spirit I admire so much in Marley.

And dang, does it look good on her.



## CHAPTER FIVE

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**B**efore I can dedicate any more time to the nativity design, I finish up my evening chores around the inn. The two couples staying the week are back from their drive through the mountains and are playing cards where Blaine and I sat for three hours this morning.

It was weird. *So* incredibly weird. Sitting across the table from Blaine and not only having a decent conversation that didn't involve insults and arguing, but actually laughing. I can't believe we spent three hours together this morning and not once—other than when I first saw him in my parlor—did I want to kick him in the shins.

I expected him to tease me about my twelve days of Christmas tree idea. But he didn't. And I didn't expect he'd come up with any ideas, much less approve of them. But I did.

There were even a few moments this morning where I felt him staring at me. Not to pick me apart or poke fun, but more so with curiosity. The way he'd quickly glance away, as if embarrassed, had a school of butterflies fluttering in my stomach.

There's never been a doubt in my mind at how handsome Blaine is. It's one of the many reasons I'm always so snappy at him. Women, men, parents, grandparents, even babies adore him. He never has to *do* anything to earn adoration and accolades from those around him. It's like there's this aura that surrounds him, drawing people into his charm.

And, yeah, I was one of those back in the day. Until I wasn't. Until he ditched me and teased me anytime I wanted to hang out with him and Grant. Slowly, what lured me to him also pushed me away.

I slice the lasagna I made earlier into five dinner portions and put them in containers to freeze. Tomorrow I'll meal prep a chicken casserole and do the same. If I don't plan my meals ahead of time, I often don't eat, or I end up eating whatever baked goods Grant has brought over for lunch and dinner.

It's a blessing and a curse having a brother who owns a bakery and a sister-in-law who owns a donut shop. While my guests love the freshly baked goods I provide in the mornings, my hips don't appreciate all the extra treats.

They're easy grab-and-go snacks in between loads of laundry or scrubbing floors. And now I have a nativity scene added to my list of chores, as well as taking out my Christmas trees. Since we're not using them for the float, I can get my inn ready for the holidays.

I keep a few trees up year-round to go along with the theme of the inn, but it's nothing compared to how I fill every room with holiday magic. Once I have the lasagna stored in the freezer, I make myself a cup of tea and take out my laptop.

I open tomorrow's spreadsheet and adjust my hourly to-do list. It may seem unnecessary to some—like my brother and Blaine—but it makes me feel accomplished when I check items off my list.

The first ten items are the same no matter the day. Still, I include them. From my basic morning preparations of brushing my teeth and washing my face, to starting coffee for my guests and setting out muffins, donuts, and pastries in the parlor, it's all important.

When I first took over the inn, I often felt like I wasn't accomplishing much during the day, as I had nothing to show for my hard work, yet I was always busy. Writing everything down helps my mental state more than anything. I'm organized and not likely to forget what needs to be done, but something about a spreadsheet makes me feel... important.

I didn't go off to college like Grant and Blaine, and my associate's degree in hotel management is almost unnecessary with the hands-on training I received from my grandparents over the years. However, it did provide some insight on how to market and keep the inn modern, while not losing its old-fashioned charm.

I add *buy material* to my one o'clock hour. The Hendersons and Lees will have checked out by then, and the Scottsdale, Martinez, and Lappin couples won't be checking in

until after three. Tapping my finger to my lip, I scroll through my evening chores and add *research design patterns* to my seven o'clock slot and *sew Mary's costume* to my nine o'clock slot.

My grandmother taught me how to use her sewing machine when I was in middle school. It was the time in my life when I was the most bored and sad. Grant and Blaine had ditched me, and I busied myself learning every domestic skill under the sun.

Many of my friends called me an old lady because I loved learning how to cook, sew, and make holiday decor. I've even hosted wreath classes in the barn. It was something my grandfather taught me. We would make a wreath to hang on the outside of every window of the inn. Twenty-eight, to be exact.

My parents come over to help me now. Grant, too. Blaine came once, but I usually do it in the afternoon or evening when my guests don't need me, and he's always been busy at the pub. Dad picks up takeout from Frosty's, and we have a fun family night of it.

Last year I didn't bother Grant with the activity since he and Evie had just opened their bakeries and were already working crazy hours. Now that they have more help, I'll ask them if they want to make wreaths together this year.

I open the tab to next Monday where I've blocked out five hours of wreath making. I scan my items next to it and see I noted to send out invites tomorrow. Since I have time now, I open the group chat to my parents, Grant, and Evie and ask if they have the day and time free for our annual tradition.

A few hours later, after I've updated the Inn's social media page, cleaned up after my guests, and researched some costume ideas for our nativity scene, I head to my private quarters and shower.

The following morning, after my guests leave, I strip their sheets, scrub the bathrooms, and put fresh linens on the beds. I toss the sheets in the laundry room and head down to the

basement to lug up the trees. Next, I rearrange the furniture, starting with the rooms that will be occupied tonight.

When the trees are nicely fluffed, I head back to the basement for the boxes of decorations. Juggling two totes stacked on top of each other, I round the corner and bump into a solid wall.

“Ah!” I would have dropped the totes had two strong hands not caught them. “Blaine. Sorry. Didn’t see you there.”

“You shouldn’t be carrying two of these at a time. You’ll strain your back.”

“Are you saying I’m weak because I’m a woman?” It’s second nature to snap back at him, and I quickly regret it after the progress we made yesterday.

“You’re anything but. I’m saying I don’t want you to hurt yourself.” He steps aside and shakes his head when I hold out my hands to take the totes back. “Tell me where you want these.”

“I can carry them upstairs myself.”

“I know.” He turns and heads up the stairs. At the top, he calls over his shoulder. “Which room?”

Mumbling about his bossy nature, I follow him. “The Douglas Fir, White Pine, and Blue Spruce rooms.”

“You say that like I’m supposed to know which rooms those are.”

“Second door on the right, first and fourth door on the left.”

“That’s three rooms and two totes.”

“And here we thought your math degree would go to waste.”

Instead of snapping back, he grins and winks. “Business finance, but I did take a lot of math classes.”

Huffing out a sigh, I point to the Douglas Fir room. “You can put them in there.”



It's the biggest room and has a gorgeous view of the mountains. It typically books first, followed by the Blue Spruce room. My favorite, however, is the Norway Spruce room. It's the smallest and the one I've kept original to my grandmother's decor. The Victorian theme is still quite popular, and I keep it stocked with historical fiction as well as nonfiction.

The Douglas Fir room feels smaller with Blaine in it. With no one else around as a distraction, I can't help but notice his wide shoulders and strong arms. I mean, I've noticed them before, but only with an eye roll and snarky remark rolling inside my head about him being a dumb jock.

Blaine opens the top tote and takes out a cranberry garland followed by a container of dried citrus fruit ornaments.

"Are you making a fruit salad?" He drapes himself in the cranberries and loops the ornaments around his ears like earrings. "Have any watermelon in here?" He opens another container and holds up a lace doily.

"Be careful with those. My grandmother made them."

He gently places it back in the container. "I remember her having these all over the place. Now you throw them on a tree?"

I snag the container from him. "I don't *throw* anything on a tree. They're all decorated with precision and care. These are for the Victorian tree in the Norway Spruce room."

"The earrings too?"

It's impossible not to roll my eyes and sigh around Blaine. It's better than barking at him. Or punching him in the face, as I've been tempted to do many times before.

"It's traditional to the era. They decorated with dried fruits and nuts, candles, paper ornaments, and handmade items."

"You don't light the candles, do you? I'd have to report you to Trace Keesler."

"Who?"

“He’s a firefighter from Grover Falls. Grant and I have been playing basketball with him.”

“You’re an idiot,” I say with jest.

“Okay, so tell me how we’re gonna decorate this one. Let me guess...” He moves to the tree in the corner, pushing branches around, then scans the four walls of the room. “You’ve got a mountain vibe going on in here. Makes sense with the view out the window. You can see the ski slopes from here, so I’m gonna say you cover the tree with little skis, ice skates, and snowshoes. Am I right or am I right?”

It annoys me how right he is. Are my trees so obvious and uncreative that he can easily peg the theme without even seeing any of the decor yet?

“Okay, so your surly frown is telling me you’re disappointed in my guess. Not everyone is an interior decorator like yourself.”

“I’m not an interior decorator.” I huff, storming out of the room. I march down the stairs to the basement and grab two more totes of decorations. When I turn around, Blaine is there, taking them from me. “I’m more than capable—”

“Yeah. I’ll take these and you can grab two others.” He spins away and heads up the stairs.

All the reasons he annoys me come tumbling to the forefront of my mind. By the time I reach the top of the stairs to the second floor, he already has the lids propped open and is thumbing through each tote.

“Which room gets the bears?”

I’m reminded of my grandmother’s favorite saying of not looking a gift horse in the mouth. Swallowing my pride, I tell him, “Last room on the right.”

He picks up the tote and carries it down the hall. When he returns, he asks where to put the bell tote, the angels, the snowmen, and then picks out an owl from the last tote.

“Whoooo. Whoooo,” he exaggerates, “does this guy go with?”

I almost laugh at his silliness then remember how much he drives me crazy. “The *bird* room. Across the hall.” I turn my back on him and lay out the miniature skis and snowshoes I’ve collected over the years.

He doesn’t say anything when he returns to the Douglas Fir room, but I can feel his presence. Part suffocating, part earthy. He’s always smelled of a nice blend of spice, earth, and sandalwood. I wiggle my nose to push his scent away and pretend I don’t realize he’s standing so close.

When his strong arm reaches across me to hang a miniature gondola on the tree, I freeze. “What are you doing?”

“Helping.”

“I didn’t ask you to help.”

“I know.”

“So why are you?”

“Because.”

“Because isn’t an answer. It’s an incomplete sentence.”

“I’ll let you finish it for me.” His breath tickles my neck, and I duck under his arm and move across the room, using the tote as a barrier between us.

“Why are you here, Blaine?”

“Well, we have this parade of lights thing we’re working on *together*.”

“Which doesn’t involve you decorating my trees. I didn’t ask for your help.”

The mischievous smile drops, and his eyebrows flatten. The air in the room thickens from tension. Tension I once again cause.

“No, you didn’t,” he agrees. “And that’s part of your problem.”

“Excuse me?” I ball my fists on my hips. “This is *my* home, *my* inn. I don’t need you to carry up totes or put

ornaments on my trees for me. I'm perfectly capable of doing all of this myself. So, how exactly is that a problem?"

"Ever thought about letting anyone in? Or are you too afraid they'll mess up your perfectly organized plans? I know I can't decorate the trees to your high standards. If I offer to help hang the lights outside, there will be something wrong with where I've positioned them, and no doubt you stayed up all night worried about how I was going to mess up your perfect nativity scene." Blaine tosses the miniature ice skates ornament on the bed. "You want to do everything by yourself? Fine. I'll tell the mayor to take my name off the flyer she made so I don't bring down your perfect image."

He storms down the stairs, and I'm tempted to let him go, but his words sting. Sting too much. I can't let him leave without defending myself. I hurry down the stairs and don't catch up with him until we're in the driveway. "What's wrong with you, Blaine?"

He spins and his eyes grow wide in shock. "Me? What's wrong with me?"

"Yes. What's wrong with *you*?" I jab my finger into his chest. Or rather, a wall of muscle. "How dare you accuse me of only caring about myself. That's incredibly insulting."

"Not yourself, Marley. Your reputation of being perfect."

"I'm far from perfect."

"The only part of you that's not perfect is your attitude. It needs a serious adjustment."

I stand speechless, processing his words, trying to figure out if he gave me a backdoor compliment or an insult. I can't argue with him on the attitude comment. To be fair, he has one too.

"Nothing about me is perfect," I mumble.

Blaine snorts and shakes his head. "Your hair, your clothes, your face, your..." His gaze dips to my legs and quickly whips back up to my eyes. "Everything you do is with careful precision, only after you've thought it out, researched, taken notes, reevaluated your notes, and made a detailed step-by-

step list of how you're going to execute your plan. You probably have notebooks on each room of your inn with an exact inventory of the decorations you break out for every holiday. No doubt you have an image of every tree and where each ornament goes."

I swallow at his accuracy. At the bottom of each tote is a photo album of the tree from the year before. I take pictures from every angle so I can reflect on the placement of ornaments and how to improve them the next year.

"You do, don't you?" He runs his hands through his hair. "It's one thing to put a list of chores on a spreadsheet. But to make people fit in those tight margins..."

I lower my eyes to the pavement, suddenly ashamed of my organizational process. I've always hated group projects, preferring to pair with people who ride the coattails of leaders, that way I can have my say so the project is done right.

After getting over my original annoyance at being partnered with Blaine, in an attempt to be positive, I saw the pairing as a good fit. I'd decorate a flatbed—something that was on my list to find, only Blaine came through first—with the twelve days of Christmas and the display would be neat, clean, bright, and fun. I'd tell him where to load the trees and lights while I decorated each.

He threw me for a loop when he came up with the nativity scene. It was so simple yet so perfect. I was proud of myself for letting my idea fall to the side and agreeing with his. That isn't the action of a control freak perfectionist. But he's been unsettling me by helping out with the decorations for the inn.

Blaine drops his hands to his side. "Listen, Mars. I... I'm gonna go." He takes two steps toward his truck before turning around again. "I didn't mean any of that as an insult. You have impeccably high standards that I know I'll never meet. Make a list of whatever it is you want me to do, and I'll do it."

He gets in his truck and drives off before I can formulate words. I'm still standing in the driveway for a solid five minutes before I formulate three.

“I’m sorry, Blaine.”



## CHAPTER SIX

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““The holiday blues got you down two days before Thanksgiving?” Carla asks as she puts her tray of dirty glasses on the bar.

I take it from her and put the glasses in the bin to take back to the kitchen. “A little distracted is all.” I give my top waitress the Blaine Foster smile that reaches my eyes, only she’s worked for me too long and can read through the forced cheer.

“Don’t tell me it’s trouble in your dating life. There are truckloads of women who sit here or even at a table and ogle you every night.”

“A little over dramatic, are we?” I rinse out a rag and wipe down the bar. We’re in between rushes right now. The lunch crew is gone and with no games on until seven, the pub is empty.

Carla heads back to the dining room where only three tables are filled. Tuesdays are typically slow anyway, throw in a food fest holiday in two days, and I don’t expect the dining room to be at half capacity. However, since the Celtics and Bruins are playing tonight, the bar area may keep me busy. While I could use an hour of peace and quiet, it gives me too much time to over-analyze what went down at Marley’s.

I was rude to her, but what else is new? Honestly, it’s growing old, the constant bickering. When we were younger, it was fun to fuel her fire. I know she enjoys pushing my buttons too. I’d never tell her, but when she gets me with a solid comeback, I’m often impressed, if not a little envious I hadn’t thought of it first.

I never thought I’d enjoy having a normal conversation with her, until we did. I was looking forward to hanging out with her and working on the nativity scene. The back of my truck is still loaded with wood and paint since there’s nowhere to dump it here.

It’s not like I can haul it to my apartment above the pub. If I didn’t live in such a safe community, I’d ask Grant if I could



store it at his house, but I trust no one will take anything out of the back of my truck in the parking lot.

Worse case, I have security cameras and insurance. I could always go back to Marley's and drop off the wood. I should have gone back yesterday, or even this morning. It's stubborn pride that has kept me away, even as the deadline approaches. The parade is next week, and we have nothing to show for it.

Marley and her family will be busy all day tomorrow prepping for Thanksgiving, a meal I'm invited to every year and have attended once. My parents divorced when I was thirteen and I was so upset about having to choose which house to go to that I said I wanted nothing to do with them and spent the day at the Hudsons'.

They've always welcomed me as an additional member of their family. Even Marley, as evident by our childish bickering. *Sibling* bickering is what her family calls it. However, lately I've been thinking of her less and less as a sister and more as... just more.

Either I've been thinking about her too much, picturing her evergreen eyes and that bright smile that's rarely directed at me, or it's really her walking through the door.

"Hey," she says, dropping to a stool in front of me.

Okay. She's real. I blink back my surprise at her visit. She comes to Frosty's regularly with Evie and Amelia. Sometimes the family. Never alone, and never at my pub unless bookended by her friends.

"What can I get you?" I ask as if she were a customer and not the person taking up too much of my headspace.

"Iced tea?" she asks.

I nod and make her tea, adding two extra lemons to a small plate.

"Thanks." She picks up one of the wedges and squeezes it into her drink. "You remembered."

I'm tempted to tell her I know more about her than her love for lemons. Instead, I shrug. "I'm a bartender. It's my job

to remember my customer's preferences.”

She stirs her straw around in her drink. “Oh.”

Now I feel bad. She's so much more than a regular customer. “Marley,” I start as she looks up at me and says, “Blaine.”

I give her a half smile.

“I'm sorry.”

Her apology nearly knocks me on my butt. “What?” I blink my surprise, first at her showing up alone, now at her apology. “For what?” If anything, I'm the one who should be apologizing. I jumped down her throat and spat out a string of insults yesterday morning for no reason other than my ego got stomped on.

“For everything you called me on. Almost.” The corner of her lip lifts. “I'm not sorry about my attitude. That's going nowhere. My parents have tried for twenty-nine years.”

I laugh. “Hardly. Other than with me, you're the sweetest human being alive. I've never seen you give your parents attitude.”

“That's because you weren't around when I was in high school. Teenage girls are vicious. I'm hoping when I have kids, they'll be boys. Much easier and more chill.”

I can picture Marley with a slew of kids. Adorable blonde haired, green eyed lookalikes. She was meant to be a mom. Loving, nurturing, kindhearted. When I imagine the man in her life who will give her those kids, my stomach clenches.

“I've never heard you refer to me as easy and chill.”

“Are you kidding?” She tips her head back and laughs. “That's what drives me nuts about you. You're so relaxed. Never stressed. Unlike me who can make a day at the beach stressful if I don't have every minute planned, lunch and snacks packed, preparations for too much sun, not enough sun, wind, rain, heatwaves. I worry about traffic and what time is best to get there before the crowds show up, when we should leave to avoid the rush. Meanwhile, you roll out of bed, grab a

towel, some sunscreen, and avoid all traffic, finding a spot on the sand and enjoying your day without your blood pressure rising.”

She’s talking about the time Grant asked her if she wanted to join us for a trip to the ocean, a solid hour’s drive, and she freaked out at the last-minute notice. We’d been home from college for a month and were having dinner with her family. I had no idea people needed more than a few minutes’ notice to go to the beach. Apparently fourteen hours’ notice wasn’t enough for Marley.

It ended up being a fun day, despite her constant questions. Grant and I played pass with a football while she sat and read. The three of us went for a walk later in the day, and she kept asking if we thought our stuff would be safe without anyone watching. The only stuff we brought of value were our phones.

Grant and I kept ours locked in the car while Marley had hers in the back pocket of her shorts. She wasn’t one to always have her nose glued to her phone. It was there in case of emergency. What kind of emergency she thought we’d have walking down the beach in Maine, I had no idea.

“Which is why you’re the one everyone wants on their team.”

“*Everyone?*” She raises her brow.

I inwardly cringe at my obnoxious outburst at the town hall meeting. “See? I’m not as easy and chill as you think I am.”

She glances down at her iced tea and swirls it with her straw. “Thanks for coming up with the nativity scene idea.”

“No need to thank me. We both tossed around ideas, and they’re both good. You’re just more stubborn and opinionated and decided to use my idea instead of yours, so I had no choice but to follow your lead.”

I hope she hears my teasing.

“What’s this? Blaine Foster being humble?” She tilts back on her barstool and cranes her neck to look out the window. “Are pigs flying?”

“Easy there, smart aleck. I’m plenty humble when I need to be.”

Marley laughs, a sound that stirs up the blood in my veins and makes my heart race. “When you need to be? What in the world does that mean?”

“There’s nothing wrong with owning your strengths and admitting your weaknesses.”

“Hmm. And what are your weaknesses, Blaine?” She rests her elbow on the bar and cups her chin in the palm of her hand.

*You.* As soon as the thought enters my mind, I shake it away. Since when is Marley my weakness? She’s my best friend’s sister, and nothing else. Right?

*Wrong,* my conscience yells at me. I flick a towel over my shoulder and busy myself by putting clean glasses away. “I’m sure you can list a plethora of them and will have more to add by the time we’re done with the float. Speaking of, I have ton of scrap wood in the back of my truck. Since I don’t have much space around here, I was hoping I could set up shop in your barn. I don’t want to disturb your guests, but mornings are the only time I’ve got right now.”

“Sure. Grant still has some of his tools stored in there until their new house is built. As long as we’re not running the saw or other loud tools before eight, it should be fine.”

“We?”

“You’re not about to be all sexist on me, are you? You haven’t forgotten my father is a carpenter, have you?”

“How could I? He put Grant and me to work anytime we were on school break.”

“Um. Excuse me? I was right there next to you guys doing my share as well.”

Yeah. I didn’t forget. At the time, when I was seventeen and she was fourteen, I thought she was out of place working with her father, Grant, and me. Thinking back on it, she pulled

her own weight, probably working extra hard to keep up with us.

Marley didn't put in as many hours as we did since she preferred to be at the inn helping her grandparents or in the garden with her mother who was off from teaching for the summer.

"You're right." I tip my chin at her. "I have a few rough sketches of how we can build a make-shift inn with the wood I have. Unless you have a plan already?"

She shakes her head. "I figured I'd leave that part to you. I've been writing down ideas for costumes."

I don't comment on how I could throw back the sexist comment at her, even if kidding. "Costumes?"

"We'll need to ask around for volunteers to pose as Mary and Joseph and the three wise men."

"Why can't we do it?"

"Won't you be driving your truck?"

"Unless you have volunteers in mind, want to pass that job on to me? I'm sure I can get some of my crew or their family members to help out. I'll throw in an incentive of free food or something."

"Don't they already get to eat for free?" She smiles at me with a shake of her head.

That smile. Those eyes. Wow. How have I never noticed how they shine? Maybe because I've worked hard over the past decade to not look at her. Or maybe because I've never been on the receiving end of her wide, toothy smile until recently.

"It's one of my strengths. I can talk my staff into helping and they'll think they're getting a good deal out of it."

She giggles again. "Right. Because you're a master manipulator."

A few days ago, she would have said that with scorn. Tonight, she's only kidding. I think. I hope.

She sips her iced tea as I keep busy, cleaning, stocking, and spending too much time—or not enough—glancing her way. We share our ideas, both of us listening and offering advice without being offended.

It's nice. It's normal. It's... eye-opening. I ignore Clara's mischievous grins when she interrupts us for drink orders. Slowly, a crowd filters in to watch the Celtics and the Bruins, and it's harder to hold a conversation with Marley. When she slides off her stool and puts a few bills on the bar, I make my way over to her.

"The one iced tea you nursed for the past hour is on the house." I push the bills back.

"You'll go out of business if you don't charge your customers."

"You can pay me back tomorrow with one of the baked goods you have for your guests."

"I guess," she mumbles, tucking the bills in her purse. "Thanks for the tea. I, uh, I'll see you tomorrow."

I watch her until she exits through the door and disappears around the corner.

"Marley, huh?" Carla stands in front of me with an empty tray.

"What?" I snap my gaze to her.

Carla laughs. "You've got eyes for her."

"I do not." I snag the drink order from her hands and pour two ales, sliding them across the bar to her.

"Hmm." She sets the drinks on her tray then tosses her head to the two men sitting at the high top behind her. "Well, if you don't, those two do. Been eyeing her the entire time, watching you flirt with her."

"I didn't flirt with her. I've never flirted with Marley a day in my life."

"Which is kinda funny, isn't it? Considering you're a consummate flirt." She chuckles as she walks away, delivering

beers to the two men who had their eyes on Marley.

I recognize one as Kyle Davison. He's a few years older than me, divorced, and has two kids. I've never seen the man he's with. It doesn't matter what his reputation is, neither of them is good enough for Marley.

Not that I'm good enough for her either. I can't think of a single human being who is worthy of her. I tug the neck of my T-shirt, pulling it away from my body. Since when have I put her up on heaven's pedestal? A week ago, I belittled her in front of the entire town.

Somehow I make it through the evening, yet sleep doesn't come easily.

In the morning, I shower, shave, accidentally slap on some aftershave, spend more time than usual picking out which flannel to wear, and head over to the inn.

When I knock on her kitchen door at ten minutes to nine, I hear Christmas music and laughter. Jealousy is not a feeling I'm accustomed to. I've heard Marley laugh hundreds of times before. Either at my expense or with her family.

Being on the receiving end of it now, followed by a smile, it's something I cherish and not something I want to share. There are only two other cars in the small parking lot, none belonging to her family, so I know it's not them.

When she doesn't open the door, I let myself in and am instantly greeted with the amazing smell of freshly baked bread. Rosemary and garlic as well, if I'm not mistaken. More laughter comes from the living room.

I make my way to the entrance and am relieved to find Marley sitting with two older couples. The heat from the woodstove and the Christmas tree in front of the windows add to the ambiance.

"You've been a delightful hostess, Marley. My daughter and son-in-law were absolutely correct with all the accolades they shared about you, the Christmas Farm Inn, and Balsam Grove. We'll be sure to tell all our friends." The woman, who looks close to my mother's age, squeezes her husband's hand.

“You’re too kind. I’m so glad you enjoyed your stay. Have a safe drive back to Albany, and please tell Melissa and James I said hello, and congratulations on their pregnancy.”

“Next time we come back, we’ll all be grandparents!” the other woman says.

“I think it’s such a sweet story the way you four have been best friends for more than twenty years, and your children fell in love. Childhood sweethearts is one of my favorite romance tropes.”

“My favorite is the boy next door.” The first lady who spoke pats her husband’s leg. “Dennis and I grew up next to each other.”

“Wow. That’s adorable.”

“Not so fast,” Dennis says. “Maggie despised me for the longest time.”

“Only because you used to put frogs in my seat and crickets in my hair.”

“That’s how boys show the girl they’re attracted to how much they love them.”

I snort from the doorway, and all five turn, noticing me for the first time. “I’m sorry for interrupting. Marley, I’ll be in the barn if you need me.”

She smiles and nods at me before I turn and walk away. I’m not at the door yet when I hear one of the ladies say, “Oh, he’s handsome. Tell me there’s a love story between you two.”

“Blaine? Oh, gosh no,” Marley quickly says, and my heart sinks in my chest. “He’s just... um, my brother’s friend. A, uh, friend of the family.”

“Those are the keepers, dear.”

“No. It’s not... no.”

I don’t stick around to hear the rest of Marley’s denial that anything more than friendship by default could take place between us.



I have the wood unloaded and organized in the barn when I hear the door creak open. I can smell her orange vanilla scent before I see her.

“Sorry it took me so long. This was their first time visiting and they had lots of stories to tell me about their children’s wedding. Melissa and James spent their first wedding anniversary here and came back again this past summer.”

“No problem.” I don’t even look her way as I measure out the two-by-four and mark where I need to cut. I lower my safety glasses and turn on the band saw.

The noise is ear piercing and prevents any conversation from happening, which is good. With the way I’m feeling right now, any words that come out of my mouth will be taken the wrong way. Or the right, if I’m honest with myself.

I’m hurt she sees me as nothing more than her brother’s sidekick. A *friend of the family* and not *my* friend tells me exactly how she sees me. I power off the saw and stack the piece of wood I cut on top of the other three.

“What can I do to help?”

Still avoiding her, I take out my tape measure and mark off the next piece of wood. “I thought you were going to work on the costumes.” I’m rude, but that’s what I’ve always been to her.

“Um. Okay. Are you sure? Are you working on anything that can use an extra pair of hands?”

“Nope. Got it.” I flick on the saw again, shutting her out.

I’m used to Marley’s bite, her impressive comebacks. She leaves without calling me on my rudeness or yelling at me for my attitude. Her silence is more effective than her snappiness.

Once again, I find myself needing to apologize to her. I work my way through the stack of wood, cutting all the pieces I need and making a list of what else needs to be done. Last night at the pub she told me she doesn’t have any guests tonight or on Thanksgiving, but she is booked nearly every night straight through New Year’s.

Since she only serves breakfast and the occasional evening snacks, it's not like she needs to be glued to the inn twenty-four-seven, but it doesn't leave her much time to work on side projects either.

Her twelve days of Christmas theme would have been less time consuming, and I now have another reason to feel guilty about making this parade of lights project bigger than it needs to be. Ironic since I was the only one in the town hall meeting who rolled their eyes at the mayor's idea. Marley is the type to dive right in and blow it out of proportion.

However, being the micromanager planner extraordinaire that she is, I'm sure she had already figured out she couldn't take on too much without overwhelming herself. Yet here we are, building a massive nativity scene.

Before heading inside, I make a few calls, hoping Marley hasn't already done so, secure what we need, and brush off the sawdust on my way to the inn.

I rap my knuckles on the door and let myself in. Three round loaves of freshly baked bread sit on the kitchen island cooling. If I didn't think she'd slap my hand with a two-by-four, I'd tear off a hunk of the bread and dip it into the freshly whipped butter she keeps in a pottery crock by the stove.

Marley bumps open the basement door with her hip and drops four boxes on the floor in front of her. She stands and swipes a loose strand of hair with the back of her arm. "Oh. Hi."

I cross the room and pick up the top two boxes. "Where would you like these?" The boxes are surprisingly light.

"I can manage them."

"Not what I asked," I snap.

Marley closes her eyes and lets out a heavy sigh. "So we're back to this, are we?"

I set the boxes on the farmer's table on the other side of the kitchen. "I don't want to be."

“Neither do I.” She carries the other two boxes to the table. “What happened to our truce?”

To be fair, she didn’t break it. I’m the one who retreated back to being petty. If we’re going to move forward and stop this tip-toeing thing with each other, I’ve gotta man up and admit when I’m wrong. In Blaine Foster style, of course.

I crack a smile and open the top box to keep my hands and eyes busy. “I was starting to like you too much, so I had to keep it real.”

“Like me too much?”

Shoot. Maybe I didn’t come off as sly as I thought. I rest my hip against the table and reach around her to give her ponytail a tug. “You’re not as annoying as you were when we were kids, brat.”

She scowls at the nickname I gave her and haven’t used in ages. “You call that a truce?”

I follow my laughter with a wink. “Fine. You’re not a brat anymore.”

“Anymore?” She lightly punches my shoulder, and I pretend to wince.

“You’re right. You don’t need any help carrying boxes. I think I’ll sit back and let you do all the heavy lifting from now on.”

“Ha. Ha.” She rolls her eyes and opens the box in front of her, taking out a pile of fabric.

“What’s all this?” I rummage through the material sitting in my box.

“My grandmother’s leftover fabric scraps. She made all the curtains and bedspreads and kept the extra fabric.”

I hold up an ugly floral design that looks like it came from the seventies, which it probably did. Marley was smart to put all new linens and blankets on the beds and upgrade the window coverings.

“What do you plan on doing with all of this?”

“I was hoping there’d be something in here we could use for Mary, Joseph, and the three wise men.”

“Think puke green and vomit yellow were popular back in the B.C. era?” I drape the ugly-looking fabric over my head and wrap it around my shoulders. “Joseph or one of the wise men? Who wore it better?”

Marley giggles. “I’m going with the one who brought the frankincense. Only this time he’ll be bringing a burger from Frosty’s.”

“Oh, I strongly disagree.” I fluff the material around my chest. “The guy decked out in seventies floral is bringing a veggie burger with a side of tofu.”

“It’ll be dark out. Maybe no one will notice the colors.”

I move the box aside and open the one underneath. “This is better.” There’s a thick folded piece of brown and another dark blue with a subtle pattern.

“Those can work.” She takes the piles from me, and our fingers tangle as I pass them to her.

I don’t miss her slight gasp and the way her eyes go big and round. This time, the pink tint in her cheeks isn’t from being angry at me. She lowers her lashes and hugs the material close to her chest.

“I’ll, uh, start working on the costumes if you want to continue what you were doing in the barn.”

Working alone no longer holds the appeal it did twenty minutes ago. “Well, I came in here for two reasons.”

“What?” She blinks up at me and bites down on her lower lip. She’s nervous. Because of her reaction when our fingers touched or because she’s worried about why I’m here, I’m not sure.

“One. You owe me for iced tea.” I hide my smile as the tightness of her jaw slackens. “And two. I could use some help in the barn.”

I’m perfectly capable of building the lean-to by myself but having Marley by my side now has a whole new appeal to it.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Somehow Blaine and I worked together for five straight hours without arguing or being condescending toward each other. It's quite refreshing to not be on edge every second while being on the receiving end of Blaine's charm. I can see his allure in more ways than just his mesmerizing blue eyes and wicked dimple.

We accomplished a great deal and all we have left to do is paint the signs and make finishing touches to the wardrobes before stringing the lights. I have a few hours Friday morning I can dedicate to our float, but my guests will start checking in at noon, and I'll be right out straight through New Year's.

Other than the Norway Spruce room, I'm booked solid from now until early January, and I'm at full capacity from mid-January through early March. I have a few rooms available at the beginning of the week, but those will be filled once ski season is underway. It's not like I won't have downtime. My guests require little of me other than to have clean linens, breakfast, a comfortable lounge area, and help with their itineraries.

I should be able to pull my weight on Tuesday, but for the next few days, I'm going to be busy. When I told Blaine this, he didn't seem to worry.

"We made great gains today. I'll finish up whatever we don't get to on Friday in the morning. I won't bother your guests, will I?"

"We're done with all the cutting. Unless you're a terribly loud painter?"

He hooks a grin my way and dusts off his jeans that have accumulated a pound of sawdust.

"I mean, I can belt out a tune pretty loud, but I've been told I have a beautiful singing voice."

I can't help my snort. "I've heard you and Grant after you've had a few too many beers. My guests would rather wake to hammers and saws."

“Ouch.” He clasps his hands over his heart. “You’ve obliterated my dreams of being the next John Legend.”

“No one can beat his voice.”

“Yeah?” Blaine packs up the tools and dusts off the saw bench. “What’s your favorite song of his?”

“Is there any better love song than ‘All of Me’?”

“I don’t know. Sing it for me.”

I shake my head with a smile. “I may not be as terrible as you, but there’s no way I’ll desecrate his song.”

“Come on.” He tugs at the strings of my hooded sweatshirt. “Sing for me.”

“You’re ridiculous.” I shove at his chest playfully.

*Oh. Wow. Has his chest always been this hard?* It’s no secret Blaine works out regularly. I’ve heard all about the beautiful man who jogs through town through the grapevine and from the women who stay at the inn for a girls’ weekend.

I’ve even seen Blaine at the beach before. He was quite the sight back in the day, and he’s filled out a great deal since then. My cheeks warm and I turn my back to him.

“I have a lot of food to prepare for Thanksgiving.” I don’t really. Grant and Evie are making dessert, my mom is taking care of the main dishes, and I’m on bread duty—which is already done—and appetizers. “Are you spending it with your mom or dad this year?”

When I reach the barn door, I face him again. The light has dimmed from his eyes, and he shoves his hands in the front pockets of his jeans.

“My dad and Bonnie are spending it with Bonnie’s kids and grandkids. Mom and I are keeping it small and cozy. You know us, we’re not really big on overdoing the holidays like the Hudson Family.”

The corner of his lip quirks, but it’s forced. In all the years he and Grant have been best friends, he’s only spent the holidays with us once. It was the year his parents divorced.

Even as amicable as it was, being thirteen and an only child was rough on Blaine. He was angry and didn't like the reasoning they gave him. That they'd grown apart and were more friends than husband and wife.

At thirteen, he didn't understand why they needed to split. At ten, I didn't either. Mr. and Mrs. Foster were good people, and both attended all of Blaine's games in high school and visited him in college. Sometimes together, sometimes separately.

As far as divorces go, theirs was a better one. Still, I wanted to be his friend when I saw him suffering all those years ago, but he treated me as an annoyance. By the look on his face, I see he's still hurting. Since our relationship isn't of the serious nature, I keep it light.

“Who does the cooking? From what I remember, your mother is limited in the kitchen, and your specialty is anything on the grill.”

He clasps his heart again. “Another dig. First my beautiful voice and now my cooking. And here I thought we were friends. Close friends.”

Being on the receiving end of his flirting stirs up the dormant butterflies in my belly. My throat swallows my tongue and I'm at a loss for words.

“I, um, should go inside. I... there's a lot to do.”

He holds the barn door open for me and I slide past him, breathing in his spicy, earthy, woody scent. I give him a wave over my shoulder as I hurry across the lawn and into the safety of my kitchen.

This is not good. I can't fall for Blaine's charm. We're barely friends. He's so wrong for me, as he's made abundantly clear over the years through his teasing and poking fun at me.

Maybe we're past all that.

For some reason, I can't erase those sea-glass eyes or the way his chest felt under my hands as I finish decorating the inn for Christmas.



••••

“Oh no!” I hear my mother shriek from the kitchen as I’m about to knock on her front door.

“WHAT IS IT, WINNIE?” my dad hollers before rushing down the stairs.

I shift the bag laden with food to my left hand and let myself in. Instead of being hit with the savory smell of turkey as I expect, the house smells... normal. A little bit of Bob, their aging dog, and pine cleaner.

“Mom? Are you okay?” I head back to the kitchen and find her on her knees in front of the oven.

“The oven isn’t working. I swear it was on when I put the turkey in two hours ago.”

My dad pushes a series of buttons. “Maybe it’s electrical from the keypad. They don’t make appliances like they used to.”

It’s been my dad’s grumble since he replaced the twenty-year-old appliances five years ago.

“How am I supposed to make Thanksgiving with a broken oven?” She’s still in her bathrobe, and the counters are covered in empty dishes she plans on filling later.

“We’ll figure it out, honey.” My dad helps my mom up, and I set the bag of groceries on the floor by my feet.

“We can make everything at the inn.”

My mom lifts her head and comes over to me, holding me in a hug. “Hi, sweetie. That’s sweet of you, but I haven’t even taken a shower yet, and the pants and blouse I want to wear are in the wash.”

“I can get started on everything.”

Mom lifts her head and sighs. “I don’t want to put all of this on you.”

Cooking in the kitchen together in our bathrobes and getting ready an hour before the meal is ready so we’re not

covered in food has been our tradition for as long as I can remember.

Since I've been living at the inn, I come over showered and dressed while Mom stays in her robe. She's big on nostalgia.

"I've been training with the best my entire life. I think it's time I show you how much I've learned. I'm ready to make this feast on my own."

"Oh, I have no doubt about it. It's the bonding time with you that I love. I suppose I can wear a different outfit. My shower won't take long."

"Let me do this, Mom. The kitchen at the inn is big enough to make two Thanksgiving feasts."

"Are you sure, honey? You'll be all alone. I can call your brother and Evie to come early—"

"No need. Besides, I'm sure they're finishing up the desserts this morning or even working on their light display for the parade." I give her a hug and squeeze her shoulders. "You've earned a year off. Let me do this for the family."

While Mom packs up the ingredients and the dishes she planned on using, Dad and I carry it all out to my car.

"You sure you don't want me to go with you and help you carry all this inside?"

"Dad." I pat his chest. "I've been lugging in groceries since I was three. I can handle it. You're on Mom and oven duty. I'll call you in a bit when I have an idea when dinner will be ready."

"Thanks, sweetheart. I'll call your brother and let him know the change in plans."

Once home, it only takes four trips from my car to the kitchen. After I have all the items stored in the fridge that need to stay cold, I pick up the list Mom made. Even though she can make a Thanksgiving feast with her eyes closed, she's always written out every dish in the order it needed to be made so all

the food would be ready at the same time. Like mother, like daughter.

I preheat the oven and lower the racks so the twenty-pound bird will fit. Since it's already seasoned and covered, there isn't any prep I need to do there. I rinse the potatoes and set them aside to peel when I see Blaine's truck pull around back.

He heads straight to the barn without glancing toward the inn. Maybe he's getting a few hours of work in before he has dinner with his mom? When the oven beeps indicating it's reached the right temperature, I put the turkey in and set the timer.

Since it will need at least four hours to cook, and the rest of the meal will only take a couple of hours to prepare, I work on setting up the dining room. I don't serve big meals at the inn and the five tables placed around the perimeter of the room are usually sufficient for my guests to have a leisurely cup of coffee and pastry, but it won't work for today's meal. I drag three tables to the center, making one rectangular table that can seat five.

After covering it with a sage green tablecloth, I'm on the hunt for decorations to make a pretty tablescape. Once the table is set, I head back to the kitchen and put the sweet potatoes in the oven.

I glance out the window at the barn. Blaine has been out there for at least an hour. He must be hungry or thirsty. I fill a mug with coffee—black, as I've learned he prefers—and grab a pumpkin spice muffin.

He doesn't hear me when I first enter the barn. His back is to me, and I watch in silence as he paints one of the signs. After a few minutes, I clear my throat, not wanting to startle him as I make my way over to him.

“Marley? What are you doing here?”

I chuckle. “Shouldn't I be the one asking that question?”

“Why aren't you at your parents'? You and your mom always make Thanksgiving together.”

“Her oven kicked the bucket so we’re moving the feast over here.” I hold out the coffee and muffin. “I didn’t know if you’d had breakfast.”

Blaine takes both and lifts his chin. “Thanks.”

“Can’t stop working, can you? What time are you going to your mom’s?”

He sips his coffee and lifts his shoulder. “She took a shift at the hospital so another nurse could be home for the holidays.”

“That was sweet of her.”

He peels back the paper wrapper and takes a bite of the muffin. “Thanks for this. I skipped out on breakfast. I’ll clean up and get out of your way.”

“Absolutely not. You’re staying and having Thanksgiving with us.”

“It’s okay, Marley. You don’t have to—”

“Seriously.” I roll my eyes and wave my hand through the air. “Don’t insult my family by giving us some lame excuse about not wanting to intrude. And don’t waste your time having a pity party about being an unwelcomed guest. You’ve always had an open invite—not that an *invite* has ever been needed—to sit at the family table.”

“It’ll be more work on you, which you weren’t planning on in the first place.”

“Now I’m insulted.” I prop my hands on my hips. “You think I can’t handle cooking a family meal?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean then?”

Blaine opens his mouth, but no words come out. He smartly fills it with another bite of the muffin. Somehow he pulls off looking like a cover model while he chews. It could be the smirk. Or the sparkle in his sea-glass eyes.

When he finishes off the muffin, he brushes his hand against his leg. “I’ll clean up here then help you in the

kitchen.”

I can't help the laugh that erupts. “We're not grilling steaks and burgers.”

“And you accuse me of insulting the Hudson family.” Blaine shakes his head. “For the record, I'm a very good sous chef. Tell me what you need done, and I'll do it. You can be Mama Hudson and I'll be her little helper Marley.”

I narrow my eyes at him, but my lips betray me and lift in a grin. “Okay, *little helper, Marley*. You're on potato peeling duty. I'll get your frilly apron ready.”

“I'm also amazing at peeling potatoes.” He dunks his paint brush in an old coffee can filled with water and wipes his hands on a towel.

“Good. Because it's my least favorite cooking task.”

“But I draw the line at wearing a frilly apron.”

“Spoilsport.”

We spend the next hour humming along to Christmas songs while we work seamlessly side-by-side. He proves himself to be a great listener and a huge help. When there's twenty minutes left on the turkey timer, and all the sides are heating up in the double wall oven, he shrugs into his coat.

My heart drops in my stomach. I never thought I'd ever be sad to see him leave. Usually I can't wait for Blaine to walk out the door, taking his snarky comments and insults with him.

“Where are you going?”

“I'm not exactly dressed for Thanksgiving with your family.” He points down at his paint splattered jeans and scuffed up work boots.

“But you helped so much with dinner. And...” *And I want you to stay.* “And Grant will give me attitude all day if he learns I made you spend two hours helping in the kitchen and then kicked you out.”

“Are you kicking me out?” The tug at the corner of his mouth makes my knees go weak.

Geesh. When did I become a smitten female falling so easily for the Blaine Foster charm?

“Um, no. But Grant won’t see it that way.”

“No worries, Mars.” Blaine crosses the kitchen and tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear. His mesmerizing eyes stare down at me, and I’m suddenly aware of my own heartbeat. “I’ll protect you from your big brother.”

He drops a kiss to my temple, and I inhale on a gasp. His spicy earth scent fills the little bit of air between our bodies.

“I’m going home to take a quick shower and change. I’ll be back before you have time to miss me.”

He slips out the back door before I can respond. Which is a good thing, because how the heck do I respond to that?

The touch.

The intense gaze.

The kiss. Even if only to my temple.

He’s only been gone for five minutes and, yes, I do miss him. I don’t have time to process before Grant and Evie pull into the driveway.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” Evie calls as she bursts through the door bearing a platter of assorted cheesecake bites, cookies, and pastries. “It smells delicious in here.” She sets the platter down and kisses my cheek.

“These look delicious.”

“Sorry we couldn’t come earlier to help. Grant wanted to try out a few new recipes, and one thing led to another and...” The twinkle in her eye says it all.

“No need to fill in the rest.” If I didn’t love them so much, I’d think it sickening. Finding someone who adores me as much as Grant adores Evie was never something I thought much about before.

My focus has been on turning the inn into my own, keeping the old school charm and character my grandparents

put into it for decades while also adding my own personality. Finding my happily ever after has been on the back burner.

I love my small private living quarters off the kitchen, but it's not a space to raise a family. It never bothered me before... before I started having feelings for...

Nope. Not going there. I do *not* have feelings for my brother's best friend.

"Hey sis. Smells awesome. Need any help setting up the dining room?" Grant sets two bottles of wine on the center island.

"I moved furniture around already."

"And did the dishes. Cleaning as you go all by yourself while making a feast. You amaze me, Marley." Evie takes down three wine glasses.

"Well, I didn't do it alone. I had help."

She and Grant wear identical furrowed brows as they glance around my kitchen. "Is Foo-foo here?"

I roll my eyes at the mention of the imaginary friend I had when I was five.

"Who is Foo-foo?" Evie asks.

Grant opens his mouth, and I whip a hand towel at him. "Nobody. My brother's an idiot." I fold the towel into thirds and drape it over the oven handle. "Blaine showed up to work on our parade entry in the barn shortly after I got back from Mom and Dad's. I guess his mom had to work today. He came inside and helped me for a few hours."

"And then you sent him packing?" Grant shakes his head. "I don't know what your issue is with Blaine. I'm calling him and inviting him over."

"Do you think I'm that cold?" I'm tempted to pick up the towel and smother my brother with it. "Of course I invited him to dinner."

"With your usual sass? No wonder he declined." Grant takes out his phone and begins to dial. "I'll fix things."

Instead of correcting my brother's assumption, I lean against the counter and watch him make a fool of himself.

"Hey, B. Sorry your mom got called in to work. Thanks for helping Mars with dinner, but why the heck aren't you here now? You deserve a free meal after putting up with her for however long she kept you on dish duty."

I stick my tongue out at him and he snarls back at me. Blaine and I took turns washing and drying, just as we took turns mixing, stirring, and gathering ingredients. We worked surprisingly well together. Just like we worked surprisingly well on the light display.

"Oh. She did?" Grant's brows shoot up toward his hairline. "Oh. You are? Cool. Okay. Yeah, Mom and Dad should be here soon. No, don't worry about that. You were on kitchen duty which means you don't have to bring anything."

I turn my back on my brother and peek at the food in the oven. There's thirty seconds left on the turkey timer, and I turn it off before sticking the meat thermometer into the crispy skin. I watch as the temperature rises to the perfect one hundred seventy degrees.

"Blaine is on his way," Grant says as he pockets his phone.

"No duh."

"You could have told me he went home to change."

"You didn't ask and assumed."

"It's not like Blaine to stick around for two hours and help in the kitchen. He'd rather have clean up duty at the end."

I don't miss Evie's smirk and turn away from her to stick my head in the refrigerator. I see a jar of olives and take those out, dumping them in a white ceramic dish. I shove the dish and the bowl of cranberry sauce at my brother.

"Make yourself useful and put these on the table."

"Is this that blueberry merlot cranberry sauce you and Evie made last year?"

"It is."



“I’m taking the leftovers home.”

When Grant leaves the kitchen, Evie taps her nails on the butcher block island. “So. Blaine was here.”

“Yeah.” I lift a shoulder in nonchalance.

“He’s been spending a lot of time here lately.”

“If Mayor Pearl didn’t do that stupid random pairing thing making us work together on a display for the parade, he wouldn’t be.”

“And what a shame that would be.”

I swirl around at her. “What’s that supposed to mean?” She’s smiling so wide I regret asking her, afraid she’s already observed the feelings I’m not ready to address. “Never mind. Your brain is convoluted by love. You’ve got hearts and rainbows in your eyes and aren’t seeing clearly.”

“A little defensive, are we?”

“You’re going to be my least favorite sister-in-law if you keep this up.”

Evie giggles. “You’ll always be my favorite.”

“Mom and Dad are here,” Grant says as he enters the kitchen again. “And Blaine pulled up next to them.”

I’m going to have to see a cardiologist soon to investigate this quickening heartbeat that keeps happening when I’m around Blaine. Or when I think about Blaine. Or when someone mentions Blaine.

Ugh. Evie must be rubbing off on me. This has nothing to do with *Blaine* and everything to do with spending so much time with a hopeless romantic. My feelings for my brother’s best friend are skewed because I see the love Grant and Evie have when they’re together. I’m projecting those vibes where they don’t belong.

“Look who we found in the driveway!” my mom exclaims as she comes through the front door. I hear Blaine’s laugh from the parlor and my insides turn to mush. Dang, Evie.

“You know me, Winnie. I can never say no to a free meal.”

“One you’ve worked for,” Grant says. “I’ll take your coat, Mom.”

“Worked for?” my mom asks.

Their voices grow louder as they come into the kitchen. My parents greet me with warm hugs like it’s been days instead of a few hours since they last saw me.

“Did you get the oven fixed?” I ask my dad.

“I took the entire back panel off and checked every wire. No idea what’s wrong. Mom and I will go oven shopping in the morning. Maybe there will be Black Friday deals.”

“An early Christmas present for me. Thank you, sweetheart,” she says to Evie when she hands Mom a glass of wine. “It’s so good to see you again too.”

More hugs and kisses are exchanged, and everyone settles around the butcher block island with their drinks while I take the rest of the food out of the oven.

“What’s this about you working for a meal, Blaine honey?”

My vision is a perfect twenty-twenty and I see his lopsided grin from the corner of my eye.

“Your daughter’s a tyrant in the kitchen, ordering me around to do all her dirty work.”

I gasp and swing around, pointing a serving spoon at him. “I am *not* a tyrant! You’re the one who offered to help, and you said you loved peeling potatoes and cutting onions.”

Darn, those sparkly eyes of his. They’re laughing at me, as is everyone else in my family.

“Kidding, Mars Bar.” He winks at me and turns to my mom. “We did a little role play. She took on the role of Winnie Hudson and had all the recipes, ingredients, and processes outlined and in order, and I stepped into Marley’s shoes as the sidekick, playing the perfect and doting assistant. If your daughter wasn’t so stubborn, she’d admit to us making a perfect pair... in the kitchen.”

Only Blaine Foster can compliment and insult me in the same sentence. Backhanded compliments are the only ones I receive from him. My parents and brother all laugh in amusement, but Evie wears a different expression.

A knowing expression. She didn't grow up with Blaine and isn't tainted by his charm. She's able to read through his teasing, and what she deciphers is not what I want to hear.

"Marley is a wonderful cook. I'm sure the meal turned out perfectly. And we're glad that you could be here to help her, Blaine. We all love having you around," my dad says, slinging an arm across Blaine's shoulders.

The food turns out perfectly and dinner is nice. Even though I hosted, I let my dad and Grant sit at the heads of the table, with Mom and Evie by their sides. Which means Blaine and I are next to each other.

I try to ignore the tingles in my belly when he passes me the stuffing and our fingers touch. And the warm blush to my cheeks when his thigh bumps against mine. And the way my heart kicks into overdrive when he leans back at the end of the meal and stretches his arm along the back of my chair.

I do my best to lean forward—and not look awkward—to avoid his touch, but I'm pretty sure I feel a tug or two on my hair. Possibly even little circles his thumb is drawing on my shoulder blade.

I'm not sure because I'm concentrating so hard on not noticing Blaine being in my space.

Clean up goes quickly. Grant and Dad take over dish duty while Mom packs up leftovers, and Evie, Blaine, and I reorganize the dining room, putting it back to normal for my guests who will arrive tomorrow.

With only six of us, there's plenty of room in the parlor for dessert and games, so Evie brings out the tray of cheesecakes and pastries while I get the wine. We make an early night of it since Grant and Evie have to be at the bakery before the sun rises.

My parents leave shortly after, and Blaine surprises me when he brings in a duffel bag and heads down the hall to the bathroom. He comes out a few minutes later changed back into his paint splattered jeans.

“Figured I’d finish painting and set up the lights for a trial run. I’m sure you’re exhausted so don’t feel like you need to come out. I know you have a lot to do to get ready for your full house in the morning.”

He’s right. I do have a full house coming tomorrow, but I don’t have too much to do. “I can help you.”

I head back to my room to change while he goes to the barn. We spend the next few hours painting, laughing, singing along to Christmas music again, and staging the props and lights on the flatbed he brought over a few nights ago.

“Ready?” He holds two ends of thick extension cords inches apart.

“You look like Clark Griswold getting ready to plug in his light display.”

Blaine snorts and does a terrible Chevy Chase impression. “We’re going to have the hap-hap-happiest Christmas.”

“Is this where I sing the ‘National Anthem’?”

“We forgot to do the pledge at dinner.”

“We’ll save it for Christmas Eve dinner.”

He quirks a grin and joins the cords. The lights come on full display, and I have to say, I’m impressed. They’re tasteful and not gaudy. The signs to the manger light up and leave a trail of lights to a shooting star that hangs above where baby Jesus will be.

It’s not flashy, and may not win us the top spot, but I’m proud of our work. “Nice job, Blaine.”

“Hmm.” He walks around the trailer, adjusting a few strings of lights. “Do we have enough lights? It is a light parade, after all.”

“We’ll have some in the bed of the truck as well. The trees, presents, and Frosty Mug signs will add more flair.”

“Frosty’s isn’t exactly flair worthy.”

“Of course it is.”

“It’s a pub. Nothing to brag about.”

The sudden turn in Blaine’s demeanor has me recalling him grumbling about not wanting to follow in his father’s footsteps when he was younger. Yet here he is.

“Can I ask you something?”

He lifts a shoulder and untangles another strand of lights.  
“Sure.”

“Why did you decide to take over Frosty’s?”

He stills and avoids looking at me. It’s another minute before he responds. “My dad didn’t want to run it anymore and offered me a fair price. I know a good deal when I see one.” The corner of his lip lifts in a grin, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Are you happy?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“You and Grant went to UConn and had big plans to be city boys wearing three-piece suits and making seven figures a year.”

“Pipe dreams. Desk jobs and big cities aren’t all they’re cracked up to be.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I can’t see you living that life.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know. I guess...” I run my hand along one of the signs he painted. “That life doesn’t seem rewarding.”

“Not like running a pub.” He snorts.

“Do you think it’s beneath you? Is that why you didn’t want to take over for your dad?”

“No. I didn’t want to turn into him.” Blaine closes his eyes. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to say that. Or ruin the festive mood.”

“You didn’t. I’m the one who brought it up. I apologize for dampening the mood. But you should be proud of the life you brought back into the pub. Everyone loves hanging out there, and the food is great.”

“You’re just saying that because I give you the family discount.” The twinkle in his eye tells me he’s joking, which is better than the path we were going down. I forgot how surly talk of his parents makes him.

I yawn and cover my mouth with the back of my hand. “Sorry.”

“I’m the one who should apologize. You’ve been on your feet for the past twelve hours, and tomorrow is a long day for you again. I’ll pack up and get out of here.” He unplugs the lights, cleans off the brushes from earlier, and turns out the lights.

I lock the barn door and we stand in the driveway in awkward silence for a few moments. “Um, thanks for all your help today in the kitchen. Especially dealing with my tyranny.”

Blaine chuckles. “You’re easy on the eyes so it helped lessen the pain of all the barking orders.”

Once again, he follows up a compliment with an insult, even if he is kidding. I don’t get defensive because I know I wasn’t being bossy or barking at him. Instead, I play along.

“At least you’re a good dog and obey my commands.”

His eyes crinkle in amusement, but he doesn’t say anything. He tucks his hands in the front pockets of his jeans and runs his tongue along the top row of teeth as if he’s contemplating what to say.

Another compliment? Another insult?

Blaine steps closer to me, his hands still tucked safely away. His gaze drops to my mouth and my heart thumps in my

chest. I shiver from the cold, yet my cheeks redden with heat.  
He lowers his head and brushes a kiss across my temple.

“Night, Mars.”

I stand frozen in place as I watch him walk to his truck. It's not until his taillights can't be seen in the dark night that I finally head back inside.

Sleep doesn't come easily. And when it does, I dream of sea-glass eyes and deep-set dimples.





## CHAPTER EIGHT

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“It’s adorable, Evie.” I circle around Grant’s truck, checking out their light display. Grant and my dad built an arbor for the bed of the truck, and it’s draped in lights shaped like donuts.

There are wooden cutouts shaped like cupcakes and gingerbread cookies, which are covered in lights as well.

“I thought of doing a Candyland theme but we’re not a candy shop. This was Grant’s idea.”

“It totally works. I love it.”

“Oh my gosh, Marley,” Denise hollers across the parking lot and rushes over to me, pushing Analise’s stroller. She and her husband Mark are our Mary and Joseph, and their adorable three-month old baby girl is playing baby Jesus for our display.

It’s twenty minutes until the start of the parade and I don’t see Mark. She’s flushed and in sheer panic mode. “Denise, are you okay?”

“Mark got into an accident on his way home from work. He’s okay. A little whiplash and the car is totaled. I’m heading to the hospital to see him. I’m so sorry we have to bail on you.”

I feel his presence before I see him. “I just heard about Mark. What can we do for you guys?” Blaine asks.

Denise bites her lip and tears pool in her eyes. “I shouldn’t be so shaken up. Mark’s okay, that’s what matters, right?” Analise fusses in her stroller and Denise’s hands shake trying to unbuckle her. “Gosh. I’m a mess. I’m afraid I’ll drop her.”

“Let me.” Blaine takes the baby from Denise and presses her against his chest like a natural.

My ovaries combust. Which is terrible timing with my friend’s husband in the hospital and our float now not happening. I won’t even begin to process why seeing Blaine with a baby has me turning into Evie’s twin.

“Do you have someone to drive you to the hospital?” I ask.

Denise nods. “Mark’s brother is here. We’re going to get Mark from the hospital and take him home.”

“How about we take care of Analise for a couple of hours and bring her by once you and Mark are settled back at home?” Blaine offers.

“You want to babysit?” Denise asks in disbelief.

“Sure. It can’t be too hard, can it?”

Denise and I look at each other and laugh. I’m glad she has this as a distraction, even if only for a minute.

“Have you ever changed a diaper?” He shakes his head. “Made a bottle?”

He shakes his head again. “Can’t be too hard, can it? I mean, if Mark can handle it, I’m sure I can.”

Mark is a year older than Blaine and Grant. They don’t necessarily hang out together but growing up in the same small town and being a small business owner means you know everyone whether you want to or not.

Denise and Mark took over the local grocer when Mark’s parents retired, and at some point in high school, every kid worked there for a stint. They opted out of participating in the light parade because they’re still adjusting to having a baby.

“I used to babysit all the time. It’s been a while, but I’m sure changing a diaper is like riding a bike. If it will help you focus on Mark, we can watch Analise for you.”

“I owe you two so much. Especially after bailing on you.”

“You didn’t bail on us, Den,” Blaine says. “Give Mark our well wishes. You have my number. Call if you want to check in on baby Jesus here. Go see your husband.”

After Denise straps in the car seat in the back of Blaine’s truck and leaves, I turn to stare at the giant of a man holding the tiny sleeping baby in his strong arms.

“Baby Jesus? Not sure how she’s going to be our miracle if she doesn’t have parents to hold her by the manger.” I nod

toward our trailer.

“We’re the new Mary and Joseph,” he says with confidence.

“And who exactly will drive your truck? If you say the three wise men, then that scene won’t make any sense with no bodies.”

“Trust me, Mars Bar.”

Tucking Analise to his chest, he crosses the busy lot and says something to my parents. I see my mom’s face light up as she strokes the baby’s chubby cheeks. The three of them greet me with wide grins.

“Your parents will drive us.”

“I’ll hold her while you two change.” My mom holds out her hands to Blaine. “Oh, I can’t wait until you two give me grandchildren.”

I choke out a cough. “Excuse me?”

My mom glances up and smiles. “You and Grant. Hopefully, he and Evie don’t wait too long. And I’m sure you’ll be close behind.”

I don’t point out the fact that I’m proudly single and nowhere close to being in love, engaged, married, or a mother.

“Here you go.” Blaine hands me the costume I made for Denise while he puts on the one I made for Mark.

They’re loose-fitting so sizing doesn’t matter too much. Blaine is a few inches taller than Mark so the robe doesn’t fall as low as it should, but no one will see his ankles anyway.

When I’ve tightened the sash around my waist, Blaine helps me up into the back of the truck, and I take my place by the make-shift manger. He sets Analise in my arms and works his way around the trailer and bed of the truck, plugging in all the lights.

Our three wise men show up, and Blaine directs them to their places on the trailer bed. We wait for instructions from

the mayor and all the vehicles start slowly rolling down Evergreen Avenue.

The lights are impressive, and I can only imagine how beautiful it looks from the spectator's standpoint on the sidewalk. I do my best to remember to wave to the townspeople who are cheering and *ooing* and *ahing* at the displays, but the man sharing the small bench next to me takes up too much headspace.

I cradle Analise in my arms, resting her across my lap, and Blaine reaches over to stroke her cheeks. "I never knew babies were so soft. She's cute."

I lift my chin to look at him and hold my breath. Our faces are only inches apart. This close, those eyes destroy any chance of me ever falling asleep without thinking of them. Of him.

His minty breath brushes across my cheek. "You're good with her."

"You are too," I whisper. I snap back into reality and move my shoulders away from him to put a little space between us.

I don't know what's happening between us or if it's mutual. I think it is, but I can never tell with him. He's a jokester. Seriousness isn't a trait he carries with him.

I don't trust him with my heart if it truly is my heart that's drawn to him. Maybe I'm just desperate for friendship since Evie and Grant are glued to each other. Not that Evie was my friend first. She was Grant's, and then we met.

Like Blaine. He's Grant's friend first. I'm here by default. I've always been the sidekick. My heart stops racing and now feels claustrophobic, the walls of my chest closing in. Cardiologists are going to have a field day with me.

I spend the next fifteen minutes focusing on the people along the parade route, waving to them, and entertaining Analise with smiles and soft kisses. When my dad parks Blaine's truck in the field at the end of downtown, I bundle the baby and hop to my feet.

“Easy there. Let me help you down.” Blaine moves in front of me and jumps to the ground, then offers his hand to me.

If I didn’t have Analise in my arms, I would have hopped down without his assistance. Or I could pass her off to him and completely ignore his hands. But then our hands and bodies would touch when we make the exchange.

I tighten my hold on the baby and scoot to the edge and sit on the open tailgate. Blaine puts his hands on my hips and lifts me to the ground. I’m unsteady on my feet and tumble into his chest. Thankfully Analise is there as a barrier. She doesn’t seem to mind the close proximity of Blaine’s body heat.

I, on the other hand, need to get away. I turn and start crossing the dirt lot.

“Marley?” Blaine calls to me.

“Yeah?”

“Where are you going?” I glance around at the trucks, the lights, the people, the laughter.

Great question. My car is on the other side of town, and I have a baby in tow. Her car seat is in the backseat of Blaine’s truck.

My parents round the truck and my mom holds out her arms. “Can I get some baby snuggles before you return her?”

I pass Analise off to my mom and soon Grant and Evie swarm around us.

“Oh, isn’t she precious?”

I watch with envy as my brother and Evie swoon over the baby. They’ll make wonderful parents one day. Grant has always wanted to be a dad, and from what Evie has told me over the year, she’d never wanted or imagined having a husband or kids. Being a product of a cold, loveless family, she never got to experience what real relationships were like.

My family welcomed her with open arms. She was a quick study, with a heart of gold yet a sharp tongue to keep my brother in line.

“You okay?” Blaine’s big, strong hand rests on my shoulder and I do all I can not to shrug it off.

It’s not his fault my brain can’t function around him.

“Yup. Tired is all. Busy week at the inn.”

“I can take Analise back to Mark and Denise if you want to go home and rest.”

I can’t be that selfish. Poor Denise is stressed about her husband. I can’t abandon babysitting duty because I have the hots for my co-babysitter and am too scared to face him.

“And leave you alone with that precious child? I don’t think so.” I force a laugh and he eyes me questionably.

“I’m not a monster.”

“Maybe not to your usual crowd, but Analise is an impressionable three-month-old and you don’t even know how to change her diaper or make her bottle. Speaking of which, I should get one ready for her.”

“You do that a lot.”

“What?”

“Passive aggressively or backhandedly call me incompetent.”

“I do not.”

He licks his bottom lip and raises a brow. I’m saved from hearing what else he plans on accusing me of when Mayor Pearl speaks through her megaphone.

“We’ll be announcing the winners at the town square. You can leave your vehicles here and meet at the gazebo in fifteen minutes.”

It will take ten minutes to walk back, so I go to the front of Blaine’s truck and take out the diaper bag. I find the bottle Denise already had prepared and give it a little shake.

“Feeding time, Mom. Do you want to do it?”

“Oh, I’d love to, but I don’t trust my legs to multitask while we make our way to the park.”

“I can feed her.” Blaine swoops in, taking Analise from my mom like a pro. “Bottle?” he asks me.

I let out a soft sigh and hand it to him. The night is cool but at least there’s no wind. I take another blanket from the bag and wrap it around Analise and tuck it between her and Blaine’s hard chest.

“Keep it at an angle so there isn’t any air coming through.” I tap his fingers so the angle is right and quickly pull my hand away. “I’ll push the stroller so we can put her down when she falls asleep.”

“I don’t mind carrying her. She isn’t heavy.”

“Your arms will feel it later.”

“These babies?” He lifts his free arm and kisses his bicep.

Grant walks with Blaine, teasing him about being the first with a baby while my parents and Evie tag along behind with me. I’m glad for the distraction of the group.

“I’m not allergic to kids like you and your sister think. I wouldn’t mind a wife and kids someday.”

Grant and I both nearly stumble at the words tumbling out of Blaine Foster’s mouth. He’s the quintessential bachelor. Not a family man.

“Really?” Grant laughs. “Tied to one woman for the rest of your life? Saturday nights on the couch watching Disney movies instead of—”

“Slinging drinks at Frosty’s? Knowing there’s always someone to go home to every night? Yeah. I wouldn’t mind that.”

I’m stunned into silence. Blaine didn’t have that stability growing up. His parents are nice people, but they don’t ooze love and comfort. They provided for him, even after their divorce, and made sure his needs were meant. His physical needs. Never the emotional ones.

Have I been blinded to his layers all these years?

Grant slaps him on the back. “Looks like Evie and I are going to have to find you a wife. We’ll set up some double dates next week.”

“Next week?” Blaine glances over his shoulder. At me? At Evie? At my parents? They’re not paying them any attention, caught up in donut talk with Evie. “Kinda fast, don’t you think?”

“Nah. Between Amelia, Marley, and Evie, I’m sure we can round up a handful of women who wouldn’t mind taming the effervescent wild boy Blaine Foster.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but I’m not wild like I was in our teens and early twenties.”

“See? Already calming down and ready for marriage. I have faith in you, bro.”

We reach the center of town and make our way to the gazebo where a reserved space is sectioned off for those who participated in the parade.

I no longer care about winning. I want to go home and bury myself in pillows and sleep for days. I’m tired. I’m confused. I’m hurt. I’m... not in love. Definitely not in love. Love takes time. After you’ve been in a relationship with a man. Dated for months. Talked about your childhood, your likes, your fears, shared your secrets, and spent time with each other’s families.

Then, maybe, love happens.

I ignore the devil—or is it an angel—on my shoulder that reminds me I’ve known Blaine my entire life. He’s spent time with my family, and I’m friendly with his parents. He’s fully aware of my likes, my fears, and too many of my secrets.

But there’s one fear, one secret, he’s not privy to.

I’m afraid I *am* in love with him.

And I’m afraid it may not be a secret.

••••



WHEN MAYOR PEARL ANNOUNCES the winner, no one is surprised. Ethan and Hannah deserve the win. As an electrician, it should have been a no-brainer Ethan Hutchins would blow us all out of the water with his light display. It was set to music that blasted from his work truck. The blinking lights kept to the beat of some of the most popular Christmas songs.

He lucked out by having Hannah Davis as a partner. She and her mother own the florist shop, and she's super creative and artistic.

Marley and I don't even come in second place. That honor is awarded to Grant and Evie.

"We should have gone with your idea," I say, switching Analise to my other arm. Marley was right. My arm is getting tired. "Voters like the lights and flashy, not the sentimental."

"The twelve trees of Christmas wouldn't have beaten them out anyway. I like that we were the only display that centered around the real meaning of Christmas."

"And we got to hang with this cutie." I lift Analise to my face and smother her chubby cheeks, the only part of her exposed to the cool air, with kisses.

She gives me a gummy grin and stuff oozes out of the corner of her mouth.

"Um. Mars?" I tilt the baby up. "She's puking. Is she sick? Should we take her to the hospital?"

"That's not puke, you big baby." Marley takes Analise from me and drapes her over her shoulder. "It's milk drool. She needs to be burped. It may mean she'll spit up a little too, so don't go into a full-blown panic and call 911."

"A bit dramatic, are we?"

"Says the guy who called milk drool puke and wanted to call rescue."

"I was joking."

"Sure." Marley sways to Bing Crosby's 'White Christmas', and when Analise is asleep, she buckles her in the stroller.

“We should get her home. Denise texted me ten minutes ago to say they were back.”

“Good. How’s Mark?”

“Sore but he’ll be okay.”

We say goodbye to her family and push the stroller back to my truck. I like this, walking side-by-side, pushing a stroller. It’s not an image I’ve ever conjured up before. Not with another woman and definitely not with Marley.

But now I can’t unsee it. Can’t *unfeel* it. My best friend’s little sister is growing on me, but it could be because of proximity. With us busy working on our light display, I haven’t had a chance to date other women.

Not that I’ve been on a date in a long time. Was it this summer? I brought Erin Grauer to the movies and dinner. I remember it being a warm night. Must have been the summer. See? I’m not the playboy bachelor Grant and Marley like to accuse me of being.

The pub has kept me busy, physically and mentally. I haven’t had time, patience, or even the desire to date. Which is ironic since I now have more time with my wingman retired.

I stand back as Marley hooks the car seat into the base that Denise buckled into my truck before she left. I don’t think I would have figured out how the contraption worked. We ride in silence to the other end of town, and when we pull into their driveway, Marley is out of the truck before I turn it off.

She slings the diaper bag over her shoulder and unhooks the carrier. When she turns around, the bag bumps into my midsection.

“Easy there, Mars. Let me help.”

“Sure. You can unhook the base.” She tosses her chin over her shoulder.

“Your hands are full. The bag or the car seat. Which one do you want to turn over to me.”

“I can manage both.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “I know you can, but that doesn’t mean you have to. Just give me something more to carry than this piece of plastic.” I unbuckle the base that doesn’t weigh more than a pound.

“Fine.” She drops the diaper bag in the driveway and spins on her heel, rushing up to the front door.

I swear, the mood swings on this woman are giving me whiplash. I should be used to it by now. This is how our relationship has been for the past twenty years. Except for the past few weeks. It’s been different.

Nice.

Denise greets us at the door. We don’t stay long, not wanting to disturb Mark who is resting upstairs, and so Denise can put Analise to bed.

“I can’t thank you enough for watching her.”

“I can’t thank you enough for letting me borrow her,” Marley says, giving Analise a soft kiss on her fingers.

*I and me.* Not *us* or *we*. A typical subtle Marley snub.

“*We*,” I emphasize, “are thankful for our baby Jesus. Call *us* anytime to watch Analise. She’s perfect.”

“What was that?” I ask once Marley is buckled in and we’re on our way back to her car.

“What was what?”

“The attitude.”

“What attitude?”

“So we’re back to this, are we?”

“Back to what?”

“Come on, Mars. We’ve been getting along great. What happened back there?”

“Nothing *happened*.”

“Think of me as an idiot, which shouldn’t be too hard for you to do.” I hear her snort and pray I’m making headway. “Spell it out for me.”

“There’s nothing to spell. Our forced proximity time is over so there’s no need to pretend to get along anymore.”

I hate that we’re already back at the lot where she left her car. Marley unlatches her belt and hops out of my truck like she did back at Denise and Mark’s house.

“Marley,” I growl. Of course my seatbelt decides now is the time to jam. I try three times before it unlatches and by the time I’m at her car, she has it started and is peeling out.

I’m not the type of guy to chase after a woman, especially one as prickly as Marley.



## CHAPTER NINE

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I'm not going to blame my poor mood over the past week on Marley. I'm not the type of guy to let one person have so much control over them. I haven't even seen the woman, much less talked to her, sent or received a text, or really, even heard her name come up in conversation.

I've been busy. Busy is good. It means the pub is making money. It means my mind is occupied and not obsessing over the blonde beauty with big, gorgeous green eyes.

The bell above the pub door chimes and Grant walks in, bringing the frigid air with him. "It's way too early in the season for it to be in the single digits." He rubs his hands together and takes a seat on the empty barstool across from me.

"Beer?"

"I'm afraid it'll turn into a slushie in my gut."

"Coffee with a shot of whiskey?"

"Now you're talking. Easy on the pour. It's not even four o'clock."

"Eh. It's five o'clock somewhere." I prepare Grant's drink and slide it across the bar to him.

"You still planning on coming over tonight?"

"Hey. I'm not the one who bails on his best friend."

Grant hits me with a grin. "If you had a bride as perfect as mine, you'd skip out on your ugly mug too."

"You Hudsons know how to lift a guy up."

A line forms between Grant's furrowed brows. "What's that supposed to mean? Your ego's never been bruised."

"Have you met your sister?"

He sips his coffee. "It's her love language."

I choke on the air in the room. Grant's oblivious to my struggle to breathe.

“She loves you like a brother. She gives me the same kind of crap she gives you.”

*Loves you like a brother.* And here Grant thought my ego could never get bruised. Not that I’m in need of Marley’s love. I’d settle for her like. It seemed like she liked me, or at least didn’t mind me, that night in the barn when she asked me if I was happy running Frosty’s.

I didn’t lie to her, but I wasn’t a hundred percent honest either. When I was younger, I thought living the opposite life of how I was brought up would fulfill me. Lots of money, fancy office job, big city. I’d even convinced Grant that he wanted that lifestyle too.

But it didn’t fulfill us. It only made us miss Maine and Balsam Grove even more. I wished I could say I missed my parents as much as I missed his. And his sister. I missed a sense of belonging.

I never thought running the pub would give me that fulfillment, but it does. It’s not glamorous, and I’ll never make millions, but I have a solid investment portfolio, good friends, and the Hudsons. All four of them.

“Yeah, I’ll be over,” I say instead of calling attention to the words he tossed out as if they mean nothing. Love. Marley. Brother.

“You coming straight from here or going home first?”

I glance at the clock behind me. There’s no need to change out of my jeans and flannel to play cards at Grant’s.

“Probably straight from here.”

“Perfect.” Grant finishes his coffee. “Think you can make up a couple batches of loaded potato skins and bring them with you?”

“I feel used.” I cover my heart with my hands. “And here I thought Evie loved me for my pretty face.”

“Bring the pretty face as well.” He slides into his coat and zips it up. “Amelia said she’s bringing a special guest. You

may want to slap on a layer of cologne and do something with that hair.”

I run a hand through my hair that’s overdue for a cut. “Thanks for the heads up. Now that I promised the skins, I guess going home for a shower is out of the question.”

“It’s why I suggested the cologne. And wear a hat to hide the mess.” Grant blows me a kiss and laughs his way to the door.

“Not before I put an ad out for a new best friend,” I call to his retreating back.

“Maybe run one for a girlfriend as well.”

If I didn’t care about him and his family so much, I’d be offended. No, I wouldn’t. I’ve never wanted a girlfriend. Friends who are girls are great. Occasional dates with women who don’t live in the area are even better. Less attachment and worry of wanting to commit.

I take care of the early dinner rush, and when Neil comes on, I go back to the kitchen to make potato skins for game night. I throw a few batches of wings into the fryer as well because who can say no to wings?

We haven’t had a game night since mid-summer. Marley didn’t go because she had a full house at the inn. Since she’s booked solid through Christmas and ski season as well, I doubt she’ll be there tonight, especially if she knows I’m going.

I’m good with it just being the four of us: Grant, Evie, Amelia, and me. Five if Meels brings a friend. Meels is fun to hang out with. We dated once in high school for a hot minute. Like, seriously, minutes. I asked her out after period two Algebra. She said yes. By the time we made it to lunch, she dumped me and said she was *talking* to Preston Miller. By the end of the day, Preston secured her as his date to homecoming.

It wasn’t the saddest day of my sophomore year. If I remember correctly, I asked Natalie Something to the dance. Or maybe it was Nevaeh? I don’t remember. Girls didn’t last longer than a date or two back then. Not really in my early twenties either.



I'm sure there's some Freudian reason to it. Not witnessing a healthy, loving relationship between my parents, or something like that. However, I spent a lot of time at the Hudsons', and Winnie and Pete were and still are model parents, proving young love can last a lifetime.

When the food is ready, I pack it up in bags and load it in my truck. I open my center console and take out a trucker hat, lowering it on my head. I'm not vain and I'm not trying to impress anyone, but I'm pretty sure my hair smells like fried food. Not the way to impress a lady.

Amelia is sweet. I'm sure any friend she brings by will be sweet as well. I rummage through my glovebox hoping a bottle of cologne will magically appear. It doesn't, which makes sense since I haven't owned a bottle since my junior year in college.

I contemplate running into the drug store on my way to Grant's and figure it's not worth it. If Amelia's friend ignites any sparks, I'll break into Grant's room and steal some of his aftershave. I lift up my arm and sniff under my arm. And maybe a shirt.

When I pull into their driveway and see a familiar Subaru, I know I'll be stealing a few things from Grant's room.

I grab the bags of food and ring the doorbell. Marley answers the door with a smile that quickly turns to a frown. "I didn't know you were coming."

"I'm Grant's best friend. Of course I'm invited. I didn't know you'd be here."

"I'm his sister. I don't need an invite."

Wow. Whatever I did to tick off Marley needs to get aired out quickly. I'm not the touchy feely-let's-talk-out-our-emotions-and-bare-our-soul kind of guy, but the tension is too thick for anyone to enjoy their evening.

"Come here." Instead of stepping into the house, I tug her outside, closing the door behind her.

"What are you doing? It's freezing out." She folds her arms across her chest and shivers.

I scan her body and see she's not wearing any shoes. Just a pair of red and green socks with elves on them. I set the food on the porch and shrug out of my coat and drape it over her shoulders. I'm pretty sure it smells like the kitchen, but it beats her getting frost bite.

"You know, if we went inside, neither one of us would be freezing."

"The chill in the air between us would freeze the entire house. At least out here, it only affects the two of us."

The frown between her brows softens, and she lowers her gaze to her feet.

"Mars." I tilt her chin up with my knuckles. "What's going on between us?"

Her eyes and mouth open in shock and she quickly shakes her head. "Between us? Um. Nothing. Why?"

Okay. That's a strange reaction for a woman who acts like she hates my guts. "What aren't you telling me?"

She blinks rapidly and looks away from me. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, Marley." I tug at her hand and bring her down to the front step. I sit next to her. Close. Real close. I drape my arm around her waist and pull her into me. I tell myself it's to keep us warm, but the hammering in my chest calls me a liar.

"I like us better when we get along."

"Okay. We'll get along."

"Just like that?"

"Sure."

"I thought we were getting along... and then we weren't."

"I... I guess not winning upset me."

If I hadn't gotten to know her on a new level the past few weeks, I'd buy the excuse. She's competitive and a sore loser. But something shifted before we found out we didn't win. We were close, and then she started pulling away.

Tonight isn't the night to have a serious conversation, not with her brother and sister-in-law on the other side of the door and Amelia and her friend... *No*.

I want to fix this between Marley and me, and if Amelia and Grant shove a woman at me, I don't know how Marley will react.

I rub my fingers across my temples. She'd only be bothered by it if she has any interest in me. If Marley doesn't care about me the way I've been hoping she does, then she won't show any jealousy with this friend.

While I have no interest in being set up, this could be exactly what I need for proof that there's a spark between us.

"I'm sorry if I've rubbed you the wrong way."

"If." She snorts and I can't help my grin.

"I'm not sorry for the intentional times." I groan as she elbows me in the ribs. The smile on her face is worth the jolt. "I haven't been intentional about it in a while."

I feel her shoulders stiffen next to me. We sit in silence for a few minutes, our breaths making heated clouds in front of our faces.

"Well," she says as she stands. "I've been intentional with mine." Her grin is back. I'll take all the insults she has in her as long as they're accompanied by that smile.

"Come on. The wings are getting cold." I pick up the bag and open the door for her.

"I see how it is. You care more about your precious food than you do the loss of feeling in my limbs," she teases.

No. I care more about the loss of feeling between *us*. I can only hope our few minutes on the front porch have brought those feelings back.

Amelia calls and lets us know she's running late and to start without them. Grant, Evie, Marley, and I make a small dent in the potato skins and are on our second round of drinks when headlights shine through the living room window.

I have no idea what Amelia told her friend about me, and I hope she's not expecting me to act like this is a date. I like my spot at the kitchen table next to Marley, even more than the stack of poker chips in front of me. She's the worst poker player, giving away her tells with every deal, even after I told her what they were.

The biting of her lower lip when she has a good hand. The scrunched-up nose when she has nothing. She's tried to fake both reactions and bluff, but her cheeks turn an adorable red when she tries to lie about her hand.

I scoop up my winnings while Evie and Grant go greet the guests.

"Surprise!" I hear Amelia cheer from the other room.

"Ash? Wow. It's been years since I've seen you. You look... wow," Grant says.

I rack my brain for an Ashley from our class. Amelia is only a year younger than us, but no one comes to mind. If Grant remembers her, I should as well. My memory of the female population is usually pretty good. I try to picture a cute, petite Ashley.

"Ash, this is Grant's wife, Evelyn. But we all call her Evie."

"It's nice to meet you. Grant, you did well."

The deep baritone is definitely not coming from a petite Ashley. I glance at Marley, who appears just as confused as I am. We stand and make our way to the living room.

"Blaine. You remember my brother, Ashton?" Amelia holds on to her brother's biceps with pride.

The man is... huge. If I remember correctly, he's two years older than Grant and me and enlisted in the Marines out of high school. We didn't hang in the same crowds, but small town and all. Ashton had a hero's send-off at school at the beginning of my junior year. I remember it well. Amelia was a sophomore and a sobbing mess.

“Nice to see you again.” I extend a hand and he takes it with a smile. The shake is strong and quick.

“I’m looking forward to settling down with an ice-cold draft at the pub. It’s been too long.” Ashton’s gaze drifts to my right where Marley stands.

The appreciation in his blue eyes doesn’t go unnoticed, and my stomach clenches with part jealousy, part possessiveness. I take a step toward her and introduce her like she’s mine.

“This is Marley, Grant’s sister.” I turn to her. “You probably don’t remember Ashton since he left for the military when you were in middle school.”

“I remember.” Marley greets him with a smile. “Thank you for your service. Amelia has told me so many stories about your bravery and your medals.”

Are those hearts in her eyes? Is she seriously flirting with him in front of me? I tamp down my anger and bite back my growl as Ashton steps forward and takes her hand in his, holding it far longer than necessary.

“It’s lovely meeting you.”

*No. He’s not going to... Oh, man.* Ashton lifts her hand to his face and kisses her knuckles.

Marley bites back a smile and I hear Evie sigh. This is worse than Amelia setting me up with a date. She’s setting Marley up. All the progress I’ve made with her over the past month, and again tonight, is thrown out the window.

“Ashton surprised us last night. We didn’t think he was coming home until after Christmas. Isn’t this great? I hope you don’t mind me inviting him tonight. He needed a break from twenty hours of Mom and Dad smothering him.”

“Are you staying with your parents? I thought they were snowbirds now. Didn’t they sell the house?” Grant asks.

“Yeah. They spend most months at their place in Florida. They come to Maine from May through September and then stay between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Once they go back

to the sunshine state, I'll have a bed to sleep in." Ashton laughs.

"He slept on their couch last night. I offered mine, but it's even smaller than our parents'." Amelia hangs on him again with sisterly adoration.

"I've slept in worse conditions." He kisses the top of Amelia's head.

"I have a room available at the inn for the next few weeks. It's not big but it's better than a couch. It's not booked until after the holidays. You're more than welcome to stay there, free of charge."

My heart drops like a cement brick in my gut. Ashton living under the same roof as Marley? I don't like it.

"That's a great idea," Grant agrees. "You'll have to double your bakery order to fuel those muscles though."

They all laugh. The women gush like they're in the same room as a celebrity.

I glare at my *former* best friend. Who is he to talk? Grant's built. Big and brawny. So am I. We're both over six feet and enjoy lifting weights a few days a week, but we've got nothing on the Marine.

"Oh, Ash, this is perfect. You remember the Christmas Farm Inn? Marley owns it now. It's beautiful. You'll still be close by so Mom and Dad won't give you a hard time, but you'll have the space you need."

"You sure?" he asks Marley. "I don't want to take any business from you."

"If I get any calls for the room, I'll kick you out. Promise." She gives him her signature beautiful smile after only meeting him minutes ago.

I've known her since she was learning to potty train, and I've only recently been on the receiving end of the beautiful smile.

"Ash. This is perfect." Amelia wraps her arms around her big brother's waist. Or at least attempts to. His eight-pack of

muscles and broad shoulders dwarf her, and she's a little taller than average for a woman.

The connection between the siblings is tight, maybe even tighter than Grant and Marley. I've become chopped liver in the corner. What do I have to offer someone like Marley? No siblings, divorced parents, no family home. She's a family person. A homebody. Wife, mother, sister, daughter material. I stand back and watch as my place in her life no longer feels significant or necessary.

"It's settled then. I'll suffer one more night on Mom and Dad's couch and in the morning, I'll move into your place." I don't like the way Ashton returns Marley's smile, or the way he says *move into your place* like they're actually *living* together.

I open my mouth to give a snappy comeback but Evie chimes in first. "The food is getting cold. Let's eat and play some games."

I step aside and let the women go first and am tempted to shoulder bump the Marine out of the way when he steps directly behind Marley. The growl is buried in my chest, but if he lays a hand on her or asks her out, it's coming out.

Since Amelia doesn't know how to play poker, Evie suggests Pictionary. We throw our names in a hat to decide on *fair* teams, and I'm matched with Amelia and Evie while Marley is with her brother and Ashton.

And the night only gets worse. Ashton is an amazing artist and Marley guesses correctly every time. Their high-fives quickly turn to hugs as their team annihilates ours. It doesn't help that Amelia and I can't draw. Evie is good but the steam coming out of my ears watching Marley sit squished between her brother and Ashton clouds my brain.

I'm uncharacteristically quiet, which no one seems to notice because they're all hero-worshipping the Marine. On any other day, in any other situation, I would be too. I respect our troops and am thankful for all they do, putting their life on the line to protect our country and support our freedoms.

If this Marine would keep his eyes and hands off Marley, I'd show him my gratitude. Right now, I only want to knock his teeth out.

Ten o'clock on a Saturday isn't a late night to call it quits for most people, but Grant and Evie are early risers and open their bakeries at an ungodly hour. If only Amelia would leave with her brother first, I could spend a few minutes alone with Marley in the driveway.

Of course, luck is not on my side tonight. The Marine helps Marley with her coat, and she beams a thankful smile up at him. I roll my eyes. It's a stupid coat. She's been getting herself dressed since she was three. Yet there she is, acting like he's something wonderful.

"Everything okay, man?" Grant slaps me on the back as I yank my coat on.

"Sure. Yeah. Everything's great."

"You seemed a little off tonight," Evie says with a grin. What the heck is it with this woman? She's always so happy since finding love with my best friend.

"Probably grumpy about losing," Grant, my idiot of a best friend, says.

"I was doing just fine at poker." Their conversation holds me back and now Marley is already outside with the Simmons siblings. "Thanks for hosting."

I give Evie a hug and kiss on the cheek and punch Grant's shoulder before rushing out the door. Amelia sits in her warming car while the Marine is talking with Marley next to her Subaru, and once again, the tsunami of jealousy barrels through me.

I have no qualms about interrupting their private conversation. If he senses my annoyance, he doesn't show it. Instead, he greets me with a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Amelia is checked out and wants to go home, but I was just asking Marley if she wants to go to Frosty's for drinks since the night is still young. Care to tag along?"



The last thing I want to do is *tag along* but there's no way in the whole wide universe I'm letting the two of them go out on a date. The Marine's gonna see that *he's* the one tagging along with Mars and me.

"Sounds good. I'm tight with the owner. I can probably manage to get us a platter of nachos as well."

He chuckles like he really thinks my stupid joke is funny.

"You two have fun. I have an early day tomorrow. It was nice meeting you, Ashton." Marley leans in and hugs him.  
"See ya, Blaine."

No. Hug. Not even eye contact.

And now I'm stuck on a guys' night with the one person on the planet I don't want to be near.



## CHAPTER TEN

---

“You promise you’ll tell me if you get a reservation for this room?” Ashton sets two ginormous military-grade duffel bags down in the Norway Spruce room.

I used to think Grant and Blaine were big guys. I mean, they are, but Ashton takes it to another level. Even Evie texted me this morning about him. Well, she wanted to wish me good luck with the hunky Marine and followed it up with a bunch of heart emojis and gifs of fainting women.

“It’s always a last resort rental when every hotel and inn in a twenty-mile radius is booked. It happens during ski season and sometimes leaf peeper season. My grandparents rarely rented it. They liked to keep it open for Grant and me so we could feel like guests when we stayed. I think I was twelve when they first let me stay here alone.”

“You weren’t scared?”

“Well,” I pick at the cuticles on my thumb, “I may or may not have heard a floorboard creak in the middle of the night and booked it down the stairs and ran into my grandparents’ room and buried myself under their covers.”

Ashton’s laughter fills the small room, even more than his broad shoulders.

“Understandable. I’m sure I would have done the same thing. I promise not to stomp down the stairs in the middle of the night and wake your guests if I hear any noises.”

He’s really sweet and not the least bit intimidating. A softie just as Amelia had said during all her stories she’s shared about her brother. She wasn’t blowing his charm and gentleness out of proportion.

At first, I was sure she was delusional. How could a Marine who looked like a cross between Thor and the Incredible Hulk—minus the green skin—have a soft side?

“My guests will appreciate that.” I gesture to the left where the narrow ensuite bathroom sits. “The shower stall is minuscule. Three guests are checking out on Monday. You’re

more than welcome to use one of the bigger bathrooms before my next guests check-in.”

“I don’t want to be an inconvenience, Marley. I meant what I said. I’ve slept, bathed, and eaten in worse places. Wait.” He holds out a hand and laughs. “I didn’t mean it to come out that way. Your inn is lovely. It’s pretty, festive, and warm. An extenuation of you.”

Oh, Ashton Simmons is a charmer. I feel my cheeks warm from his praise. “Thank you.” I’m suddenly bashful. I’m not a shy woman. Only one other man’s praise has made me bashful, and last night he acted like a put-off child.

I’ve always been competitive and can get snappy when I lose, but Blaine was rude all night. He glared at Grant and snubbed Ashton any chance he could get while completely ignoring me.

Maybe he was upset about Amelia not bringing over a date for him. I don’t know, but his behavior shouldn’t have surprised me. I have more memories of him annoying me than making me laugh. What surprises me more is that we got along for a few weeks.

Our talk on the front porch, before we went inside, was nice too. It was like we were back to our new normal, whatever that is for us. Or maybe our current status is back to normal?

“Marley?”

Ashton is leaning forward, almost at eye level, trying to get my attention. I completely missed whatever he said.

“Sorry. Zoned out for a sec. Going through my to-do list.”

“I won’t keep you. Thank you again for the room.”

“No problem.” I turn and start down the hall. “Oh and help yourself to anything in the dining room and kitchen. I have Evie’s donuts out by six o’clock and Grant’s muffins and pastries in the dining room throughout the day.”

“I appreciate it, Marley. Everything. Thank you.”

I give him a smile and nod as I head down the stairs. The rest of the day flies by as I greet my guests, offer suggestions for activities, clean rooms, and prepare for new arrivals.

The next few days are more of the same. Ashton is out the door before eight every morning. We talk over coffee and a donut. Usually about the weather, how Balsam Grove has changed over the years, and the contracting job he just started with Don Burke, my dad's best friend.

Grant and Dad connected Ashton with him, and from what I hear through the grapevine, it's been a good match. Ashton doesn't talk much about what he did as a Marine, but he does talk about the contractor work he's doing. According to my dad, he's a skilled carpenter.

Grant swings by in the morning with fresh baked goods. Our visit is short. He asks about the guests and Ashton, then hurries off to get the ovens started at Sweet Rewards. I strip the bed from Ashton's room, and when I close the door behind me, my laundry basket overloaded with sheets, I slam into a hard surface.

A wall shouldn't be there. I peer over the towering pile of sheets and towels and find a pair of pale blue-green eyes glaring at me.

"What the heck are you doing?" Blaine snaps at me.

"Um. My job?" I snarl back.

His gaze flicks to the closed door behind me. "The Marine can do his own laundry." Blaine yanks the basket from me and storms off, stomping aggressively down the stairs.

"Can you be any louder? I'm pretty sure you woke up Mr. and Mrs. Beasley in the Douglas room." They've already left for the day, but Grant doesn't know that.

Blaine stops at the bottom of the stairs and glances up at me. His face softens. "There weren't any cars in the parking lot. I didn't realize anyone was here. Sorry."

He turns away, this time walking more quietly to the laundry room next to my private quarters. Instead of dumping the basket as expected, he sorts the linens, shoving the sheets

in the washer. I lean against the wall and watch him fill the tray with detergent and fabric softener and run the machine.

He turns and mirrors my pose, resting his backside against the washer.

“What are you doing?”

“Laundry.” He folds his arms across his chest, his facial expressions unreadable.

“Why?”

“Because your hands were full.”

“They’re not full anymore, and this is part of my job.”

He lifts a shoulder in a careless shrug. If he wasn’t so determined to irritate me, I might find the gesture sweet. Watching Blaine do something as domestic as laundry makes my insides flutter. Domestic chores aren’t something I normally associate with Blaine, but I suppose everyone does laundry and dishes at some point unless they’re born into a ridiculous amount of wealth.

“Blaine.”

“Marley.”

“Why are you here?” The light parade is over, so there’s no need for him to be here.

“I came to check in on you.”

I scrunch my nose in confusion. “Why?”

“Because you took a stranger into your home.”

“What?” The man infuriates me to no end.

“How well do you know the Marine? Amelia’s brother?”

“Ashton? He’s very sweet.”

Blaine snorts. “That man is not *sweet*.”

“What is your problem with him?”

“You opened your home to him after knowing him for two minutes.”

“You do realize I book my rooms on a daily basis to people I’ve never met before? It’s kinda my job. It’s how I pay my bills.”

Blaine pushes off the washer and storms past me. I follow him into the kitchen. He helps himself to one of Grant’s cranberry walnut muffins. “I don’t like the way he looks at you. It’s inappropriate. You shouldn’t be in his room.” He takes an aggressive bite of the muffin.

“What makes you think it’s your place to tell me this?”

“Grant’s too busy being in love with Evie to look out for you, so I have to step into the big brother role.”

*Big brother role.* Those butterflies stop flapping their wings and fall to their death in my stomach. Somewhere between puberty and last summer, I stopped wanting Blaine to treat me like a little sister and wanted him to look at me as a woman.

I thought that change had happened a few months ago, especially during our time working together, but I guess I’m too naive to notice the difference. I don’t know why I’m wasting my time pining after a man who will never think of me as anything more than Grant’s little sister when I have a sweet man living under my roof who actually gives me the time of day. Ashton is genuine, sweet, and makes me laugh.

“Well, it’s none of your or Grant’s business who I’m interested in or who I’m dating, so you can take your muffin and get out.” I push his chest, and he stumbles back.

Hmpf. Ashton wouldn’t have fallen. He’s a brick wall, capable of keeping me safe. Maybe I’ll ask him to put that brick wall of his around my heart and protect it from *Big Brother* Blaine.

“Mars.”

“Don’t *Mars* me. I’m twenty-nine years old and perfectly capable of taking care of myself.” I fling open the back door.

“Marley.”

“Get. Out.” I clench my back molars together and stare at the wall behind him, refusing to get lost in those eyes.

“I don’t like it when you’re mad at me.”

I huff a laugh. “Then stop saying and doing stupid stuff to make me mad at you.” I swing the door shut, not caring that it hits him on the backside and opens again. When he’s down the first step, I slam it shut and click the deadbolt.

Four hours later, the inn has never been so clean. Angry scrubbing is the best kind of therapy. By the time I’m taking the chicken parmesan out of the oven, I almost feel normal again.

“Wow. That smells amazing. Don’t tell my mom, but I’ll bet it tastes better than hers.”

Ashton stands in the doorway, looking tall and gorgeous. A welcome change from the last person who filled that doorway. Instead of dark hair and dreamy eyes, sandy blond hair and smiling baby blues warm the room.

“Care to put it to the test?” I wave the steam from the casserole dish his way, taunting him a little. “I just need to finish the salad and then dinner is ready.”

He glances around the kitchen and my place setting for one. “That’s a lot of food for one person. You sure I’m not intruding?”

“I never learned to cook for one. This way I have leftovers for the week. Or when my brother stops by, I don’t have to worry about him eating all my food. Although, now that he’s married, he doesn’t conveniently crash my kitchen at dinner time anymore.”

“How about we make a trade? I’ll taste-test your chicken tonight and then repay you by taking you out tomorrow.”

My chest flutters at the invite. Is it a date or a friendly gesture, and how do I feel if it *is* a date? It’s been too long since a man has asked me out. I’m either at the inn or with my friends and family, so there’s rarely an opportunity to meet men my age. The ones who stay at the inn are here with their



wives. It's not often a single man in his early thirties is seeking out a quaint inn for a weekend getaway.

"Or not. I didn't mean to intrude on your dinner." Ashton takes a step back.

"You're not intruding at all. Have a seat. The salad will only take a minute." I ignore the invite to the possible dinner date tomorrow.

"I'm going to clean up real quick. Is that okay? I'm covered in drywall dust."

He looks fine to me, but I smile and nod. *Looks fine.* There's no arguing Ashton is an extremely handsome man. Even Evie blushed over him. I should be fanning myself after he walks away, but I don't. I gather the ingredients for a simple salad and chop away, imagining the head of lettuce is someone else's head.

While I appreciate Ashton's looks and his kindness, there's another man—albeit annoying, pigheaded, and irritating—who stirs up all sorts of emotions inside me. The good, the bad, the ugly. No, there's no ugly. We bicker. I know where my bickering stems from.

From Blaine not seeing me as a woman but as a little sister. From him not seeing my worth and putting me down. Although, lately, his insults have been more in jest and a way to stir the pot. I don't think he's ever insulted me to be cruel. Teasing, but teasing me to the edge of anger.

And the anger comes from me wanting him to see me in a different light. He'll always see me as a little sister until I make him see me as an attractive, dateable woman.

"Anything I can do to help?" Ashton steps into the kitchen smelling like soap.

I glance up at him and notice the water droplets at the tips of his hair. It's cropped close along the sides and back and a little longer up top. A military cut that has grown out for a few weeks, if I had my guess. It looks good on him. Clean cut, clean shaven. That's how I like my men.

I inwardly snort. *My men*. Like I date a lot. Or at all. It's been over a year since I've been on a date, and that was a terrible setup by my mother's best friend. Brent was incredibly boring and shy. We sat in near silence at dinner. I had to force conversation and with every question I asked him, he responded with one-word answers.

The following week I turned down my mother's second blind date for me, but he showed up at the inn an hour later claiming he never saw my missed call or text canceling dinner. He busted me in my sweatpants cleaning my kitchen floor. I may have lied, telling him I wasn't feeling well and my favorite medicine was citrus floor cleaner.

His eyes grew wide, and he bolted. Smarter man than I gave him credit for.

“Marley?”

I shake the pitiful memory away and smile up at Ashton. “Nope. It's all ready. Ranch or Italian? I'm afraid I don't have many dressings to pick from.”

“Ranch is perfect.” He takes a seat at the counter.

“It's self-serve tonight.” I hand him the spatula to the chicken parmesan, and I take a seat, leaving the stool between us empty.

“This looks heavenly. I love my mother's cooking but now that she and my dad live most months in Florida, their condo is kind of sparse. She's an okay cook but has never wowed Amelia and me with something fancy like chicken parm.”

“Ashton Simmons.” I point my fork at him. “You implied your mother made amazing chicken parm. Was that your sneaky way of earning yourself a dinner invite?”

He reads my grin and plays along. “She has a connection with this company called... Stouffers. They deliver the food to the freezer section, and she takes it home and adds her own secret recipe to spice it up.”

“Oh really.” I do a poor job of hiding my laugh. “What exactly is her secret recipe?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a secret anymore, would it?”

Ashton puts a healthy portion of food on his plate and cuts another, holding it up for me. My eyes grow wide, and he smartly cuts it in half before putting it on my plate.

“I suppose you’re right about that.”

He leans over the empty stool between us and whispers, “Don’t tell anyone, but it’s a hefty helping of shredded mozzarella cheese.” He puts a finger over his lips, and I mimic zipping mine and throwing away the key.

“Secret is safe. Promise.”

He takes a bite and moans. “Oh, wow. You’re going to put Stouffers out of business.”

“If anyone gets ahold of your mom’s recipe, she may beat me to the punch.”

His laugh fills the kitchen, and we enjoy our meal with more stories and laughter. “I’m glad Amelia has made friends with you and Evie. She’s talked a lot about the two of you the past year.”

“Your sister and Evie are quite special. They’re wonderful people.”

“I never hung around with your brother and Blaine when we were kids, but I like them. They both think highly of you as well.”

“My brother and I have always been close. He’s awesome, and I’m so happy he brought Evie into our lives.” I purposely leave Blaine out of the equation.

“From what I hear, before Evie came along it was the three amigos? Or is it the three Musketeers?”

“Three? Never. Blaine is Grant’s friend. Not mine. I mean, he’s always been around but he’s not anything to me.” I pick up the tongs and add more salad to my plate, even though I still have a pile of lettuce and cucumber in front of me. “He’s around a lot because of Grant. I don’t hang out with them. It’s not like that.”

Shoot. Now I'm rambling. Ashton is polite enough not to call me on it. Blaine, on the other hand, would poke fun at me and call me on my babble.

“Amelia reminded me of a time when she and Grant dated.”

Thankful for the change of topic, I let out a snort. “If you can call it that. It was a whirlwind of young romance for Amelia. I think it lasted three days. She even dated Blaine, but that relationship didn't last as long either. Living in a small town, pretty much every teenager in our school ended up dating each other.”

“You and Blaine ever date?” he asks casually. I can't tell if he's digging or if it's an innocent question.

“My brother's best friend? That would be gross.”

“I'm sure if I was a little younger or you were a few years older I would have had my eye on you in high school. Granted, I was a punk in high school. You never would have looked my way.”

“A punk? Do tell. What's the worst thing you ever did?”

“Worst? That's a story I'll never tell. My most talked about stunt? Glitter bombing the halls of Balsam Grove High School.”

“That was you?” I laugh. “We found glitter around the halls years later.”

“That's me. A lasting impression.”

I like being around Ashton. He doesn't have ulterior motives as Blaine accused. He's a friendly man and I'm a personable woman. We get along well, as I do with most people. Other than Blaine Foster.

After Ashton helps with the dishes, he takes two of Grant's cookies up to his room. The kitchen is quiet again, and I make my way down to my lonely living quarters. In the four years I've lived here, I've never felt as lonely as I do tonight.

Ironic since my life has never been so full of friends. It has nothing to do with me kicking Blaine out of my house.

Nothing at all.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

---

The pub has been a constant flow of customers for the past week, which was exactly what I needed to keep my mind off my green-eyed distraction.

*As if.* Pouring drinks and having conversations with my regulars as well as new customers has done nothing to erase Marley's wide-mouth grin and adorable giggle. If the grin and giggle were ever directed at me, the memory would have a different effect.

And if Ashton Simmons wasn't the recipient, I might actually like the guy. I'm oh-for-two. Even my best friend is snubbing me. Not that I hold a grudge against him. He's a doting husband, something I admire about him.

"Are you sure you want me to clock out, Blaine? We've been getting a late dinner rush lately and you've been left solo twice this week."

"If Clara gets slammed, I'll run orders out for her. We've got it. You're on for a double tomorrow. With the nor'easter predicted in two days, you know everyone is going to be out and about before hunkering down."

"Okay, but don't be afraid to call me if the crowd doesn't simmer down."

Cynthia was a huge asset this summer, and I missed her when she left for college this fall, but she picked up right where she left off when she came home for Christmas break. By the time she returns to Rhode Island for the spring semester, we'll slow down again.

I check on my four customers, refilling their drinks and clearing away their empty plates. I put another log on the fire that separates the bar from the dining area and wipe down the tabletops. My back is to the front entrance when the bell above the door dings. I call out with my customary smile and greeting.

"Come get warm by the fire. I'll be right with you." I tuck the rag in my back pocket and turn to greet my customers.

“How many—”

Words fall dead on my lips. Marley’s cheeks are red from the cold air, and she’s giggling as she takes off her winter hat, her hair full of static electricity. The Marine laughs as he pats down her hair.

I roll my shoulders back and grind my back molars together. It’s not until her hair is under control that they look at me.

“Hey, Blaine.” The Marine holds out his hand to me in greeting.

Keeping my molars tight, I force a grin and take his hand. If he noticed the extra strength I put behind the shake, he doesn’t react.

“Are Grant and Evie meeting you tonight?”

“Just the two of us.” He puts his hand on Marley’s lower back. She hasn’t looked up at me yet.

The music is just loud enough to hide my growl. I’ve never felt territorial of a woman before. I’ve never sabotaged any of Marley’s dates, not that I’ve ever witnessed any.

“You look nice tonight, Mars.”

That does the trick. Her gaze whips to mine, her eyes wide with shock. She’s covered head to toe in winter gear. From her tall boots to her long coat and the mittens still on her hands, the only part of her visible is her face.

Her gorgeous, most perfect face.

“Um. Thanks.”

Clara comes up behind me. “I can seat you guys this way.”

Marley walks by me and I try not to make an embarrassing show of smelling her orange vanilla scent.

“Hey, man. Come stop by the table if you get a chance between customers.” The Marine squeezes my shoulder in a friendly gesture.



I'd like to think it was a show of one-up-manship. Rubbing it in that he's the one with the girl and I'm not, but that's not what it felt like. It was... friendly.

The nicer he is the more I hate him. I need him to be a jerk so I can warn Marley. Or better yet, stick Grant on him. I watch as Clara seats them at a table close to the fireplace. Marley's back is to me, and I'm forced to stare at the side profile of the giant.

I let out a deep sigh as I go back to the bar to take care of my customers. Of all the nights I need customers to come in and fill the place, tonight they decide to stay at home, leaving the pub to only a handful of families and couples.

It's too quiet. While I can't make out their conversation, Marley's laughter floats through the air every few minutes. It doesn't sound fake or forced.

When my customers pay their bills, I'm left with no one to distract me. I stock the beer cooler, empty the tray of clean glasses, and make sure everything is lined up perfectly, not that I'm OCD when it comes to the glasses, but it keeps me busy.

"Food's really good here. Better than I remember it."

I turn and find myself face to face with Marley's date. I look over his Hulk shoulders and see his table empty.

"She's in the ladies' room." He nods over his shoulder.

"Sure. Uh, glad you liked your meal."

"Company's good too."

*Don't punch him in the face. Don't punch him in the face.* I'm not a violent guy and have never thought about taking a guy down before, but this one, with the superhero looks the women swooned over last week at Grant's, has me hot under the collar.

"Yeah, she is. She's too good for—" I clear my throat and remind myself this guy hasn't technically done anything wrong. I'm the jerk here, not him. He's a hero, for crying out

loud. Served our country for the past sixteen years. “Most men.”

“Won’t argue with you there.” He leans one bulky arm against the bar and fixes his gaze toward the back of the restaurant where the restrooms are located. My gaze is locked down the hall as well. “I’m gonna come right out and ask this. Pardon me if I overstep.”

*Pardon me? What, is the guy seventy?* I steel myself for the shoe to drop. He’s going to tell me he’s interested in Marley and warn me to back off. I curl my fingers into my palms, my short nails cutting into my skin.

I tear my gaze away from the empty hallway and bring it to the Marine. “What is it you want to ask?”

The guy has the audacity to smirk. I can’t tell if it’s a smug smirk or if he’s truly enjoying himself, and not in a menacing way.

“Are you interested in Marley?”

“Interested? What makes you ask that?”

He laughs. Again, not snarky. It’s actually real. “Come on, man. I barely know you, but it doesn’t take a genius to see how much you care about her.”

“Of course I care about her. She’s my best friend’s sister.”

“Is that all you think of her as?”

I’m not about to bare my soul to this virtual stranger, especially since I have yet to have this conversation with Grant. Or myself.

“What are you getting at, *Ashton?*” It’s the first time I’ve said his name. I don’t like the sound of it.

“I’m not here to steal her from you, Blaine. Tonight’s a friendly dinner. A thank you for letting me stay at the inn. I’m not infringing on your girl. It’s obvious there are feelings that go both ways.”

*Both ways?* The band around my chest loosens.

“What makes you think there’s anything between her and me other than friendship?”

“It could be that she somehow works your name into every conversation we have. Or how whenever she glances your way, she blushes. I saw it at Grant and Evie’s and again tonight. Could also be the jealousy that’s grinding away at your molars and the steam that’s been coming out of your ears since we walked through the door.” The man has the audacity to grin at me.

“She mentions me?” Marley’s been talking about me? To Ashton?

His laugh is loud and fills the pub. At that moment, Marley comes out of the ladies’ room, just as shocked as I am to hear Ashton laughing with me.

“Let me guess. You’ve never told her how you feel?”

“I... I don’t know how I feel.” I narrow my eyes at him, and I soften my expression when Marley comes over to us.

“Sorry I took so long. I couldn’t get the paper towels out of the thingy. I think it’s jammed.”

“It’s been jamming a lot. I’ll take a look at it.”

“I got it working.” Marley’s eyes dart between Ashton and me, just as confused at our one-on-one conversation as I am, and she doesn’t even know what went down. Pink floods her cheeks again.

I can’t help the goofy grin that curls my top lip. Coming up with a witty conversation is never hard, but right now, I’m stumped. Happy and stumped. Marley talks about me. I make her blush. Not Ashton with the superhero muscles, but me.

Blaine Foster, slinger of beers and fryer of the best wings in town, can make the most beautiful woman in the world blush, and Captain Muscles doesn’t.

“What’s that look for?” Marley narrows her eyes at me. “Are you making fun of me for something? You’re too old for these games.” She lets out a huff.

Ashton has a pretty good poker face, something I need to keep in mind when I invite him to play cards. Because, yeah, he's earned his seat at our table. I owe him an apology for thinking the worst of him. It'll have to come later when I'm not on the receiving end of Marley's daggers.

It's like the fifth-grade playground all over again.

Boy is attracted to Girl, so Boy teases Girl.

Girl runs away from Boy and calls him names but secretly likes him.

Boy taunts Girl until she almost cries.

Girl tells Boy she hates him.

Boy smartens up and tells Girl he loves her and—

*Love?* Do I love Marley?

My grin drops and I stare at the pink stains on her cheeks.

“Seriously, Blaine. What? Do I have food in my teeth or something?”

“Your teeth are perfect.”

Ashton puts his arm around her shoulders, and I see red. He chuckles and shakes his head at me. “You gonna do something about that?” he asks me.

“Do something about what?” Marley looks between the two of us.

When I don't respond, Ashton shakes his head. “Never mind. This way is more entertaining.” He drops a kiss on the top of Marley's head and helps her with her coat.

“Ashton,” I warn.

“Yeah?” he responds too lightly.

“Don't even think about it.”

“Think about what?” he and Marley ask at the same time.

The only person laughing is the Marine. I can't fault him too much. I teased and openly flirted with Evie as soon as I

suspected Grant was interested in her. Ashton is pulling a Blaine.

I can dish it out and I can take it too, now that I know he's only trying to rile me up and not seriously trying to take Marley away from me. Not that she's mine. I have to ask her first.

"Ready to go, gorgeous?" Ashton returns his arm to her shoulder, which she doesn't seem to mind.

"I'll see you around," I say to Marley, ignoring Ashton.

"Maybe," she says over her shoulder.

Ashton laughs as he leads her out of the pub, and I can't help the smile that forms on my lips as well.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

---

It's Amelia's turn to host girls' night. Sometimes we go to a movie, or out to dinner, and other times it's nice to hang out in our sweatpants at one of our homes. Amelia's studio apartment is small and suits her perfectly.

Nestled above her coffee shop, it always smells of coffee beans and cinnamon, and is one of my favorite places to relax. She has it decorated with warm colors and an eclectic mix of mismatched chairs and rugs. It has a *Friends* vibe, which I'm pretty sure is what she was going for.

"You must be so happy to have your brother home, Meels." Evie scoops up a load of queso on her tortilla chip, and I do the same.

Amelia takes a sip of her strawberry margarita. "I haven't seen him much since he moved into Marley's."

"He hasn't *moved in*. He's staying in a guest room until he finds an apartment. It's temporary."

"Must be difficult having such a hunk of a man staying at the inn. I hear he's been joining you for morning scones and you've had a few date night dinners," Evie says with a devilish smirk.

"It's not like that." I stuff my face with more chips.

"You sure my brother doesn't think that? He talks about you a lot. I think he likes you. Can't go wrong with Ash. He's a good guy."

"I like him too. As a *friend*." There isn't anything wrong with Ashton. Evie and Amelia are right. Ashton is an extremely good-looking man, and he's super sweet. I want to be more attracted to him, but there isn't a pull between us. There's a friendly connection, but the butterflies don't flutter, and I don't stumble over my words when I'm with him like when I'm near Blaine.

*Wait. What?* I've never actually admitted to those feelings before, even if just in my head. Yeah, there's some serious

chemistry between Blaine and me but it's because we argue all the time.

Right?

I chomp on my chips and pick up my margarita glass, hiding behind it so my best friends don't call me out on my feelings.

"If he asked you out on a real date, what would you say?" Evie waves a chip in my direction.

"Just because you've settled down and are happy in love doesn't mean Amelia and I are on the hunt for a husband."

"Oh, I know Meels isn't. She's fiercely independent. You, on the other hand, are quite ready to settle down."

"I am not."

"Why so defensive, Mars? It's not a bad thing, just like me being independent and one hundred percent happy being alone isn't bad."

"I'm not on the prowl for a husband."

The strawberry margarita goes down easily. Too easily. If I continue slurping so fast, I'll get a buzz and won't be able to drive home. Knowing my matchmaker friends, they'd use it to their advantage and call Ashton to pick me up. Which he would. I pick up my water bottle and tuck my legs under me while I settle back into the couch.

"Besides. Between the inn and our girls' nights, I don't have time or the desire to date. I'm perfectly content and happy with my life and the people in it."

"Like Ashton?" Evie giggles.

"Shut it or I'm never talking to you again."

My sister-in-law rolls her eyes, quite aware I'll never drop her from my life.

"Fine. So let's get back to the Christmas party."

"I like the idea of a Friendsgiving." Amelia picks up the pitcher of margaritas and I quickly cover my glass with my



hand. “We’ll need to come up with a snazzier name since we’re making it a Christmas theme.”

Happy to be off the dating topic, I chime in. “How about *A Claus for Celebration*?”

“Oh. That’s cute.” Evie nods. “Or *A Party That Sleights*.”

Amelia adds, “If we don’t invite Evie and Grant, we can call it *Single Bells Holiday Mixer*.”

“Hey! That isn’t nice.” Evie chuckles. “But it is kinda cute. Grant and I can be the hosts and we can invite all the single—”

“No. This is a holiday party, not a dating game.” I huff out a sigh. “What about *Ugly and Bright Sweater Night* and we make it an ugly sweater party? Or *O Come All Ye Ugly Sweaters*?”

“Yes!” Amelia and Evie shout at the same time.

“An ugly sweater friends party is perfect. And a Yankee Swap,” Amelia adds.

“Why not draw names and set a twenty-dollar limit? We can encourage gag gifts, but they don’t have to be.” Evie pushes the bowl of chips away and picks up her margarita.

“I like it.”

“Why not a Yankee Swap? Isn’t that easier to plan, especially since we haven’t officially invited anyone yet or even picked a date?” I hug a purple throw pillow with gold tassels to my chest and mentally run through my busy calendar.

“Since most of us work mornings, we can ask Blaine which night would be best for him to take a few hours off. Oh, I mentioned something to Hannah Davis about it the other day when she came in to pick up donuts for her and her mom. Have you guys met her yet? She’s super sweet.”

“I have. She comes in for coffee every Wednesday. I like her.”

“I haven’t met her yet. I’ve only heard about her moving in with her mom to help with the florist shop after her mom had

hip surgery.”

“She says she’s only here for a few months. I don’t think she knows many people in town.”

“Let’s invite her.” Evie scribbles her name on a notepad. “What about Trace Keesler? I met him the other night when I went to watch Grant and Blaine play basketball.”

“You’d think living in a small town we’d know everyone by now,” Amelia says.

“He’s not originally from here. He lives in Grover Falls and works for the Balsam Grove Fire Department. I’m adding him to the list.”

“Maybe he and Hannah will hit it off.”

I groan. “This is *not* a matchmaking party. Ugly sweaters, Meels. Not romance.”

She sticks her tongue out at me. “Party pooper.”

“Fine. If you want to match people up so badly, maybe Evie and I will set you up with someone. Perhaps Trace? Or Ethan Shepherd?”

“Ew. I used to babysit Ethan when I was in high school. So did you, Mars.”

“Who’s Ethan?” Evie asks.

“He’s an electrician now. He worked with my dad before he retired.”

“Should we add him to the list?”

“Why not? I’m pretty sure he and Grant still keep in touch. He’s got to be around twenty-five now?”

“How are we that old that we used to babysit twenty-five-year-olds?” Amelia sulks.

“To be fair, we were sixteen and he was ten or eleven. We’re not *that* old and he’s not *that* young.”

“I guess.”

We spend the next hour making an easy menu and Evie offers to whip up digital invitations. With our guest list

complete, menu planned, and theme all figured out, all we have left is picking a date, which is limited with Christmas less than two weeks away.

“Marley. Wanna call Blaine and check his schedule?”

Not really, but if I protest, they’ll ask why, and I don’t have a definitive answer. “Sure,” I say instead. I fire off a quick text, and it doesn’t take long for him to reply.

**Blaine:** *What the heck is a O Come All Ye Ugly Sweater party?*

**Me:** *It’s a Christmas party. Evie and Grant are hosting.*

**Blaine:** *Do I have to wear an ugly sweater.*

**Me:** *Yes. Now what night works for you? Evie is waiting so she can send out invites.*

**Blaine:** *What night works for you?*

“What’s with the heavy sigh?” Evie asks. “What did Blaine say?”

“He doesn’t want to wear an ugly sweater.”

“We’ll work on him later. We need a date first.”

“That’s what I told him.” I hold up my phone and our string of texts.

**Blaine:** *Mars Bar?*

I hate how his nickname causes my heart to palpitate.

**Me:** *Doesn’t matter as long as I’m home at a decent hour so I’m not a walking zombie in the morning. Answer up. Evie is giving me the evil eye.*

**Blaine:** *Will you help me find a not embarrassing ugly sweater for this party?*

I’m growing impatient and let out a frustrated sigh.

**Me:** *Date?*

**Blaine:** *Sure. Before or after the party?*

**Me:** *What?*

**Blaine:** *You just asked me on a date.*

**Me:** *I did NOT! If you don't tell me when you can do this, then we'll have the party without you. It doesn't matter to me.*

Three dots appear. Then disappear. Then appear again.

“There’s a lot of angry texting going on. What’s he saying?” Amelia reaches for my phone.

I hold it to my chest, not wanting her to see our thread. No doubt she’ll look more into it than what it is. Simple, frustrated texts. My phone finally vibrates again.

**Blaine:** *Wednesday works.*

“He said Wednesday.” I don’t text him back, leaving it up to Evie to send out the invites.

“FYI. We’re making this an annual tradition.” Evie holds her empty margarita glass up in a salute. “To friends. To parties. To Christmas.”

We clink our empty glasses and each sip from our waters. Crazy, wild ladies that we are.

“Are we doing ugly sweaters as the tradition or the party?” I ask.

“Let’s see how this goes and we can decide after. Get some feedback from the group. Either way, it’s a win-win. I’ve never been to a friend party before.” Evie curls herself around her throw pillow at the end of the couch.

While Evie grew up with a silver spoon in her mouth, her stuffy parents weren’t big on the holidays or hugs or family traditions. The parties she attended were business meetings disguised as parties, and she never had the luxury of hanging out in sweatpants with girlfriends.

Amelia and I have been more than happy to show her what friendship is supposed to look like, which is ironic since I was a bit of a lone wolf until now. I preferred being with my family over going to parties and doing what the popular kids did. Amelia was the popular kid in school and now thrives on

being a small business owner and keeping her friend circle tight.

I like our small group, not that I'm opposed to making new friends.

"We good?" Evie stands up and stretches. "I've got an early morning tomorrow."

"You always have an early morning." Amelia laughs. "And so do you, Mars."

"Seriously. How old are we? It's only nine o'clock and it feels like midnight." Evie hugs me. "Ashton requested a candy cane-sprinkled donut. Grant will be coming by in the morning with his special order."

"My brother is such a child." Amelia gives me a hug and walks us to the door.

"To be fair, he's been deprived of special goodies like these while overseas."

"True. And I like that he has you to defend him. Maybe you two—"

"Don't say it, Meels." I cover her mouth with my hand. "One more word about hooking me and your brother up and I'll kick him to the curb."

"No you—"

"Ah!"

Evie giggles behind me. "Love you two. We'll chat tomorrow."

When I'm home again and curled under my covers, I can't stop thinking about the two men in my life who aren't really *in* my life.

We're friends, Ashton and me. He's my best friend's brother. He's a temporary border. He's sweet and funny and incredibly good-looking. When I'm with him, I feel relaxed like I am with the girls. Conversation is easy and I laugh a lot.

And then there's Blaine. A man I've known my entire life. My brother's best friend. I crushed over him as a boy, pined

after him as a teen, argued with him in my twenties, and now... now a new friendship has formed.

When I'm with him I'm usually on edge. I over-analyze the looks he gives me. I worry I'll be caught staring at his dimple or get lost in the depths of his gaze. The gentle way he puts his hand on my lower back causes my heart to skip a beat. When I'm not drooling and worried he doesn't want to be with me, we tease each other until my cheeks hurt from grinning.

When I'm with Blaine, my heart is on fire. When I'm not with him, I think about when I'll see him again.

I can't tell him how I feel—if I can even put a name to it. If he doesn't feel the same, we'll go back to how things were when we were teenagers. Him ignoring me because he's aware I'm attracted to him and he doesn't want me to get the wrong idea.

At least, that's what I imagine happened between us.

I doubt I'll ever know the truth.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

Evie, Amelia, and I struck ugly sweater gold when we went thrift shopping. We even found sweaters for Grant and Blaine, which meant I dodged Blaine's request to help him find an outfit.

Thanks to Evie's intense planning skills, we're in good shape for the party. The only hitch is the name I drew for our Secret Santa gift-giving. It's just my poor luck that I got stuck with Blaine.

Since not everyone knows each other well, Evie noted on the invitations that gag gifts are perfectly acceptable and highly recommended. But sincere gifts are allowed as well. It will be a lot easier to get Blaine something funny than something sentimental.

Or at least I thought. I've been up and down the aisles of too many stores to count and haven't come across anything that feels right. And then I spot it. I pick up the ridiculous toy and giggle. I can see Blaine's inner child coming out as he plays with the flying monkey slingshot contraption. I find a book on bartender jokes and add it to my cart along with the decorations I was assigned to bring to the party.

I've never purchased a gag gift before. Gift-giving is my love language. I love being creative and sentimental, but since I'm not ready to come to terms with my feelings for Blaine, silly gifts will have to do.

After another hour of errands, I'm back at the inn and have the fruit kabobs skewered and the chicken cooking for my buffalo chicken dip. I do a final check of the parlor making sure the hot water and coffee urns are full, the cookie platter stocked, and finish folding the last load of towels.

I change into my ugly sweater and opt for comfortable leggings instead of jeans. The vintage sweater from the early eighties is loose and hangs to my mid-thigh. It's something I can picture my grandmother wearing back in the day. A red and white argyle pattern runs up and down the sleeves and the



back of the sweater while two dancing reindeer are knitted into the front.

I take a final look in the full-length mirror on the back of my closet door before heading back out to the kitchen. After shredding the chicken and adding it to the cream cheese and hot sauce mixture, I scoop it into a crockpot and load the food, decorations, and Blaine's gift into my car.

Amelia and I arrive an hour early to help Evie set up, even though she doesn't need it. I'm competitive and organized while Evie is creative and organized, and Amelia is creative and spontaneous. We make a great team, especially with Grant around to do the heavy lifting.

We rearrange the living room and dining room furniture to make an easier flow through the rooms.

"I made a voting bucket for the ugliest sweater and came up with a prize as well." Amelia holds up a gaudy-looking bucket decorated with tinsel, bows, blinking lights, and candy canes.

"That's a great idea," Evie says from the other side of the kitchen. "What's the prize?"

"Not telling. Going to have to wait to see who wins."

"What if it's you?" I take the bucket and set it on a table in the living room and arrange the voting ballots around it.

"I mean, my sweater is cute and all, but you two are uglier lookin' than me."

Evie snorts while I pretend to gasp. We know what she means and are not offended by her teasing insult.

"Love you too, Meels." I kiss her cheek. The doorbell rings and since Evie and Grant are busy with the final food preparations in the kitchen, I offer to greet our first guests. "Oh. Wow."

I cover my mouth to unsuccessfully hide my giggle. Blaine looks adorably ridiculous in his ugly sweater.

"If I'm the only one wearing a stupid-looking sweater, you're going to owe me. Big time. I feel like a fool. Is this

even for a man?”

He does look silly in the vintage bigfoot sweater. A faux tie is woven into the middle, and two Christmas trees are on either side. In fact, he could win the ugliest sweater award tonight.

“In case you haven’t noticed,” I point both hands toward my outfit, “you’re not the only one.”

Blaine’s countenance is blank as his gaze drifts down my front, all the way to my feet, and back up to my face again. “You look great in anything, Mars.”

Is he... is Blaine checking me out? Warning bells go off in my head. Or maybe it’s the sleigh bells sewn into the front of his sweater.

“Yeah, um,” I wave my hand in the air, blowing off his compliment, “we look *great* tonight in our ugly holiday outfits. Come on in.”

I take a step back and can’t help breathing in a little deeper when he brushes past me. Spice and sandalwood dominate the air.

“Oh my gosh. You’re adorable,” Evie croons behind me as I close the front door.

“Adorable? Your dork of a husband may like to be called that, but I prefer stud, magnificent, even handsome will do. You, however, Mrs. Evie Hudson, look adorable.”

“Always the flirt. And even in that silly sweater, you still look incredibly handsome, wouldn’t you say, Marley?”

He turns to me, and I quirk my lip. “Blaine is perfectly aware of how he looks.”

He narrows his eyes at me, and I snort. The corner of his mouth twitches as his light blue gaze doesn’t move from mine. I’m the first to look away and nod to the bag in his hand.

“Gifts go under the tree.”

The doorbell rings and this time Evie answers it. Ashton’s deep laugh echoes into the kitchen from the front hall followed

by Evie's.

"I should be jealous about my wife's crush, but I can't blame her. I love that guy." Grant smacks Blaine's shoulder. "You look cute, bro," he says as he brushes past us to greet Ashton.

"You crushing on the Marine too, Mars?"

"What? Me? No! What is it with everyone trying to play matchmaker?" I push past Blaine into the kitchen.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Blaine comes up behind me, stepping into my space. "Who's trying to match you with who?"

I've never seen Blaine so angry. He's been upset with me before, sure, but he's going to wear away the enamel on his teeth if he doesn't loosen his jaw.

"Hey, beautiful. Love the sweater." Ashton doesn't slip into a room. He can't. His presence fills it to capacity. I swear I hear Blaine growl. "You look nice too, Marley."

I can't help the giggle. The tension in Blaine's shoulders relaxes a little as he looks Ashton up and down.

The growl quickly turns into a snort. "You look ridiculous."

"I know," Ashton says with pride. His smile is almost as bright as the lights built into his sweater, which was clearly not made for a man of his size.

It's not one of the vintage sweaters we found for Blaine. Instead, it's store-bought and cheesy, and so much fun. I love that Ashton isn't ashamed to look foolish.

"Amelia found it for me. She said the blue background brings out my eyes, and the lights on the Christmas tree make them sparkle. What do ya think, Blainey? Do I sparkle?" Ashton digs his fingers into his cheeks.

He doesn't have dimples like Blaine, but he's handsome, nonetheless.

"Like a princess," Blaine says.

Laughter and Christmas music fill the room as Evie and Grant go greet the next round of guests. The house overflows with festive friends, and there are so many conversations happening at once, it's glorious.

Evie may never have had a friend group before, but she's accustomed to parties. Granted, none like this. While I've been surrounded by good people, I've never had a big friend group. The warmth in the air is wonderful.

I find myself engaged in a long conversation with Hannah and we talk about her new arrival to Balsam Grove and her plans for her mother's florist shop.

"Do you think you'll stay here after your mom recovers?" I ask while we sip our eggnog.

"I hope you do," Amelia says.

"I'm not sure. She was thinking about retiring before she had her surgery, but I'm not sure if I want to spend the rest of my life running a florist shop. I left a good job in Hartford, Connecticut."

"I'm sure there are graphic design jobs in Maine." I really want her to stay.

"I don't know if I want to spend the rest of my life working as a graphic artist for someone else either. Is thirty-one too young to have a midlife crisis?"

"Not at all." Evie gives Hannah's hand a comforting squeeze. "I was neck-deep in corporate America less than two years ago, and now look at me. Married to a small-town baker, running my own donut shop, and wearing a silly sweater my mother would have a heart attack over. And I can honestly say, I've never been happier."

"That is encouraging. I'm not opposed to staying here, and I love the flower shop. It's soothing and doesn't really seem like a job."

"That's good, right? At least for me, it is. I love being surrounded by coffee beans. I'm up early and on my feet all day, but most of the time it doesn't feel like work. Sitting

behind a computer, answering to someone else, does *not* sound like a fun future to me.”

Hannah’s gaze flits to her left when Ashton comes into the kitchen. Standing so close to her, I can practically feel her breath catch before she lets out a dreamy sigh. If I knew her better and I hadn’t been on the receiving end of matchmaking these past few weeks, I’d tease her about it.

“Have you met my brother?”

Hannah’s gaze snaps to Amelia. “He’s your brother? But you’re so tiny and he’s so…”

“He’s a giant. Just came home from overseas.”

“He’s in the military? I can see that.” Hannah’s face falls. “When does he deploy again?”

Amelia smiles. “Never. He’s served his time and is ready to settle down.” She tilts her head at me and bats her eyelashes.

“You should introduce him to Hannah,” I say too quickly. I’d feel bad about it if she hadn’t been drooling after him.

“You two haven’t met?”

“The boys went right to the garage to play darts. I scolded Grant and he said it was Blaine’s idea. I think he’s embarrassed about wearing the sweater.”

“You’d think Ashton would be the most embarrassed since he’s so… big.” Hannah nearly sighs.

“Blaine’s got big muscles too.” I snap my mouth shut, mortified at how quickly I came to Blaine’s defense.

“I didn’t think you noticed,” Blaine says over my shoulder. His breath lightly dusts across my cheek yet every cell in my body tenses like I’ve been electrocuted.

I’m frozen like a deer in headlights. My cheeks burn with embarrassment. I don’t turn to face him. There’s no need. I can feel his heat and smell his spicy, earthy scent. I have two options. Run away and hide or blow off my comment with a joke.

Since hiding is clearly not going to happen, I defend myself with a joke. “Please. How can we not? You and Grant love to show off your minuscule muscles by strutting around shirtless in the summer, hoping all the ladies will notice.”

“Yeah. Super tiny muscles.” Evie squeezes Blaine’s bulging biceps and pats his broad shoulders. “String beans, our men are.”

“*Your* men,” Blaine glances from Evie to me, “are anything but string beans. And I don’t strut around shirtless hoping *all* the ladies will notice.” He storms back out to the garage.

“Oh. Wow.” Hannah fans herself with her hand. “I didn’t see that one coming.”

Jealousy rushes through my veins. Two minutes ago, she was fanning herself over Ashton. I don’t want her pining after Blaine. She’d be perfect for him with her girl-next-door looks and her city life experience and charming personality.

“He kind of snuck up on us,” Evie says.

“No, I mean, the chemistry between you two.” Hannah turns to me. “Did you two date before or something because I’m pretty sure he’s still interested in you.”

“Date? Us? No. Never. He’s Grant’s best friend. I’ve been stuck with him in my life since forever.”

The line between Hannah’s brows deepens. “Oh. I guess maybe I misread it.” She lifts a shoulder, and her gaze follows Ashton down the hall where he goes back to the garage. “What’s Ethan’s story?” She’s clearly deflecting. I’m a recent expert in that area.

“I’m not sure. We don’t know him too well. And it’s not helping that the guys have segregated themselves in the garage. You know what?” Evie sets her glass down on the coffee table. “I’m dragging the boys back inside. Amelia, why don’t you get charades set up?”

Twenty minutes later, after many deep grumbles and lots of snacking, the eight of us are squished into the living room. I

suggested we play girls against guys, but they grumbled even more. Evie put our names into a hat, and we drew teams.

Just like drawing for Secret Santa, I have my doubts my best friend didn't cheat the teams. Mayor Pearl is rubbing off on her. Ethan, Ashton, Blaine, and I are on one team while Grant is with Evie, Amelia, and Hannah.

"Lucky you being with all the men," Evie teases. Grant frowns at her and she pokes his ribs. "Lucky for your sister and lucky for me I get to be with the best man here. No offense boys." She smiles mischievously across the living room at my teammates.

Most women would agree with Evie and find themselves fortunate to be in my situation. I like Ashton a lot, and the little I've talked with Ethan has me liking him too. If he has Grant's seal of approval, he has mine.

And then there's Blaine. Sure he has Grant's seal of approval as well, but I know better than to get lost in his mood swings. I seem to be on the receiving and giving end of them. Both are a lose-lose.

I miss the days when we worked as a team. The teasing was fun and went both ways. Of course, I didn't have the pressure of pesky friends trying to set us up and jealousy over men vying for my attention.

Wait. Jealousy? Maybe Hannah is right. If Blaine is jealous over Ashton's attention to me it could only be because Blaine is interested in me as well, right? Even though there's nothing to be jealous about.

If Blaine thinks of me as a little sister, he'd want to vet the guys who are interested in me. Ashton has more than passed the vetting stage. Grant has only had positive things to say about him and says even Blaine likes him. Although I have yet to witness any love between the two men.

Unless it's because of me. Those warm fuzzies that magically appear when I think of Blaine take over my body again.

Ashton drops himself next to me on the couch, his leg mashing up against mine. He leans back and stretches his arm across the back of the couch behind me. There's not enough room for anyone on my other side, and I curl my bottom lip between my teeth when I see Blaine give Ashton an evil eye.

It only makes Ashton chuckle, which tells me he's playing a game as well. But at whose expense? Ethan drops to the floor a little to Ashton's right, and Blaine settles himself in front of me.

He props one knee up and rests his wrist over it, then casually leans back against my legs. *Oh, wow.* Who turned up the heat? Grant stoked the fire before we settled into our groups, and now I'm wishing I wore a cute top under my ugly sweater. I'm roasting under all the fake argyle.

"Everyone good with the rules? No mouthing words. No making sounds or grunts." Amelia points at Blaine. "Especially you."

"Me? What did I do?" Blaine brushes his hand along my calf and those butterflies flutter up my torso and warm my neck. I must have a garden growing in my belly by now.

"We know how competitive you get."

"Mars is the one who gets itchy when she doesn't win. But since she's on my team, she'll be alright."

I lean forward and my knees bump into his neck. "Itchy? Excuse me? You're the one who—"

"Kids." Amelia holds up her hand and points back and forth between us. "Same team. Simmer down."

"I got ya, princess. No worries." Ashton pats my shoulder.

I can feel Blaine's growl through my legs, and I try to shift them to the side, but he loops his hands around my ankles, keeping me in place. We've been around each other for years. Worked closely together for the past few weeks. But never has he touched me like this. His hands on my shins shouldn't make me shiver, but it's Blaine.



The man I've wanted to not think about for years but who keeps finding a way to the forefront of my thoughts from the moment I wake up in the morning until I fall asleep at night.

“Since we're the hosts, I declare we go first.” Evie hops to her feet. “Marley, you want to be the timer?”

“On it.” I start to reach forward for the timer on the coffee table, and my arm brushes across Blaine's cheek. I can't bend any closer with him relaxed against my legs. “Um, can you hand me the timer?”

He tilts his head back and our faces are inches from each other. I can't look away from his sea-glass eyes. The dimple deepens in his cheek as his right arm reaches out and blindly finds the timer while his eyes never leave mine.

My heartbeat didn't skip. It stopped, if only for a split second. I gasp as he hands me the timer, our fingers brush innocently, and then he winks at me before shifting around again.

I'm too young for menopausal hot flashes. I'm going to lie to myself and pretend that's what this is anyway.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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I'm pretty sure I have mascara smudges under my eyes from the tears I've shed, and my sides ache as well. I've never laughed as hard as I have over the past hour. I lucked out having Ashton and Blaine on my team.

They're both over the top hilarious, and not shy about acting out the Disney princess themes or even rolling around on the living room floor pretending to be a dead fish. Ethan did a great job as well, but he was a little more reserved.

I would be too if I had drawn *playing reindeer games* and had to perform in front of people I've only recently befriended. I couldn't tell if the intense way Hannah watched my teammates was from entertainment or interest.

Thinking about being matchmaker with my friends takes my attention off my other incredibly handsome teammate and helps me not be so self-conscious every time it's Blaine's turn.

He performed for *me* instead of for our team, which Ashton had no problem matching. The first time Ashton was up, Blaine quickly took his seat next to me and didn't relinquish it until it was his turn to act out the slip of paper.

When Ashton kept his gaze locked on me, I could feel the tension in Blaine's body, which only encouraged Ashton to be over the top with his performance.

We all had fun, filled up on Christmas cookies and cheese fondue, and handed out our Secret Santa gifts. Most were silly games or books. Blaine chuckled when he opened his gifts from me and instantly, he shot the flying monkey into Ashton's chest. I'm the last one to open my gift, and process of elimination tells me it's from Blaine.

I reach into the bag and pull out a beautiful snow globe. An amazing replica of the Christmas Farm Inn sits in the middle, and I watch as the snow falls on the roof.

"Blaine. It's beautiful. Thank you."

"Didn't you used to be fascinated with Grandma's snow globes?" Grant asks.

I nod my head, keeping my gaze on the snow globe. And Blaine remembered. Or had a lucky guess. I'm too nervous to ask him how he was able to have this custom made so quickly, so instead I lift my head and give him a soft smile.

“Thank you, Blaine. It's perfect.”

My sentimental mood is cut short when a flying monkey whizzes past my face and bonks Blaine square in the middle of his forehead. Ashton falls back with a loud laugh, and the rest of the room erupts as well.

The men polish off the rest of the snacks, and we're ready to call it a night.

“How old are we that ten o'clock feels like midnight?” Amelia doesn't even try to hide her yawn. “How did we stay up so late when we were younger and still function in the morning?”

“We didn't have businesses we ran and opened at the crack of dawn.” I give her a hug.

“Speak for yourself.” Grant holds out her coat for her. “Some of us are at work way before the crack of dawn.”

“I'm sorry for keeping you up so late. You sure I can't stay and help clean up?” Ethan offers. “My shift doesn't start until eight.”

“You're too sweet,” Evie croons. “As a first timer, and putting up with our crazy shenanigans, you're off the hook. But now that we're all such good friends, we'll be sure to assign you cleaning duty next time.”

She's kidding, but Ethan nods and reaches out his hand for Grant. “You two have a nice place here. Thank you for including me. I had a great time.”

“Any time, man.” Grant shakes his hand and Evie hugs him. “As soon as we get through the holidays, we're going to reinstate weekly poker night. You play?”

“Reinstate?” Evie snorts. “You mean start up.”

“We've been waiting for enough guys to play,” Blaine says.

“Excuse me? Girls can’t play?” I fist my hands on my hips.

“You’re the worst poker player I’ve ever met.” My mouth drops open and I gasp. Blaine chuckles. “Come on, Mars. Your tells are pathetic. We love that you want to play with us and give us all your money.”

“That’s mean.”

“Just being honest.”

“Maybe we girls will form our own poker night,” Hannah says. She’s already bundled up in her winter coat and she swirls her key ring around her finger.

“You play?” Ashton looks impressed.

“Maybe.” She lifts a shoulder.

“Oh, we’re gonna talk more about this when the boys aren’t around.” Amelia loops her arm through Hannah’s. “Thanks again for hosting, Mr. and Mrs. Hudson.”

When Ashton, Amelia, Ethan, and Hannah leave, I head to the kitchen to help clean up.

“Seriously, Marley, you can leave it. We’ll get to it tomorrow.” Evie brushes her hand through the air and yawns.

“I’m not leaving you guys with this mess. Go on up to bed. I’ll lock up behind me.”

“Sounds good to me.” Grant presses a kiss to the top of my head. “Don’t be too loud banging around the dishes.”

“Grant,” Evie scolds. “We can’t leave your sister to clean this up. She has to get up early too.”

“I’ll stick around and help. I don’t open until eleven.” Blaine carries a stack of dirty dishes to the sink.

“Perfect. Come on, wife. This is a deal we can’t pass up.” Grant takes Evie’s hand and heads upstairs.

“You don’t have to stay.” I fill the sink with water and start washing the glasses.

“It’ll take less time with the two of us.”

He's right. In less than thirty minutes, we have the kitchen and living room spotless. We don't talk much, wanting to keep quiet so Grant and Evie can sleep. I load the two bags I brought with the clean dishes and find the three platters of baked goods Evie and Grant made for the inn.

"I'll help carry these to the car for you."

Blaine holds out my coat for me and I ignore the tingles that shoot up my arm as I slide into it. He walks me to my car, and we load up my trunk.

"Thanks for all the help." I curl my lips between my teeth and stare at the center of his chest to avoid his heated stare.

"I'll follow you back to the inn and help you unload."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know." He gives me a wink and opens my car door for me. "See you in a few."

Fifteen minutes later, we've unloaded the stuff from the trunk and are once again saying good night.

"Thank you again for the snow globe. That was a very thoughtful gift."

Blaine's face is blank as he stares at the wall behind me. We stand in awkward silence for a moment before he lowers his gaze at me.

"Question."

There's a pregnant pause while I wait for him to continue. He shifts his feet from side to side.

"Dinner. Um, is there a night this week you can have it?"

*Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh.* Is he asking me out? On a date? If I'm misreading the signs, I don't want to sound like an idiot, so I play it cool and stick to our normal snarky wit.

"Answer. I usually have it every night. Been having dinner on the daily for nearly my entire life."

He narrows his gaze at me, not impressed with my comeback.

Shoot. Maybe I insulted him. Maybe I turned him off and he's remembering why he's not truly interested in dating me. *Stupidstupidstupid.*

I can only blame my defense mechanism. When it comes to Blaine Foster, I bring out the snark when I'm nervous. Otherwise, I'm genuinely a nice person. I've never seen him nervous before. At least, that's how I'm interpreting his stillness and the unreadable expression on his face.

He glances away, and for a moment I worry he'll forget about the dinner invitation. I hold out an olive branch.

"Are you having dinner this week?"

Blaine reaches out and pushes a strand of hair behind my ear. My eyes grow wide and I'm pretty sure I gasp—loud.

"I'd like to." He takes a breath, then another, and pierces me with his beautiful eyes. "With you."

My pulse spikes and a familiar heat floods my neck and face. He's waiting for my response. My brain works in overdrive thinking of the best way to respond. Do I jump up and down and shout, *Yes!* Or do I play it cool and tell him I need to look at my calendar? Maybe I should ask him for clarification on whether this is a *date* or dinner with a friend. Because we are friends now. He's not just my brother's best friend, but I think of him as *my* friend now too.

Do I use humor or sincerity? Do I ask what day? No, he asked *me* what day. But my evenings are more flexible than his. Maybe I should ask him which night is easier for him to take off? Weekends are busy at the pub, so we should wait until next week. But putting it off until next week will make him think I'm not interested or hesitant. I toy with the buttons on my coat.

Wait. Me not responding right now is going to make him think I'm hesitant. I'm not. Not at all. I panic. I don't know how to respond.

I flick my gaze up to him and see a flash of sadness. He thinks I'm coming up with a way to turn him down. I'm hurting his feelings, because, yes, Blaine Foster does have

feelings, something I wouldn't have believed a few months ago.

Without hesitation, I fill my lungs with air and give him an enthusiastic, "Yes."

Blaine's eyebrow shoots up. "Yes?"

I open my mouth, but I don't know how to respond. And then I think back to his question. What did he ask again? Will I go out on a date with him? The answer is clearly, *yes*.

Wait. That wasn't the question he asked.

My cheeks burn and this time not from his heated stare but from embarrassment. "Sorry. Sidetracked. Can you ask me the question again?"

This time the corner of his lip lifts. "Is there a night I can take you to dinner?"

"Tomorrow. I'm available tomorrow," I say, this time without any hesitation.

Blaine dips his head in a quick nod. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

He kisses my temple, something my brother does frequently. But Blaine's lips linger, and there's absolutely nothing brotherly about the way I feel about the innocent kiss.

I stand frozen in the middle of the kitchen as I watch him leave. When the lights from his truck can no longer be seen through the dark night, I slide my back down the cabinets and sit on the kitchen floor.

"Blaine Foster asked me out on a date. And I said yes." I want to squeal with excitement, but my guests are quietly tucked away for the night upstairs.

I haven't been on a date in months, but that's not what has me giddy and dancing around my bathroom as I brush my teeth.

A date.

With Blaine Foster.



My childhood crush.

My teenage annoyance.

My adulthood... love?

Maybe.

Or maybe it's still an innocent childhood crush. Only I don't remember feeling this strongly about him when I was younger.

Maybe it's something more.

....

I'VE DATED PLENTY OF women during my thirty-three years on earth, so why is this one dinner date causing me to second, third, and fourth guess my choice of clothing? I've never cared before what I wore on a date, be it casual or formal. Not that I'm a formal kind of guy.

I toss my fourth shirt change of the night on my bed and snag a light grey Henley. Anything Carhartt, hoodies, and athletic gear are my go-to attire. I own a couple pair of khakis, but live in jeans, joggers when I'm in my apartment, and shorts when I'm working out.

Dressing up for a woman only gives a false impression of my potential feelings for her. It's not that I didn't care what I wear or how I look, but I don't put much stock into the superficial. When I ask a woman out on a date, it's because I'm interested in her, not her clothing. I expect the same in return.

However, my date with Marley is different. Different because, well, it's *Marley*. She's seen me at my worst and at my best. Although, I'm not exactly sure what my best is. Possibly the past few weeks when we're not at each other's throats, even though sparring with Marley is one of my favorite things to do.

She can dish it out as well as she can take it. It's something I enjoy and respect about her. I don't have to walk on eggshells around her and can be myself, twisted sense of

humor and all. But tonight, I don't want the sparring or the twisted humor. Tonight I want...

I glance at my reflection in the mirror as I tug on my shirt. What is it I want? Dating Marley will be different from other women. There's a catch-twenty-two with taking our relationship to the next level.

Once—*if*—we start dating, things will never be the same between us. Or even between Grant and me.

If it doesn't work out, I'll have to walk on eggshells around her. I'll feel guilty about dating other women. I'll get surly—more surly—when she dates other men. Because the only way it won't work out between us is if Marley doesn't want to be with me.

On the flipside, if we find we are compatible and dating her is easy, it means the end of dating other women. It means a future with her. She's the settling down, get married, pop out a few kids kind of woman. Am I ready for that? Is that where I want our relationship to go?

I run my hands through the stubble on my jaw. I should shave. She won't want me scratching her face when—*if*—I kiss her tonight.

Again, it's not a thought I give before taking a woman out. Some days I feel like shaving, others I don't. I don't live my life to impress other people. But I find myself wanting to impress Marley.

She's too good for me. She's kind and loyal. She has a heart of gold and cares about everyone around her. She comes from the most perfect family.

While I'm Mr. Have A Good Time without a stable family. I'm loyal to my friends and those in my inner circle, which happens to be the Hudson family. The. End.

Although lately, my circle has been expanding. Trace is a cool guy. With his crazy schedule it's hard to get together often. Ethan's chill and Ashton... well, I don't *not* like him as much as I used to. He's pulling an act right out of the Blaine Foster handbook. Torment your buddy when he's interested in

a woman. Flirt with her—innocently, because crossing the line is against the code. Have your buddy's back and when you're not giving him a hard time, give the woman a nudge in his direction.

Has Ashton been nudging Marley? They see each other every morning before he leaves for work. Something he has no qualms about rubbing in my face. It comes with a smile and a chuckle and nothing malicious, but I don't stop my scowls or my threats.

As far as I know, Grant is oblivious about my feelings toward his sister. I should say something to him. Ask for his approval. Or should I ask her father for approval? No, I'm not asking for her hand in marriage.

Surprisingly, the idea doesn't make me break out in hives like it did when Cassidy Neumayer hinted—not so subtly—about wanting to settle down and marry after only a month of dating.

And by a month of dating, that consisted of her sitting on the other side of the bar while I worked for two weeks until I agreed to her invitation to dinner. It was a nice meal and conversation flowed freely, but there were no sparks. I imagined myself growing bored with her quickly.

I proved myself correct when I couldn't stop yawning after our third date. She was nice. Sweet. Pretty. But she didn't challenge me. She didn't spark any curiosity or sense of adventure. Even after I turned down her multiple dinner invitations, she continued to come to the pub and flirt with me.

Flirting is second nature to me, but I also know when it leads a woman on. I've never been attached to a woman before. Never toyed with the possibility of her being in my future.

It scares me how much it *doesn't* scare me that I think about the future with Marley. It's easy. She's easy to be with. Or maybe I'm over-analyzing my feelings for her because she is so easy to be with. That doesn't mean I'm in love with her.

*Love.*

I close my eyes and push that word away. I'm not opposed to love. It looks disgustingly sweet like a princess fairytale story on Evie and Grant. And yeah, I tease him about being a cheesy prince charming on the daily.

But love isn't in my blood. My parents thought they married out of love, but it turned out they married each other because they were comfortable with each other and figured the next step was marriage and kids.

I would have loved having a brother or sister, but I'm glad they realized after having me that having a house full of kids wasn't for them. I guess I could say they've been my friends more than my parents.

I'm not confident I'm going to be any different from them, and Marley isn't the type of woman to be okay with that. She'll be an amazing mother one day.

I lower myself to the edge of my bed and rest my elbows on my thighs. Going out on a date with Marley could blow up in my face. I have no idea what the heck I was thinking. My cell phone sits next to me on my bed, and I stare at it, contemplating sending her a text canceling our date.

When it vibrates, I jump back with alarm. No way could she sense my hesitation. When I look down at the caller, I groan. He's the last person I want to talk to. Because I seem to enjoy torturing myself with bad decisions, I pick up.

"What do you want?"

"Wow. Pretty grumpy for a guy who's getting ready to go on a date."

"How did—" I bite my tongue. I'm not about to get into it with him.

Ashton chuckles. "She didn't say it was with you. Tight lipped, she is. Thanks for verifying. Where are you taking her?"

"None of your business." Knowing Ashton, he'll *coincidentally* show up at the same place.

I know because I did the same thing to Grant and Evie. I start to smile at how annoyed Grant was with me when Ashton ruins the memory.

“She looks pretty tonight. Not that she doesn’t always look beautiful.”

Marley dressed up for me? I look down at my Henley and jump off my bed, rummaging through my closet for something else to wear.

I don’t often wear button downs. Usually only to Hudson family meals and when they ask me to go to church with them. I want to ask Ashton what she’s wearing, but I’m smarter than that. He’ll make me fess up about my feelings for her before telling me.

“Trace and I were gonna grab a bite to eat. Thinking we’ll hit up Salsa Verde.”

That was going to be one of my three suggestions when I pick up Marley. It’s my usual go-to first date. How predictable am I? She deserves better than a casual Mexican restaurant.

“Enjoy your dinner date. No offense to Trace, but my date is better looking than yours.”

Ashton snorts. “Trace is the prettiest of us guys, but Marley is a stunner.”

“Hannah’s beautiful too. If things don’t go well with Marley, I may ask her out.” I have no interest in asking her out, but it wasn’t lost on me the way Ashton’s attention gravitated toward her last night. Riling him up is just as fun as messing with Grant.

“That would be a mistake,” Ashton growls.

*Bingo.* I found his Achilles’ heel. Now maybe he’ll give Marley and me a moment’s rest. “What’s wrong with Hannah?” I shrug out of my shirt and switch it out for a dark blue button down. It’s nice yet not too formal.

“There’s nothing wrong with Hannah. But you’d be making a mistake by messing things up with Marley. I don’t know what she sees in you, but she’s into you.”

I'm glad I'm alone so no one can see the goofy grin on my face. I keep it Blaine style and reply, "All the ladies are, Ash. Get used to being second."

I close out the call and tuck my phone in my front pocket. My jeans are dark and clean. Nothing fancy, but khakis will make it look like I'm trying too hard. I brush my teeth for the second time this hour and scoop up my keys on my way out.

Ashton wasn't wrong. Marley looks stunning when she opens the door to her kitchen and greets me.

"Wow. Hi. You're..." I'm not used to being tongue-tied around women. Only Marley. I don't want to come off too strong and sound like an idiot. "You look nice."

*Nice.* Ashton called her pretty and beautiful. No doubt he used those words to her face as well while I told her she looked *nice*. I could use a lesson in connotations.

"Thanks." She takes her coat off the hook by the door, and I help her into it. "You clean up nice as well."

My coat is open so she can see I'm wearing a button down instead of my usual casual garb. I want to tell her she's the most beautiful woman I've seen. That the purple in her top makes her green eyes pop against her light skin and brings out the pink and mauve tones in her lips.

I don't. I stand mute and wait for her to gather her things. I help her into my truck, and we drive in silence as we head out of town. The last thing I need is our friends showing up and ruining our date, or the town gossips spreading rumors about our relationship before we figure out if we even have one.

"I love the Christmas lights along this road," she says when we're a few miles out of town.

"Do you want to drive around a bit or are you hungry?"

She picks at the bottom of her coat. "We can drive around after dinner. Unless you need to get back to the pub."

I narrow my eyes in confusion and glance at her. "I took the night off."

“Oh. I didn’t think... you took last night off, and you usually work every night so...”

So she thought this wasn’t a date and just a quick dinner among friends. I guess I need to be clearer about my intentions. Or rather, I need to figure out my intentions.

Is she worth the risk? Sitting so close to her, breathing in her intoxicating orange and vanilla scent. Yeah. She’s worth it.

“I took the night off to be with you.”

There. Let the implication hang in the air. She’s a terrible poker player. If my intentions scare her, she won’t be able to hide it.

I glance in her direction and am rewarded with her near smile. She has her bottom lip trapped between her teeth, and even in the darkened truck, I can see the happiness in her eyes. My heart thumps loudly in my chest, and I’m pretty sure she can hear it over the soft Christmas music playing from the speakers.

I don’t push the conversation and we ride the rest of the way in silence with the holiday tunes filling the air. I hold the door for her at Seabass and rest my hand on her lower back as we follow the hostess to our table.

When she takes our drink order and leaves us with our menus, I break our comfortable silence. “I hope seafood is okay.”

“Yes. I love fish.”

“I know.”

She tilts her head to the side and her soft auburn curls bounce on her shoulders. “You do?”

“You used to fish with Grant and me all the time. You’re the only girl I know who’s not afraid to handle the worms and to take a trout off the hook.”

She scrunches her nose at me. “Charming girl I was.”

“I thought so.”

When she blushes, I pick up my menu, partly blocking my view of her to hide my grin. The waiter comes by, and we place our order. She opts for the salmon while I go for the surf and turf.

“You really thought I was charming?” she asks when we’re alone again.

“I’m doubtful I used the word *charming* when I was a punkish pre-teen, but yeah, I thought you were cute.”

“Cute? I was a tomboy.”

“Trust me. Elementary and middle school boys are not interested in divas. They want a girl who can keep up with them. You kept up with us quite well.”

“How I remember it, you were the one always telling Grant to send me away.”

“Of course I did.” I pick up my IPA and take a sip. Not as good as the beer at Frosty’s, but decent, nonetheless. Besides, I’m here because of my date, not for the food or beverages. “What fourteen-year-old boy wants to admit to his best friend that he thinks his baby sister is cool and kinda cute?”

Marley’s eyes grow wide. “You thought I was cool and cute when you were fourteen? But that’s when you started being so mean to me.”

I roll my eyes in dramatic fashion and push the breadbasket toward her. “Do you not know anything about boys? We follow playground rules until we’re past puberty. Which for some, isn’t until their mid-twenties.”

“I believe I have accused you of never getting past puberty.”

I hold my glass up to her in mock salute. “Until recently.”

Marley studies me, and by the deep line between her brows, she has many questions. She takes a sip of her wine, then rests her elbows on the table. I like the way she leans forward to ask her question.

“Explain these playground rules.”



I mirror her pose and lean toward her. The table creates too much distance between us, but I can still smell her fruity scent and see the flecks of a million shades of green in her eyes.

“The more we like a girl, the more we tease her, make fun of her, and push her away.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Exactly. I’d think growing up with a brother you’d have caught on to how dumb boys are.”

She relaxes and laughs. “I guess I would have if I didn’t idolize him so much. I wanted to be a boy so badly.”

“I remember. I liked you better as a boy than when you started turning all girly.”

Marley’s mouth opens in shock, and she clasps her hand over her heart. “I’ve been *girly* longer than I was a tomboy.”

“I should clarify.” I lean further across the table. “When you were a tomboy, there was less temptation. When you started brushing your hair, wearing clothes that accentuated your figure instead of hiding behind your brother’s hand-me-downs, it was harder to forget you weren’t temptation on a stick.”

“Temptation on a stick?” Her cheeks flush and mirror the color of her lips.

“I couldn’t very well tell my best friend I was attracted to his sister. He’d either laugh at me, chop off a limb, or unfriend me. I wasn’t willing to risk any of the three options, so I...”

“Resorted to playground rules. Even in your twenties.”

I nod. “That’s my excuse. What’s yours?” I’ve pretty much come out and told her I’ve been attracted to her my entire life. While my ego will get crushed when she tells me she’s only recently been attracted to me—if at all—it’s better than the alternative.

“Excuse for what?”

“Why you were mean to me.” Keeping our conversation as light as possible, I add a playful pout.

She's saved from responding by our waiter who delivers our food. We thank him and dive into our meals. I give Marley a few minutes to enjoy her salmon before I bring us back to where we left off.

"All those mean jokes. Do girls have the same playground rules? I always pegged you all as smarter than us dumb boys."

"Way to stereotype and group the female population as thinking and acting the same."

Great. Somehow I've dredged up the old Marley-Blaine feud. And with that comes the snark and sarcasm.

"I didn't mean—"

"I'm only teasing." She reaches across the table and squeezes my hand.

It's the most intimate touch we've shared, and I'm frozen momentarily as my gaze locks on our joined hands. Or rather, her hand trapping mine.

I flip my hand over and thread my fingers with hers, still staring at the anomaly. Her fingers are slender and dainty between mine. Her skin is pale and satiny soft while my hands are calloused, and flecks of dark hair cover my wrist.

Our hands stay locked, and I pick up my fork with my left hand, not caring how awkward it feels. I'm not letting her go. Ever.

And then it dawns on me. It doesn't matter that I don't have a history of healthy relationships running through my blood. It's the heart that matters, and the blood pumping through it right now screams *be mine forever*. I still need answers from her though.

I squeeze Marley's hand. "I gave you no choice but to snap at me all those years."

"I didn't—" She stops herself. "Sorry. I guess snapping at you comes naturally. It doesn't mean I don't like you. I guess it means I'm comfortable around you. I don't like conflict and get along with most people. With you though... I don't hold back."

I'm not offended. If anything, her confession makes my heart beat stronger. "I don't ever want you to hold back with me, Marley. I want your honesty. Always. And I'll give you mine."

She's comfortable with me. My smile freezes and turns to a frown. Those were the words my parents used with each other. The reason why their marriage didn't work. Reluctantly, I draw my hand away and finish my dinner in silence.

We decline our waiter's offer for dessert, and I pay our bill. "Do you still want to drive around and look at Christmas lights?"

"We don't have to if you don't want to."

Great. We're back to this. It's my fault for pulling back toward the end of our meal. "Are there places your parents used to take you?"

I know there are. Grant would complain when we were in high school about going for family drives to see the lights because his mom and sister loved them. At the time, I thought it was a stupid and boring tradition as well.

I wouldn't have minded being squished between Grant and Marley in the backseat of their car, but Grant never asked me to tag along. I'm sure it was because he thought it would be a punishment for me.

There were nights when he went off to do family traditions that I longed to be part of. Sure, I had an open invitation to all the meals and traditions, but it wasn't the same. Grant and I were teenage boys. At the time, we weren't thinking about lasting memories and family outings.

We were thinking about college, careers, and girls. Not necessarily in that order.

"The houses along the golf course are usually decked out. And there's a cute neighborhood in Chestnut Hill that's pretty. But we don't have to go there. I know driving through neighborhoods looking at Christmas lights isn't exciting for you."

“What makes you say that?” I ask as I take a left toward the golf course.

“Because Grant used to complain the entire two hours of our drives. He hated it. My mom used to suggest he ask you to join us, but he said he didn’t want to lose you as a best friend.”

I chuckle and can hear him saying that. I don’t confess my thoughts from back then or a few minutes ago. She’s *comfortable* with me and I don’t want to push her for something more when she may only be looking to take the walls down and form a civil friendship instead of always being at each other’s throats.

“I’ll be Home for Christmas” comes on and Marley hums along as we go for our leisurely drive. She points out her favorite displays, and I look when she points, but my concentration flits between the road and the way her face lights up.

It’s true, I really don’t care one way or another if we drive around all night looking at light displays. But if it brings a smile to Marley’s face, I’ll do just about anything. When we reach Chestnut Hill, she changes the radio station.

“There’s a house on this road that sets their light display to music. It’s super cool. We may have to wait in line for a few minutes before we reach the house. It’s up there.” She points ahead of us, and I see the line of cars.

I don’t mind waiting if it makes our date last longer. I should use this time to ask her where she sees our relationship going, but that’s not a conversation I’ve ever had with a woman. It’s been asked of me a few times, and I broke out in an itchy rash. Not really, but I squirmed and avoided taking the question seriously.

Joking, flirting, making light of a situation is more my style. *Was* more my style. I love that I can joke around with Marley and still be comfortable with serious conversations as well.

*Comfortable.*

I avert my gaze from Marley and pretend like I'm fully vested in the light display. It is impressive how the lights blink and change to the music, but the thumping of my heartbeat overshadows it all.

Once we make it through the neighborhood, I head back toward the inn. I don't want our night to end, but like all good things...

As soon as I park the truck, we get out and I walk Marley to her private entrance. I'm not sure what the protocol is here. Do I give her a hug? Shake hands? Tell her I had a nice time and apologize for being *comfortable*?

It's not her fault my heart is confused and possibly wounded. She stands on the top step and I'm two steps lower, making us eye level. She doesn't open the door and waits for me to end what started out as the most perfect date.

"Thank you for dinner and for driving me around." She folds her hands in front of her and lowers her chin as if shy.

"Sure. Thanks for coming."

My monotone response has her snapping her chin up and scowling at me. She bites her lip, opens her mouth to say something, then bites her lip again.

I scratch my jaw and glance over her shoulder, afraid she's going to call me out on my mixed messages.

"You said you appreciated my full honesty." Marley folds her arms across her chest. "I feel the same. I would appreciate your full honesty."

"Me? I've been nothing but honest."

She nods in understanding. What she understands, I haven't a clue because I don't understand what's happening or not happening between us.

"Great. Well, thanks again." She turns and lets herself inside, not even being subtle about slamming the door in my face.

"That went well," I mutter on my way back to my truck.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

---

“A little birdie told me you went out on a date last night.” Amelia wiggles her eyebrows at me and passes me my French vanilla latte.

“Not a date. Dinner.”

“Hm. Did your *date* receive the same message? That it was just dinner?”

I take my coffee and plop myself at one of the stools close to the counter. “My *dinner companion* is the one who made it perfectly clear it was only dinner.”

Well, maybe Blaine didn’t make it perfectly clear. More like muddy water. Sludge. It started as a majestic clear pool in the middle of paradise until a mud slide came in like a wrecking ball. I’m still not sure who or what the mud slide or the wrecking ball is a metaphor of, other than it not being romantic.

The flirting, the smiles, the hand holding. It was all so sweet. Heck, Blaine even admitted he had a crush on me when we were younger.

Younger being the operative word. He never said anything about a present day crush. I really thought our conversation was steering in that direction, and then came the mud slide muddying the waters.

He was polite and standoffish as we drove through the neighborhoods. For a few minutes, with the Christmas music playing and beauty of the lights, I was able to forget about the tension in the cab of his truck.

For a fleeting moment, I thought when he dropped me off that he’d kiss me. At least to the temple like he did when he picked me up. Instead, I got *Sure. Thanks for coming*. Like, seriously? Thanks for coming?

I’m an absolute fool for thinking—dreaming—that Blaine could possibly see me as anything more than his best friend’s sister.

“Ouch. That bad?”

“What?” I glance up at Amelia, forgetting where I am for a moment.

“Quite the grizzly scowl. You and Blaine at it again? I thought you kissed and made up after working on the parade together.”

“Since when did we *kiss*? And we’ve never made up. He’s still an annoying, pompous, arrogant imbecile.”

“Whoa.” Amelia holds up a hand, warding off my mood.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to come here and scare your customers away.”

She looks out at the empty coffee shop. “Three o’clock isn’t exactly my rush hour. Wanna tell me what happened?” Amelia rounds the counter and takes a seat next to me.

“Not really.”

“You showing up mid-afternoon tells me otherwise.”

“Why can’t I stop by mid-afternoon without an agenda?” Amelia’s brow lifts.

The chime above the door rings followed by my sister-in-law’s terrible voice. “I saw Mama kissing Santa Claus,” she sings along with the music playing in the coffee shop. “I was in the middle of scrubbing down the tables in the bakery and was surprised to see you here, Mars.”

She greets me with a hug, grabs my coffee, and takes a sip.

“Need a cup?” Amelia stands and Evie pats her shoulder.

“I’ll be up all night if I do. It smells so good though, I couldn’t resist.” When she’s settled next to me, her smile turns upside down. “What’s wrong, Marley? Are you okay?”

“Why does everyone think something is wrong?”

Amelia and Evie look at each other, then cock their heads at me.

“It’s nothing.” I wrap my hands around my coffee and hide behind the lip of the paper cup.



“If it was nothing, you wouldn’t be sitting at Mug Shop in the middle of the afternoon looking like someone told you Santa Claus isn’t real.”

I give my sister-in-law the side-eye. “Do I look that terrible?”

“Not terrible.” Amelia strokes my hair. “Sad.”

“Oh, honey.” Evie scoots closer and takes one of my hands between hers. “Let us help you. What’s going on?”

It’s not like they haven’t already figured out I have feelings for Blaine. It will feel good to let it all out, to confide in my closest friends. “Blaine and I went out on a date last night.”

“I knew it!” I glare at Amelia. She cringes and slouches her shoulders. “I mean, yay?”

“I’m guessing by the frown lines it didn’t go well. Did you tell him how you feel about him?” Evie squeezes my hand again.

“How do you know I feel anything?”

Evie and Amelia snort.

“I picked up on the chemistry the first time I saw you two in the same room.”

“That was over a year ago.”

“Exactly. Your brother may be oblivious to the budding romance, but we’re not.”

“You haven’t said anything to Grant?”

Evie shakes her head. “Well, I’ve hinted but it’s gone right over his head. I don’t think he’d be opposed to Blaine and you dating, if that’s what has the two of you worried.”

“We haven’t discussed dating or how Grant may feel about it. We haven’t even tiptoed on how we’re feeling.”

“But the way he looked at you the other night at Evie and Grant’s. And last night’s dinner...?” Amelia cocks her head.

“It’s not like that, I guess.”

“You guess?” Evie sits back and crosses one leg over the other. “What did Blaine do or say to cause these doubts?”

“It’s more like what he didn’t do or say.” I shrug. “One minute we’re laughing and enjoying ourselves. He tells me he had a crush on me when we were younger, and then he freezes. He shut down toward the end of our dinner and didn’t say a word while we drove around looking at Christmas lights.”

“You drove around?” Evie puts her hands over her heart. “Grant told me about that family tradition. One he hated as a kid, but he thought I’d enjoy it, so he drove me around while I sang to Christmas songs and took pictures and videos. I’m pretty sure he was bored out of his mind, but he did it for me because he loves me. I don’t doubt Blaine’s reasonings are the same.”

I choke on my coffee. “Hardly. Blaine doesn’t love me, Evie.”

“I think he does,” Amelia says. “He’s just afraid to show it. Think about it. His parents aren’t exactly role models of a happy marriage. He’s scared.”

“I can relate,” Evie adds. “While our stories are different, I didn’t grow up in a loving home. I was intimidated by the love and traditions of your family, Marley. Maybe that’s spooked Blaine as well. For how cocky he can be, we all know it’s a show. I’ll bet all the presents under the Christmas tree he doesn’t feel worthy of your love.”

“What? That’s crazy. Of course he’s worthy of my—” I clamp my mouth shut, all too aware of the mischievous grins on my friends’ faces. They set me up for that one. “He’s a good guy.”

“We know. You know. But does he? Do you remember what you were talking about at dinner when he froze up?” Amelia asks.

“We were holding hands. He was talking about boys and their playground rules. How he teased me when we were young because he had a crush on me. I apologized for being snappy around him and told him I only give him a hard time

because I'm comfortable around him. He then told me to always be honest with him, then pulled his hand away and went radio silent. I don't get it."

"We're going to come back to this hand holding at dinner." Amelia points her finger at me. "Let's dissect the conversation first. Elaborate on the playground analogy."

I retell Blaine's story and tune out all of Evie's *oohs* and *ahhs*.

"Wow. He totally bared his soul to you without fully admitting he loves you," Amelia says.

"Love never came up."

"Because you told him you were comfortable with him." Evie leans forward again and nods. "I've gotten to know Blaine quite well this past year. He isn't one who freely admits his feelings. He's either joking around or grumbling about something. Work, usually. He doesn't like to take days off, yet he took off two in a row. For you."

"Great. Now he resents me for missing out on time at the pub. And for the record, the other night wasn't for me. That was your party."

"You're the one who invited him," Amelia adds. "And in case you haven't noticed, there's some serious jealousy vibes going on. I'd be more concerned about my brother's feelings, but he's not one to poach on another man's girlfriend."

"I'm not anyone's girlfriend."

"Close enough."

"Let's get back to you saying you were comfortable." Evie pats my knee. "Did you say it like he's a warm blanket on a cold day? A cup of hot chocolate during a snowstorm?"

I roll my eyes. "No, Evs. There was nothing romantic about it. Just kinda matter of fact. I am comfortable around him, which is why I have no problem telling him off when he's bothering me. I'd never talk that way to someone else."

"Ohh," Amelia drags out.

“Mhm.” Evie nods

I dart my eyes between my two confusing friends.  
“Someone gonna clue me in on this mind-boggling revelation you came up with? Which I highly doubt has any truth to it, by the way.”

“You think so?” Amelia asks Evie as if they have some sort of telepathic communication going on between them.

“You’ve known him longer than me. You think?”

“Yeah.”

“What?” I throw my hands up in the air.

Amelia takes my cup from me, and Evie takes both my hands, holding them in hers.

“Blaine admitted his feelings for you, and you didn’t reciprocate. Instead, you told him he’s comfortable. Like an old couch. No one wants to feel like an old piece of furniture.”

“I didn’t call him an old couch.”

“You didn’t tell him he was comfortable like a blanket you want to wrap yourself in. Or a cup of cocoa that warms you from the inside out leaving a sweet taste on your tongue.”  
Amelia shakes her head in disappointment at me.

“I don’t get it.”

Evie pats my hands. “You friend-zoned him.”

“I what?”

“Friend zone. A gentle push off making him think you only want to be friends and nothing more.”

“How the heck did you come up with that ridiculous theory based on what I told you?”

“It’s much easier being an objective observer of a relationship than being in one and reading the writing on the walls.” Evie takes my coffee from Amelia and finishes it off.

“First, there is no *relationship* and second, you two are hardly objective observers. You see what you want to see.” I stand and snag my empty cup from Evie. “You two are

delusional. Evie, I understand. She can only see hearts and love. But you, Amelia? You're supposed to be clear-headed like me."

I shrug into my coat and fish for my keys in my pocket.

Amelia belts out a laugh. "Sweetie. You're anything but clear-headed."

"Talk to Blaine. Let him know how you feel. He said he wanted honesty." Evie gives me a hug.

My shoulders sag. "But that means I have to be honest with myself as well."



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

---

“Thanks for the invite to the party.” I toss coasters in front of Grant, Ashton, and Ethan who take up the other side of the bar. It’s three days until Christmas, so business is slowing down.

“Easy, big guy. We brought the party to you. Cause we’re thoughtful like that.” Grant cracks open a peanut and tosses it in his mouth.

“Let me guess.” I take down Grant’s mug from the rack above and pour his usual IPA. “Evie ditched you, and you can’t stand being alone, so you called up the boys.”

Ethan and Ashton chuckle as they crack peanuts and toss them at Grant. He catches one in his open mouth.

“Something like that. She went with Marley, Hannah, and Amelia to do a last round of Christmas shopping. I don’t know what she hasn’t bought yet. I’m not even allowed in the spare bedroom, not that I can open the door. It’s stuffed to the brim with packages.”

“If I knew he was such a drama queen, I would have had second thoughts on befriending him.” Ashton tips his chin in thanks as I slide his beer across the bar. “I helped Evie wrap a few things the other day. The room is hardly packed full.”

“What? When? Why didn’t Evie tell me about this?”

Ashton grins, and this time I don’t mind him pushing buttons. Mostly because they aren’t mine.

“Evie swore me to secrecy. Really, though, I think it was an excuse to hang out with me. She must be getting tired of seeing your ugly mug twenty-four-seven.”

I snort out a laugh while Ethan cringes. Being new to our circle, he’s still in polite and respectful mode. We’ll know he’s more comfortable with us when he starts teasing. I suppose looking in from the outside, it could seem inappropriate. In the few weeks we’ve known Ashton, he’s proven himself to be faithful and loyal.

Even though I'm on the receiving end of it more than I'm not, I appreciate Ashton's sense of humor. We're more alike than I cared to admit. Now, I don't mind so much. Especially since Grant is married and isn't available to be at my beck and call.

"Ashton's covering the tab tonight." Grant takes a pull of his beer.

"You invited us out. Seems like you should pay up."

"You spent time with my wife without me knowing. That's priceless. Ethan, order the lobster and prime rib. Ashton's mooching off my sister and living rent free. He can afford our dinners."

There's no need to point out that I don't serve lobster, and prime rib only on occasion. This time, Ethan gets the joke.

"I was craving fish and chips, but I'll take your top shelf whiskey," Ethan says to me.

I've already poured him his Maker's Mark, his usual drink, but I go along with it. "What do you think I poured you? It's fifty bucks a shot, and I poured you a double. Let me know when you're ready for your second."

"Har har." Ashton cracks another peanut and tosses the empty shell in the bucket in front of him. "So, what did you get your sister for Christmas?" he asks Grant but looks at me.

I know what he's doing. Trying to work Marley into the conversation. I have no idea what he knows about our dinner date the other night. If she told Ashton how poorly I botched the end of our night, he's covering it well.

I'm doubtful she confided in her brother, but since she and Ashton have gotten cozy over coffee and muffins lately, I wonder if she confided in him.

"No idea. I'm the worst at shopping. One of the million reasons being married is the best is having a wife who enjoys shopping and buying all the presents."

By the gleam in his eye, it's obvious Ashton couldn't care less what Grant got for Marley. "B. You've been friends with



her for decades. What did you get her?”

I glare at him. “Nothing. We’ve never exchanged gifts.” The first part is a lie, the latter is not. This is the first time I’ve gotten her anything. Of course, that was when I thought there might be something between us. The snow globe from our Secret Santa Ugly Sweater party didn’t count.

“Really? That surprises me.” He takes a long, leisurely sip of his beer. “I hope she likes what I got her.”

I see red, and I’m pretty sure there’s steam coming out my ears. Ethan covers his mouth with his hand in a poor attempt to cover his laugh.

Great. So even the new guy knows about my obsession with Marley and Ashton’s intent to rile me up. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be laughing.

“You got my sister something? Cool. What did you get her?”

“Just a little something I thought she might like.”

“Why so secretive, Ash?” I growl as I wipe the already clean bar top.

“I’m really good at keeping secrets.” He winks at me. “Tell me anything and I’ll keep it right here.” He pounds his chest with his fist.

“It’s good to have honest, loyal friends. I’m glad you’re staying at Marley’s. Sometimes I worry about her, a single woman, staying with strangers every night. I’ll feel better when she finds someone and marries.”

*Someone.* Not once has Grant ever suggested I ask his sister out. He’s never seen me as worthy of her, and I don’t blame him. I’m a big brother to her. It’s all she will ever see in me as well.

“You guys know what you want to eat?” I grumble.

They give me their long list of food requests, and I find refuge in the kitchen for a few minutes while I give my cooks their orders. When I return, Grant is on the other side of the restaurant, his phone glued to his ear.

“Evie.” Ashton flicks his head back toward Grant.

“Another beer?” I ask him.

“Sure.”

“Whiskey? I ask Ethan.

“I’ll take a water. I’ve got an early morning.”

I fill a glass with ice water and set it next to Ethan’s whiskey.

“Thanks.” He sinks the lemon slice with his straw and clears his voice. “Tell me if I’m out of line, but as the new guy to the group, I want to make sure I’m reading all the innuendos and side eyes correctly.”

“I’m relatively new too, Eth.”

“Yeah, but you clicked faster, and you have an in since your sister has been friends with these knuckleheads since forever.”

“Knuckleheads is right.” Ashton clinks his beer stein with Ethan’s water. “What’s your observation?”

“I’m aware Grant and Blaine have been inseparable since they were in diapers.”

“Grant still needed a diaper ‘cause he wet the bed, but I’d been out of them for years. We met in kindergarten, yeah.”

Ethan chuckles. “Noted. Which means you also grew up with Marley. And Amelia,” he adds.

“Yup.” I pour myself a ginger ale and take a few sips.

“I heard you dated Amelia.”

“We were sophomores in high school. We started dating around third period and were broken up before the end of the class.”

Ethan laughs and Ashton gives him a dirty look. It’s much more fun being on this side of the discussion. “Amelia isn’t on your radar. Not when there’s another woman shining so brightly you’ve become as blind to everyone around you as Grant has since marrying Evie.”

“Well before they married.”

“Following in his footsteps then, huh?”

I narrow my eyes at Ethan and ignore Ashton’s deep laugh.

“I’m not blinded by anyone or anything.”

Ashton pretends to choke and coughs into his hand.

“Okay. So it wouldn’t bother you if, say, I ask Marley out sometime?”

My back molars are going to be nothing but dust by the time this evening is over. I take a few cleansing breaths and unclench my jaw.

“Are you *interested* in dating Marley? I haven’t seen you two interact much.”

“To be fair,” he takes a sip of his water, “it’s hard to get any time with her when you can’t take your eyes off her. There was some serious hovering going on last week at the party. I was afraid to compliment her ugly sweater in case you got the wrong idea about my intentions and cut out my tongue.”

If Ashton keeps up his fake choke-coughing fit, I’m going to call him an ambulance.

I shake my head. “Great. Another drama queen in the group.” I whip the dish rag over my shoulder and turn my back on the guys.

I busy myself with putting the glasses away and am relieved when the kitchen calls out the guys’ order. A few minutes later, after I’ve delivered their food, Grant plops himself back on his stool.

“Thought we were gonna have to put an APB out for you.” I take two of his fries and swipe them through the pool of ketchup he’d just squirted.

“That was Evie.”

“Really. We wouldn’t have guessed.”

Grant snarls his nose at Ashton and punches him in the shoulder. “I already have one wise-cracking best friend. I don’t

need a second.”

“Our boy Ethan here’s got some sarcasm laced through his blood as well,” Ashton says before taking a bite of his burger.

“Oh, I wasn’t being sarcastic at all.” Ethan remains serious as he cuts into his fried fish. “I was just asking the guys if it would be okay to ask Marley out.”

Ashton freezes, his hand still wrapped around his burger mid-air, and the blood boiling in my veins is about ready to shoot out of my pores.

I grind my back molars as I give Ethan a steely stare. He stares at his food like it’s the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen. I glance at Grant who is looking at Ethan with curiosity.

“Hm. You and Mars? She’s a few years older than you, not that it really matters.” He rubs his chin and rests his elbow on the counter. “I dunno. I’ve never thought about my sister in a serious relationship. Her focus has always been on the inn. I guess I’ve always imagined her with a husband and house load of kids, but I never actually put a face to the man who’d be standing by her side.”

Grant has the audacity to pick up his chicken sandwich and take a bite like picturing Marley marrying some stranger off the street is no big deal.

Ashton leans back against his barstool. “Picture it now, G. Who’s the perfect man for Marley?” He avoids looking at me or Ethan. Smart man.

My legs are heavier than weighted cement columns with heavy bricks on my feet. My heart thumps erratically in my chest, otherwise I’d think there was no blood pumping in my body at all. No air coming in or going out.

I stand frozen in time as I hang on Grant’s next words.

“No doubt about it, he’ll have to have my approval. Yours too, Blaine.”

I quirk an eyebrow, not liking where this is going. “Mine? Why?”

“Because I trust you more than I trust anyone else. No offense guys.” He nods to his left at Ashton and Ethan. “I trust you with my friendship, but it’ll take longer than a few months to earn that level to be with my sister.”

“So, you’re saying only a guy you’ve known forever will pass inspection?” Ethan asks, still eating his dinner like we’re talking about the weather and not my future.

“Yeah. I guess.” Grant shrugs and dives back into his sandwich.

How can I be best friends with such a blind idiot? I bet if Evie wasn’t in the picture, he wouldn’t be as distracted and would have caught on to my interest in his sister by now. Too bad it’s only one-way. I’m *comfortable*. I’m surprised Grant didn’t use that word to describe what he wants for Marley.

“I want her to be as comfortable with the guy as I am with you guys and with Evie.”

*Aaannnd there it is.* My life is officially over.

“You and Evie are hardly comfortable,” I correct him. “You two challenge each other and are fiercely competitive. Are you forgetting how you met?” They fought and competed for the storefront space they now share and co-own.

“Exactly. If I wasn’t comfortable with Evie’s and my relationship, I wouldn’t tease her so much. I wouldn’t challenge her, and she wouldn’t push my buttons.” He grins like a lovesick teenager. “We’re comfortable and confident enough in our relationship where we know a little argument isn’t going to end us. Our love is stronger than that.”

“I’m gonna go throw up in the bathroom now.” Ashton wipes his mouth with his napkin and gets up to leave.

“You’ll find someone like that too. Someone who will overlook your muscles and terrible sense of humor,” Grant calls to Ashton’s retreating back. “You’re serious about wanting to take Marley out?” he asks Ethan.

“Me? No. She’s a beautiful, intelligent, sweet woman, but I’m not in a position to compete for her attention.”

“Compete? Who’s after my sister?” Grant turns his face towards me and guilt washes over me. “Has Marley mentioned anyone to you?” he asks me.

Because I’m the second older brother. I’m not in the running to steal Marley’s heart.

“Never mind. I’ll ask her in a few. The girls are finished shopping and are on their way here.”

“Here?”

Ethan smiles, the first reaction I’ve seen out of him since dropping the bomb about Marley.

“They want to play a few rounds of darts and pool before heading home. I guess they’re wired from their spiked hot chocolates.”

Great. I’m stuck behind the bar while Ashton and Ethan have free rein over Marley. Not that I think they’ll go after her, if only out of respect for me.

*Comfortable.*

Marley is comfortable with me. Grant’s interpretation of the word is completely different than my parents’. Now I need to figure out what it means to Marley.

I don’t have to wait long before four beautiful women come giggling through the door of the pub. They’re covered in a thin layer of snow.

“Is it snowing out?” I ask the obvious. No wonder I’m still single.

The guys are around the corner at the pool tables, but Grant’s married Spidey sense kicks in and he rounds the corner, scooping Evie in a hug.

“It just started. It’s so pretty. Marley and Hannah want to go for a walk and make snow angels, but Evie’s gone an entire four hours without seeing her husband, and I’m freezing. So we won.” Amelia hurries over to the fireplace and warms her hands while Hannah and Marley take off their coats and hang them on the coat tree by the door.

“Can I make you ladies a cup of hot chocolate or coffee to warm you up?”

“No more sugar for me. Do you happen to have any tea?” Hannah joins Amelia by the fire while Marley stands in the middle of the space as if unsure where to go.

“Sure do. Marley, would you like tea as well?”

She nods. “That would be great.”

I head back into the kitchen, thankful for some privacy while I calm my breathing. We’re done serving food for the night, and with the incoming storm, I don’t expect many more customers.

I tell the kitchen staff to head home as soon as they’re done. Since I live above the pub, it’s easy for me to stay and serve any stragglers. Not that I expect any. Nine o’clock on a Tuesday is slow as it is. Throw in a little snow, and Christmas in three days, and business is done.

A perk of owning the place is being able to choose when I want to shut down. I lock the front door and turn off the neon OPEN sign. Might as well have a private party of eight since I won’t see them until after Christmas.

I’m sure the Hudsons will invite me over to Christmas dinner as they have since I was in middle school, but I don’t expect to see them in the next few days. Not with wrapping, baking, and all the family traditions that they live for.

Amelia and Ashton have each other and their parents. Ethan’s older brother is recently divorced with a little one, so he’s spending time at his brother’s, and Hannah and her mom have plans as well.

As usual, my mom picked up shifts this week. I respect that about her, working the holidays so someone else doesn’t have to. Dad is still off with his new family, and I’m... here. I’ve never had as many friends as I do right now, yet I’ve never felt more alone.

I fill a pot with hot water and put four mugs, a bowl of lemons, sugar packets, and tea bags on a tray, assuming all

four women will want something warm. I add a basket of breadsticks still mostly warm and carry it out to the restaurant.

“We’ve got the place to ourselves. This never happens,” Grant says as he chalks a cue stick.

“I locked the front door and flipped the sign. Private party only tonight. Do you guys need another drink?”

They shake their head, which I expect since they’re all driving home.

“How are we dividing up teams?” Ashton asks as he leans on his pool stick. “Ladies against gents or mixed couples?”

Evie hands Ethan and me a pool stick. “Couples against couples. Grant and I will take on... Ethan and Amelia. Marley and Blaine, you two play Ashton and Hannah.”

I chuckle at Evie’s obvious matchmaking attempt. Noticing the blushes on the ladies, she may not be far off in her estimation of couples. Although Amelia and Ethan aren’t interested in each other that way. She’s more like the fun-loving older sister since she used to babysit him. Something she likes to remind him of quite regularly.

Matching me with Marley either means she approves of us as a couple or Marley hasn’t told her about the flopped date. Or it’s just a friendly coincidence and doesn’t mean anything, kind of like Ashton and Hannah and Ethan and Amelia.

They haven’t hinted at any interest beyond friendship. But I haven’t mentioned anything about Marley either.

“Do you want to break?” I hold out the pool stick to her.

She shakes her head. “Do you not remember how terrible I am at pool?”

“You are?”

“You’re kidding right?” She cocks her hip to the side. “You’ve been watching me play here for a few years. Have I ever won?”

My throat swells as I try to swallow. Yeah, I’ve watched her play with Grant and her parents ever since I took over



Frosty's. But I wasn't watching her skill or how many balls she got in the pocket. I was watching *her*.

“Maybe you need a better teacher than your brother.”

Her lip quirks and the spark I haven't seen in a few days sparkles under the lights hanging in the dim room. “Yeah. Maybe I do.”



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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I'm not sure I can be any more confused than I am tonight. Two days ago, Blaine went cold on me halfway through our date. He didn't kiss me goodnight, never promised to call or text. Which he hasn't, so I shouldn't be upset about not hearing from him.

Tonight, he's back to his old self. Or rather, the Blaine from last week. The Blaine who can't keep his eyes off me. The Blaine who is territorial of me. The Blaine who flirts instead of teases.

I like this Blaine. I like him a lot. Amelia and Evie think I should tell him how I feel, and I suppose mature adults do that. Communicate. But Blaine and I have been anything but mature adults.

Communication has always been a strong point of mine. Strong with anyone else. Strong on the rare occasion I'm out on a date and the man I'm with asks for a second. If I'm not interested—which I haven't been in a long, long time—I have no problems politely declining and thanking him for a lovely evening.

I didn't even have problems letting Jeremy Tompkins down easy after dating for six months. We were barely twenty and Grant and Blaine were living in Connecticut trying their hand in the business world.

They spent most of their time learning the stock market and investing the little money they had and watching it grow. I admired their tenacity and their intelligence, and I admired them even more when they admitted city life wasn't for them.

I had insisted on throwing them a welcome home party, which was when Jeremy met my brother and Blaine for the first time. It was only a few weeks later when our relationship turned. Looking back, Jeremy hadn't done anything wrong, but I'd slowly—or maybe quickly—become less interested in him.

On paper, he was perfect for me. Studying to be a science teacher, close with his family, a perfect gentleman. But I'd

become... bored with him. It was also then that the sparring with Blaine escalated again.

Jeremy had become jealous of the time I spent at the inn with my grandparents and how I preferred to spend my free time at home with my family than with him. One day I woke up and realized our relationship wasn't going anywhere. Because of me.

We were friends, but not overly friendly. There was no spark, no laughter, no anticipation to see him again. I met Jeremy at the park and told him point blank, "You're an amazing man who will be a wonderful husband and father someday, but I don't think we're right for each other anymore."

He was too polite to argue. We didn't do that. Bicker, tease, flirt, joke around. We were comfortable in a boring way. We gave each other a friendly hug and went our separate ways. He's teaching in Chestnut Hill now. I run into him on occasion, and it's not even awkward when we see each other out and about.

"Don't freeze on me now, Mars Bar." Blaine hands me a pool stick, and I blink away the memories.

"I'm not."

"You zoned out for a few minutes. Either you're nervous or you're bored."

I take the stick from him and raise my brow. "Are those my only choices?"

"Humor me." He leans against the wall and props one foot behind him.

The pool area is noisy with Christmas music and laughter from the other table. Grant and Evie are loud with their taunts, and Ethan and Amelia are taking it well. I glance to my side and watch Ashton help Hannah line up her stick before taking a shot.

"Just taking a trip down memory lane."

“Yeah? Playing pool brings you fond memories, does it?”  
He eyes me quizzically.

I shake my head. “Nope. Thinking about Jeremy. Remember him?” I bite my lip and turn my back on Blaine as I study the balls on the table and contemplate my next shot. Contemplating my next shot with Blaine more so than where to set my pool stick, but still.

I hear him growl behind me and I suppress my grin. “Jeremy?” he whispers in my ear. “Why the heck are you thinking about that doofus?”

“You remember him?” I’m shocked. We’d broken up a few weeks after he returned home.

“No. I don’t remember *him*. I remember learning about you dating someone and not liking it.” His strong hands gently grab my shoulders and guide me to the other side of the table. “Hit the left side of the purple ball. It should bank off the side and drop into the pocket.”

My knees wobble and I grip the pool table. I’m supposed to be flirting with him and teasing him, but he’s turned the tables. I’m not as good at this as he is. I catch Amelia’s grin from the other side of the room, and she grabs her shoulder, giving herself a giggly hug.

Blaine’s hand still rests on my shoulder, and I’m more than tempted to lean back into his hard chest. Maybe if I was brave and confident, I would. There’s still a truck load of doubt swirling in my over-active brain telling me Blaine’s not interested in pursuing a relationship with me.

The other night he confessed to having a crush on me when we were younger. He didn’t say anything about being attracted to me now. Wait. That’s not entirely true. He told me on more than one occasion that I looked beautiful, but he could have been saying that to be nice. But the way his eyes darkened with... interest throughout the night must mean he really does think I’m at least half-way decent.

I can’t help remembering the way he shut down and ignored me for the rest of the night though. It could have been

boredom from driving around. It could have been him realizing he was sending mixed signals. It could have been—

“Are you going to take the shot?” he asks from behind me.

His earthy tones fill my air and give me an ounce of confidence. I’d prefer a cup. A gallon. A bucket. But an ounce will have to do.

“I could use some help.” I glance over my shoulder at him and curl my bottom lip between my teeth. “It looks like a tough shot.” It’s not.

His gaze drops to my mouth and quickly flicks back up to my eyes. His hand slides off my shoulder and down my arm, sending tingles to my core before he covers my hand with his over the pool stick.

“Line it up like this.” Blaine keeps a respectful distance between our bodies, but his scent envelops me, and his breath whispers across my cheek. He rests his left hand on my back and guides my right. “Tap it lightly or you’ll scratch.”

I hear him take a deep breath as if he’s sniffing my neck before he releases my hand and steps away. I instantly miss the feel of him next to me. The chatter from my friends has quieted down and I don’t risk looking at them, knowing their grins must be hurting their faces right now.

We’re on full display and I highly doubt Evie and Amelia—or Hannah, now that we’ve become tight—are being subtle with their gawking. I take the shot and surprisingly sink the purple ball.

“Woot! Nice job Mars!” Evie and Amelia cheer.

I glance up and grin back. Next to Evie, Grant watches me. He scratches his jaw then looks over at Blaine. I tense, worried my brother is going to cause a scene. I doubt Blaine has even talked to him about our date. I have no idea if he’d be happy about the possibility of his best friend and sister dating or if he’ll do everything he can to keep us apart.

I don’t have time to fill my brain with any more questions when Blaine squeezes my arm. “Nice shot, partner. Where to next?”

His simple touches shouldn't affect me the way it does. It's a friendly touch. My brother does it all the time. Even Ashton does. Heck, Ashton gives me a bear hug every morning before taking off for work, but I feel nothing but warm friendship. Blaine's strong hand, however, warms my entire body.

I scan the pool table and point the stick at the orange ball. "That one? In the corner pocket?" It doesn't look like an easy shot, but it's the only one I have.

This time, Blaine stands back and lets me do this on my own. I miss his warmth around me, but I don't ask him for help again. Of course, I miss the shot. I don't mind. It means I get to stand back with Blaine while Ashton and Hannah try to beat us.

And beat us they do. Mostly because of me. Blaine is a pro and Hannah surprises us all showing her pool shark skills.

"Good game, kids." Ashton wraps me in one of those friendly hugs, and when I feel him laugh as he kisses the top of my head, I know it's because he's on the receiving end of a Blaine stare down.

Unlike Ashton, my intention isn't to make Blaine jealous. I'm terrible at flirting, at least, at pre-planned flirting. When Ashton releases me, I give Hannah a hug.

"You're amazing. You'll have to teach me all your secrets."

"No secrets. Just lots of practice." She loops her arm through mine, and we join Amelia and Evie who are finishing their game.

Grant and Evie win and they don't hide their gloating dances. When Mariah Carey's infamous song comes on, Amelia instantly holds her pool stick like a microphone and starts singing along.

Evie joins her and thrusts a stick at Hannah and me. We get caught up in the lyrics and sing together in a little circle we've formed. When it comes to the chorus, Evie turns to face the guys, and we follow suit.

She points at Grant, then Amelia and Hannah follow suit and point in the direction of the men. It'll be more obvious if I don't, so I do the same. While Amelia and Hannah swing their arms in the air not necessarily pointing at anyone in particular, I direct my attention at Blaine while I sing *All I want for Christmas is you*.

It's a bold move and if Blaine doesn't see us moving in this direction, then I can blame it on the song and the peer pressure of my best friends. His eyes are locked on mine and his countenance is stiff and serious.

My brain does the over-thinking thing again. What if I'm pushing things too far? What if this changes our friendship? Or his friendship with Grant?

My singing dies out with the song, and when the Alvin and the Chipmunk song comes on, we circle around again and sing to each other. When the second song is over, Grant sidles over with his and Evie's coats.

"You're going to be dead on your feet tomorrow." He kisses the top of her head and helps her into her coat. "Thanks for a fun, impromptu night."

"Merry Christmas. Thanks for including me today." Ethan shakes Grant's hand and they do that guy chest-bump thing. He gives Evie, Amelia, Hannah, and I quick hugs and the handshake bump thing with Ashton and Blaine.

"I had fun shopping and kicking your butts tonight," Hannah says when she hugs me.

"It's the quiet ones we have to worry about. I suppose you're not going to reveal what other secret talents you have up your sleeve?"

She mimics zipping her lips and throwing away the key. Amelia says her goodbyes as well, until it's just Ashton, Blaine, and me.

"Snow's starting to come down a little heavier now. Want to hop a ride with me and we can get your car in the morning?" Ashton asks.



Blaine narrows his eyes at him and lets out a sigh. “It’s probably a good idea.”

The inn is less than fifteen minutes away, and I don’t point out that they didn’t express their concern for Amelia or Hannah. Well, they did offer a *Drive safely and text us when you get home*. Still. No overprotective bears.

The snow isn’t falling too hard. Not even two inches has covered the ground in the hour we’ve been here. It’s a light, fluffy, flurry, and I’ve been driving in it my entire life.

“I can manage.” I want a few minutes alone with Blaine but don’t know how to send Ashton on his way. “I’m, um, going to use the ladies’ room before I leave. I’ll see you in the morning, Ash.”

I give him a hug and head to the restroom. I take my time and listen at the door, hoping Ashton has left. The music shuts off, and no other noises can be heard. I swallow my nerves and head back out to the restaurant.

Blaine is sitting on a barstool facing out, his back leaning against the bar and his elbow resting behind him. He looks so cool. So calm. So... handsome.

I’m not immune to the lovestruck sighs and the female attention that he’s never short of. Not immune or ignorant, especially since I’m part of that female population. Doubt swirls its angry way around my head. I’m not the most beautiful woman he’s met. I don’t have a fancy college degree or a career that’s going to ever have me living in complete financial freedom.

He could have any woman he wants, and yet... and yet the intensity of those beautiful eyes has me gliding across the pub and stopping inches from his legs. I run through a million different ways to ease into my confession, and none of them sound right.

*Be honest*, Evie’s advice echoes through my head, fighting for space between my ears with the loud words of doubt taking up too much rent in my head.

“I had fun tonight.” That’s honest.

“Me too.” He pierces me with his stare.

He’s not smiling. Not frowning. If anything, I’d say he’s guarded. Because of me. Because I unintentionally insulted him.

“You’re a good pool partner.” I grimace at how lame I sound. Still being honest though. “The best,” I add.

Blaine tilts his head to the side as if trying to read between my words. I can’t blame him for being confused by my odd behavior. Fifteen minutes ago, I was pointing at him while belting out the lines to Mariah Carey’s song.

I’m terrible at poker, but I know a few lines. Time to go all in. Cards on the table. Wager with all I’ve got. I close my eyes and shake the stupid lines out of my head.

“I enjoy spending time with you,” I say, opening my eyes and swallowing my nerves.

He doesn’t break out into a grin or a frown. He blinks a few times, and I can see him processing my words. *I enjoy spending time with you* can be interpreted in too many ways, just like being comfortable with him.

“I’m not comfortable right now,” I blurt out, remembering what Evie said about possibly insulting him with that word. I cringe again and shake my head. “I mean, I’m comfortable around you. I actually like spending time with you. Wait. Forget the *actually*, that sounds insulting.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Will you say something?”

Blaine lifts his elbow off the bar and rubs his chin. “I’m not sure how to respond, Marley.”

“Is it because you don’t like me?” Gah! When did I become a nervous blurter of my thoughts?

“I like you very much.” He stands, and I have to tilt my head up to look at him, we’re so close.

“Oh,” the vowel comes out in heavy sigh. “I like you very much too.”

He quirks his head to the side, and I think I see the sign of a subtle grin.

“I like fighting with you.” He leans away from me. It’s slight, but I pick up on it, nonetheless. “I mean, it’s kind of fun. That sounds morbid.”

I interlace my fingers and nervously crack my knuckles. He doesn’t save me from my mud slide of verbal nonsense.

“You’re the only guy I can argue with and feel comfortable that you’re not going to hate me later. You’re the only guy I can tease and make fun of and know you won’t take it the wrong way. I have fun joking around with you, but I especially love our normal conversations. I... like you too, Blaine. You’re comfortable in a way I’ve never felt before. Like hot chocolate on a cold winter day.”

He brushes my hair behind my ear and leaves his hand there, cupping my jaw. “Marley, I—”

“You coming soon, Mars? The snow is picking up.” Ashton sticks his head through the front door.

I jump back and instantly miss the warmth of Blaine’s hand on my face. He’s scowling at Ashton, who looks like he just won the lottery. I have no doubt he saw us from the window and timed his entrance perfectly.

Or terribly.

“I should go,” I say reluctantly.

“Text me when you make it home safely.”

“What about me? Want me to send you a text too?” Ashton asks.

Blaine huffs out an aggravated sigh. “Keys?” he asks me.

“You’re not driving me home. You live upstairs. It would be silly for you to—”

“For Ash so he can warm up your car.”

And it will buy us a few more minutes alone. I dig them out of my coat pocket and hand them to Blaine who tosses them to Ashton.

“She’ll be out in a minute.”

When we're alone again, the moment is gone. My tongue is more tied than it was before. I take a deep breath and step into him, wrapping my arms around his waist in a hug. "Thank you for letting us crash your pub tonight and for teaching me how to play pool," I add idiotically.

His arms wrap around me, and he pulls me into his chest. "You've never hugged me before." He rests his cheek on my head, and I close my eyes, getting lost in his hard muscles and the beating of his heart.

I think back to all the goodbyes we've said and haven't said. He's right. We've never hugged. It's second nature to hug my family and my friends. I even hugged Ashton when I first met him, not that he gave me a choice. He's a boisterous, huggy guy.

Even Ethan, who is as quiet as Hannah, hugged me goodbye after the Christmas party and again tonight. Yet Blaine, who I've known since I was in diapers, has never hugged me and I have never hugged him. It's not because I never wanted to. It's because I was afraid. Afraid he'd feel my feelings for him in those hugs.

I can't help but wonder why he's never initiated a hug with me.

"You've never hugged me either."

"No. I haven't." He kisses the top of my head and pulls away. "Are you free tomorrow afternoon?"

The sudden change in direction of our conversation has me confused. "Most of my guests are checking out. I have four rooms to clean. My other guests are staying through the holidays. They have family in the area."

"When will you be done?"

"Hopefully by four. Possibly five if they linger and want to strike up a conversation."

Blaine buttons my coat for me and holds on to the collar by my face. "I'll be by at four."

He kisses my forehead and walks me to my car. I watch him in my rearview mirror. The light from the lamppost and the snow coming down around him make him look angelic.

Twenty minutes later, after locking up the inn and saying goodnight to Ashton, I retreat to my private quarters and send Blaine a text.

**Me:** *Made it home safely.*

**Blaine:** *Good. Sleep well. I'll see you at four.*

**Me:** *How should I dress?*

**Blaine:** *Warm and... comfortable.*

I snuggle under my covers and fall asleep with a warm, cozy smile on my face.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Warm and comfortable. Does that mean joggers and a sweatshirt? Jeans and a flannel? I start a group chat to ask the girls, but I'm not ready to get inundated with questions about our date and what may or may not have conspired in the pub after they left.

As if reading my mind, my cell vibrates, and Evie's name pops up on the screen. It's three o'clock so she must have just closed The Friendly Donut.

"Hey. All done with work for the day?" I plop myself down on my bed amidst a pile of sheets and towels that still need to be folded. I zipped through my chores and the thorough cleanings of the rooms, not stopping for idle chatter.

Since my guests were eager to get to where they were going for the holidays, they weren't up for chit-chat anyway.

"I am. Grant is still finishing up with a few orders. I'm going to help him in a sec but wanted to check in with you first."

"Check in? Why?" I play dumb.

"Hm. So you're not expecting Blaine to show up at your doorstep in fifty-seven minutes?"

Fifty-seven? I still need to take a shower and figure out what to wear. "How did you hear about that?"

"He came in this morning."

"He did? Did he say anything to Grant?"

"Well. Sort of. He mentioned going somewhere with you this afternoon and asked if we wanted to tag along."

"Oh." My heart sinks into my chest. Not that I don't love hanging out with Evie and Grant, and double dates sound super fun, I was just hoping to have some alone time with Blaine so we can finally communicate whatever it is that's going on between us.

"No worries. I stepped in and told Grant we had a million things to do and that I was too tired from being out last night."

“Sorry. I guess you read into that *Oh* pretty well. I love spending time with you—”

“But you want Blaine the Hot Stud Muffin to yourself. I figured as much, which is why I over-exaggerated my yawn. I mean, I am exhausted, so it’s not like I was lying to my husband.”

I lift my sweatshirt and hide my grin behind the collar, not that anyone is in my room to see.

“We haven’t had a chance to talk since our blunder of a date last week.”

“Does this mean you’re going to tell him how you feel?”

I pick at a loose thread in the quilt my grandmother made decades ago. “I started to last night.”

“You what?” Evie yells too excitedly in my ear. “I mean, go, girl,” she says in a hushed whisper.

I can hear the faint music in the background and Grant calling for her. “I’ll let you go before Grant gives you the third degree.”

“You mean before I give you the third degree on what happened last night.”

“In short, nothing exactly happened. Except... I hugged him goodbye.”

“Hm. Not as romantic as a kiss, but it’s something.”

“No. You don’t understand. I’ve never hugged Blaine a day in my life.”

“For real? But you come from a huggy family. I’ve seen you hug Ashton and Ethan, and even strangers when they check out of the inn.”

“Exactly. I’ve avoided that kind of contact with him since forever.”

“Oh. Wow. I get it now. Hugging Blaine means something, and you’ve been afraid to let that something be known.”



“Right. I’m hoping that’s his excuse for never hugging me. Seriously, he hugged you the first time he met you.”

“Only to make Grant jealous.” Evie giggles. “Listen, I gotta go but I wanted to give you a quick good luck. Call me tomorrow with all the details.”

“Wait. Before you hang up, what should I wear?”

“Where are you going?”

“I have no idea. He said to wear something comfortable and warm.”

“Hm. Maybe you’re doing something outside. How about those flannel-lined jeans and a thick sweatshirt? That lavender one you have that I like to borrow.”

“Those jeans aren’t very flattering. They’re made more for...”

Evie snorts. “Comfort and warmth. Okay. Something in between that will make you feel like the goddess you are while still toasty cozy. How about your fleece-lined black leggings, your white sweatshirt, and a flannel over it? And your knee-high black boots? You’ll look cute and winter chic.”

“No one would ever accuse me of being chic. You, on the other hand, have all the style.”

“Exactly why you should trust me on this one. I gotta go. Call me first thing tomorrow. Love you!”

I end the call and see fifteen minutes have passed, which only gives me forty-two minutes to get ready. I’m not one to leave laundry unfolded, but tonight is important to me. Turning my back on the mound, I hop in the shower and make quick work of washing and conditioning my hair.

I let my hair air dry while I take care of my skin and apply a thin layer of makeup. I don’t go all out, not that I know how. I rarely wear much makeup. Some mascara, and a little blush in the winter when I’m feeling extra pasty. By February, my skin is so translucent I sometimes even add a little bronzer to make me not look so ghostlike.

Tonight, I skip the blush since being around Blaine has my cheeks reddening every five minutes. I dust a little bronzer on my cheekbones and apply two coats of mascara. Following Evie's fashion advice, I get dressed in the outfit she suggested.

Blaine will be here in ten minutes, which is all the time I need to dry my hair. As soon as I'm done, I rub hair oil between my palms and run my hands through my hair hoping it will help with static electricity.

I spritz my favorite orange vanilla body spray in the air and hold my breath as I walk through it. For good measure, I spray one more time. I add my keys and phone to my purse, and after I take one deep breath, choking on the fragrance still lingering in the air, head out to the kitchen.

Blaine is standing at the back door. It's two minutes past the hour, and he's proven himself quite punctual. I unlock and open the door for him.

"I didn't know you were here already. Have you been standing there for long?"

"Just a couple minutes. I was early."

I step back, giving him room to come inside. "Sorry to keep you waiting in the cold."

He tucks his hands in the front pockets of his coat and gives me a lopsided grin. "Totally worth it."

Such a charmer, this man, and I'm the fortunate one to be on the receiving end. I toy with the hem of my flannel shirt. "Is this okay? Too casual for where we're going?"

"You're perfect," he says, not taking his eyes off my face.

Oh, boy. I'm going to be plenty warm all night if he keeps caressing me with his soft gaze. He takes my coat off the hook behind him and holds it out for me to slip in.

"You'll need a hat and gloves. We'll be walking around outside for a little bit, if that's okay."

There's nothing I love more than being outside. Spring, summer, fall, and winter. The four seasons in Maine make me

feel alive, and being outdoors rejuvenates my soul, as corny as it sounds.

“It sounds perfect.”

He holds the door open for me and I brush past him. As usual, his clean, spicy, earthy scent surrounds him, and I just want to fall in his arms and soak it all in. Soak *him* all in. Feeling his arms around me last night in an innocent hug had my heart spiraling out of control and solidified my feelings for him.

Tonight, I’m going to tell Blaine how I feel. Lay my heart on the line and pray he feels at least a little of what I feel for him.

Once we’re in his truck and on our way, I break the silence. “Are you going to tell me where we’re going or are you keeping it a mystery?”

“Mysteries can be fun.” He glances over at me and returns his focus to the road.

“As long as you’re not dropping me in the middle of the woods and making me find my way out on my own.”

Blaine chuckles and then covers his mouth. “Sorry. That was mean of us.”

“Let me guess, it was your idea.” I prop one leg under me and turn to him. “Grant wouldn’t have let me tag along on your hiking adventure and ditch me later without you putting the idea in his head.” I laugh softly so he knows I’m not still upset twenty years later.

“In my defense, I was twelve. Twelve-year-old boys aren’t the brightest or the kindest.”

“Grant was always nice to me. Except when you were around. And even then, it was always you pulling the pranks.”

“And I explained this to you on our last date. Playground rules. That was my idiotic pre-teen way of saying I liked you.”

“Hm. Well, there are other ways of letting a girl know you like them.”

He reaches over and threads his fingers through mine. It's the first time he's ever done this, and my heart is beating in overdrive.

“So I've learned.”

My coat has become suffocating, and I should take it off but that would mean I'd have to take my hand away from Blaine's. There's no way that's going to happen. He draws tiny circles on the back of my hand with his thumb, and I'm embarrassed at how my pulse beats like it's the recipient of four energy drinks and a vat of coffee.

We're quiet through two Christmas songs before he breaks the silence. “I didn't ask if you were able to finish your work in time.”

“Most of it.”

“Since I dragged you away, I'll help you when we get back, if it's not too late and won't disturb your guests.”

Never in a million years would I have guessed Blaine has such a sweet and caring side. My parents and brother must have seen it or they wouldn't love him so much. I tried for so long to focus on his faults as a way to put a barrier between us, and now I'm blinded by his kindness.

“You don't need to do that.”

“I know I don't need to. I *want* to.”

If I hadn't already fallen for him, my knees would be on the floorboard of his truck. “It's just a few loads of laundry.” I try to sound nonchalant.

“Did you know one of my many talents is folding a fitted sheet?”

“I don't believe you,” I say, thankful for the lighthearted change of direction. It's too early in our date to be serious.

“True story. My mother had to fold a ton of laundry when she worked in the nursing home before she got her RN license and moved over to the hospital. She made sure I knew how to do it as well.”

“I’m impressed. What other secret talents do you have, Blaine Foster?”

“I shared one of mine, now you have to share one of yours.”

I lift a shoulder. “I don’t have any. My life’s an open book. You’ve known me my whole life.”

“Yes, and no. I’ve known you as my best friend’s sister, and you’re a far cry from an open book. Half the time, I have no idea what’s going on inside your head.”

“Really?” I laugh. “Because you usually get mad at me for speaking my mind.”

Blaine squeezes my hand. “When I do something to tick you off, yeah, you speak your mind. It’s when you’re not upset with me that you clam up.”

“Right back at ya.”

“That’s fair.” He’s quiet for a moment and then gets us back on track. “Secret talent. Go. If you take longer than a minute to come up with one, you have to tell me two.”

“That’s not fair. You can’t make up rules on the fly.”

“Just did. Fifty-five seconds.”

He flicks his blinker and smoothly turns the steering wheel one-handed, keeping our fingers locked, and I wonder how often he does this. Holds a woman’s hand while driving.

“Forty-two. Tick-tock.”

Thankful for the playful banter that keeps my brain from going in that dark direction, I sputter, “I’m super organized.”

“Eh.” He makes a buzzing noise. “That’s no secret. Your brother and sister-in-law are freakishly organized as well. You can do better, Marley.”

“That’s not fair. I don’t have any talents.”

Again, he makes an obnoxious buzzing noise. “Not true. Twenty-five.”

I tap my foot nervously on the floorboard. “I like to draw and paint. But I’m not good at it.” Mostly doodles of flowers and scenes from nature.

“I saw what you sketched for our parade entry. I’d say you’re pretty darn talented. Will you show me sometime?”

“My artwork?”

“Yeah.”

“Um. I’m not good at it, so it doesn’t even count as a talent. More a secret... hobby.”

“Why so secretive about it?”

“Did you miss the part about me not being good at it?”

“You’ve always been your worst critic, not seeing how amazing and special you are.”

He slows the truck and turns into a busy parking lot. I’ve been so focused on Blaine that I hadn’t paid attention to where we were going. When I see the sign at the entrance I gasp.

“The Botanical Gardens? I’ve heard about their light display for years.”

“You’ve never been?” Blaine parks his truck and turns off the engine.

The interior lights come on and I stare at our joined hands. My insides are vibrating, partially from being at the gardens, mostly from being with Blaine. “No. Never. Oh my gosh. I’m so excited.”

He breaks out into a huge grin like I’ve made his day with the confession. “With how much you love looking at lights, I thought you may have been, but I’ve never heard you or Grant talk about it before.”

“I’ve mentioned it to him in the past, but he always blew me off by saying how boring walking through a garden decorated in lights would be.”

“Interesting since he bought tickets for next week. I’m sure it was Evie’s doing.”

“They didn’t want to come tonight?” I regret my words as soon as I say them. I’m thankful they’re not here and Blaine and I are alone.

“Honestly? I called his bluff. I invited them hoping he’d say no.”

“What if he said yes?”

Blaine scratches the back of his neck with his free hand and rolls his shoulders. “I, uh, would have pretended to go online and then tell him they only had two tickets left. You have to get the tickets weeks in advance.” He slips his hand from mine and he exits the truck.

I watch him round the hood and come over to my side while my brain processes what he just admitted. When he opens my door and holds out his hand, I look him in the eye, needing to know.

“Did you plan on asking me weeks ago or were you going with someone else?”

Blaine snorts and shakes his head. “Someone else? Seriously, Mars.”

“You planned this date... weeks ago?”

“Something like that.”

Weeks ago, he didn’t know how much I loved looking at Christmas lights. I study his face, so sweet, so tender, and a bit reserved. He’s exposing his feelings for me, and I haven’t reciprocated.

“But you asked Evie and Grant to come tonight.”

“I was banking on Evie covering for me.”

“That’s a second secret talent you’ve shared.” Too nervous to say this when we’re looking eye-to-eye, I take his hand and hop out of the truck. “First the sheets, and now how incredibly sweet and thoughtful you are. Any more of these secrets and I’m going to need a cardiologist.”

“What? Are you okay?” he asks as we make our way toward the entrance.

“The way you make my heart race can’t be healthy.”

Blaine stops walking and turns to me. He fiddles with my hat, pulling it a fraction of an inch lower, then raises it, as if trying to find something to do with his hands. He opens his mouth, closes it, licks his bottom lip like he’s going to say something, then closes it again.

Finally, he takes a deep breath. “Does that count as another talent of mine?”

I tilt my head to the side and grin at him. “My secret. Your talent. Even?”

“For now.”

••••

HOLDING MARLEY’S HAND in mine just feels... comfortable. For as much as that word caused me angst last week, it’s growing on me. I’ve held a woman’s hand plenty of times. I’ve been on dates with dozens and dozens of women, and I don’t think I ever felt *comfortable*.

Not in the way I do with Marley. Comfortable, yet nervous and anxious. In a good way.

We stroll along the path, and I’m actually enjoying myself, taking selfies with her in front of some of her favorite light displays. Would I ever come here on my own? No. With friends? No. If my family unit hadn’t been broken up so long ago and my parents dragged me, would I have enjoyed it? Definitely not.

I’m all about Christmas and traditions but paying money to look at lights sounded like a ridiculous idea until I thought about doing it with Marley. Even before she suggested we drive around some of her favorite neighborhoods to look at lights, I thought about bringing her here.

So much so that I went online a few weeks ago and bought two tickets. My backup plan, if Marley turned me down or showed no interest in going out with me, was to gift them to her parents. Or even Grant and Evie as a fun torture device for my best friend.



But I don't think he'll mind walking in the cold to look at lights because of his love for his wife.

It's why I have zero regrets tonight. Marley brings so much joy and meaning into my life. It's the simple things. The pride she has in running her business, the way she cares for her friends and family, always putting them first. Even her humility and shyness about her drawing and painting. She's the most selfless, beautiful woman in the world, and I can't imagine spending another day without her in my life.

In *my* life, not as her brother's best friend.

"Oh, wow, Blaine. This one is my favorite! The combination of lights around the trees and plants, it's gorgeous, isn't it?"

I'm not looking at the display, my entire focus is on the beautiful woman standing next to me. When she tilts her head up and sees me staring, her smile drops.

"Blaine? What's wrong?"

I shake my head and reach for both her hands so she's facing me. I stare at her, too long by the way she uncomfortably shifts her feet from side to side.

"Blaine?" my name comes out as a whisper.

"I don't want you thinking of me as your brother's best friend anymore."

Her brows furrow. "Are you and Grant not getting along?"

I wish we weren't wearing thick gloves so I can feel the softness of her skin under my hands.

"I want you thinking of me as... me." *As yours.*

"I... okay. I don't understand."

*Because I don't know what I'm doing.* I've never had feelings like this for a woman before. I've never let myself get emotionally attached, not because I was opposed to it, but because no woman ever stole my heart before. These are words and thoughts I need to say to Marley and not just in my head.

“I care about you, Marley. And not because you’re my best friend’s sister. I care about you as a person.” I close my eyes, realizing how ridiculous I sound. I take a deep breath and open my eyes again. “You’re feisty and fierce. Independent and loyal to your friends and family. You’re kind and generous. Smart and beautiful. And a thief.”

A confused sound escapes her throat. That sounded better in my head.

“A thief.”

“You can make fun of me later for sounding so cheesy. For now, roll with it.”

“Okay.” She laughs. There’s a shimmer of tears in her eyes, which I choose to interpret as a good thing.

“You stole my attention when we were kids. You stole any chance I had with other girls because I compared everyone to you. And get that cardiologist on speed dial because you stole my heart. And the kicker is, I gave it to you freely.”

Tears spill over and stream down her cheeks. I release one of her hands and wipe the drops away with my glove. Needing to feel her, I bring my fingers to my mouth and tug off the glove, dropping it to the ground.

I caress her face and cup her chin in the palm of my hand. “Please tell me these aren’t the same tears that you shed after I put a frog in your bed.”

She giggles and sniffs. “These are most definitely not the same tears. And the turmoil happening in my chest isn’t the same. Like your UConn sweatshirt I stole a decade ago, I’m not giving your heart back either. Would you like mine instead?”

I stroke my finger along her jawline. “Your sweatshirt or your heart?”

She hits my chest with her free hand. It’s more like a love tap, and she leaves it there, over my beating heart. My heart that beats for her.

“You’re never getting that sweatshirt back.”

“You can keep my heart as well. Wait. Does that make me heartless?”

“Not if you accept mine.”

I nod and lower my face close to hers. “I accept.”

My gaze drops to her mouth. I bring our joined hands to the narrow space between us and tug her closer.

“Is it too soon to tell you I’m in love with you?”

Marley literally goes weak, and I hold her upright before she falls. If this is what’s meant by sweeping someone off their feet, I’m gonna brag about this for the rest of my life.

“Will you freak out if I tell you I love you?”

“Freak out?” This woman loves to catch me off guard, and it’s one of the million reasons why I love her.

“For as long as I’ve known you, you’ve had an allergy to love. You’ve been making fun of Grant and Evie since they started dating.”

“Did you not hear me say I’m in love with you?”

She bats her eyelashes at me, the tears spatter on her cheeks. “No, I heard you ask if it was too soon to tell me, but you never did.”

“Is everything always going to be an argument with you?” I step closer, our fronts separated only by our coats and our joined hands.

She cocks her head to the side and grins. “Is that a problem?”

“It’s not a problem at all.” I close the distance between us and hover over her mouth. “I love you, Marley Jane Hudson.”

“I love you too, Blaine Eugene Foster.” She closes her eyes and lifts her lips to me.

I stare down at her with all the love in the world, but there’s no way I’m letting her get away with that.

“Take it back.”

Her mischievous eyes fly open. “What?”

“You just ruined a perfect moment. On purpose.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I scowl at her. “My middle name has been the bane of my existence, and you choose *now* to make fun of me for it?”

“Yes. And it’s one of the many reasons why you love me. Feisty and fierce, remember? Now, are you going to kiss me or what?”

I shake my head and laugh.

And then I kiss her.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

“So, I have some news.” My feet are curled up under me and my parents’ dog Bob has his head plopped in the soft cushions of blankets on my lap.

The dishes and leftovers from Christmas breakfast are put away, and presents have been opened. Evie is smushed close to Grant on the other end of the couch, and my parents occupy the two recliners.

The fire is roaring, and Christmas music plays softly from the stereo. It’s our typical Christmas morning, which will be followed by our typical Christmas dinner. However, the news I’m about to share is anything but typical.

“Are you booked solid through spring?” my mother asks.

“Almost. But that’s not it.”

“Hm. I wonder what it could be?” Evie puts her finger to her chin and tilts her head. I told her about my date with Blaine at the Botanical Gardens, but I evaded her questions about the status of our relationship.

“You’re renovating the barn?” Grant asks.

“The barn? No. Why would you think that?”

He shrugs. “Dunno. A while back, Blaine was asking if our grandparents ever considered fixing it up and making it a useful space. He probably meant more rooms or something.”

“I haven’t given it much thought.”

“The structure is quite sound. Your grandparents had thought about turning it into their home, but my mother liked living in the house. Never made any sense to me or Dad, but Dad would do anything she asked.”

“Well, that’s not my news.” I rub between Bob’s ears. “I, um, I’m seeing someone.”

“Like a therapist?” Grant asks.

I can’t tell if he’s serious or teasing, but Evie lightly punches him, and he laughs. Joke’s going to be on him in a

minute. I'm more nervous about breaking the news to him than to our parents.

Blaine wanted to be with me when we talked to Grant, but I told him I wanted to talk to my family myself. It's not because I don't trust Blaine. It's because I'm worried what Grant will say. If his first reaction is anger, I don't want Blaine to carry that guilt around with him.

I'm hoping to appease him before Blaine shows up, which, according to the clock above the mantel, will be in less than ten minutes. I didn't exactly plan on much processing time for him.

"We'd love to meet him, sweetheart," my mother says.

Right on cue, I hear tires on the dirt driveway. Figures Blaine is early.

"I invited him over. Is that okay?"

"You never need to ask. We'd love to meet him before he spends the day with his family."

I feel Evie's heated stare and glance her way. She wiggles her eyebrows at me. Bob hears footsteps and jumps off my lap to greet our guest. My boyfriend.

I hop to my feet and brush my hand down my leggings and sweater as if there are wrinkles to be ironed out. "Grant." I look sheepishly at him. "I—"

The ringing of the doorbell and Bob's loud bark cuts me off. So much for giving everyone a head's up. I open the door and smile up at Blaine. He begins to lower his head as if to give me a kiss, but I catch his eyes traveling over my shoulder.

We are anything but alone. I bite my lip and I can see his question in his eyes. I give my head a gentle shake.

"Merry Christmas, Marley," he says instead and kisses my temple.

"Blaine! Grant didn't tell us you were coming. We're so happy to see you." My parents greet him at the door.

While my mom takes his coat, I turn and see my brother's confusion. "Glad you're here, bro, but I thought you said you were spending the day with this girl you've been seeing."

Evie's eyes grow wide with mischief, and I hear my mother's excited gasp behind us. My parents and Blaine come further into the living room and my mom gives him another hug.

"Oh, this is the best Christmas gift ever. Congratulations." She brings his face down to hers and kisses both cheeks, then comes and gives me a hug.

"How come me showing up isn't a Christmas gift? It's not like you don't see Blaine every week." Evie elbows Grant in the ribs. "Hey."

"You have our blessing." My dad shakes Blaine's hand.

"I'm sorry I didn't ask permission first. I will before proposing though."

Evie and I choke-cough at the same time. Blaine curls his arm around my waist and pulls me into his side.

"Blessing?" Grant glances from Blaine to his hand around my waist, to Blaine, to me. "Seriously?"

He nudges Evie off his shoulder and stands in front of us scratching the back of his neck.

"You're not kidding?" he asks Blaine.

"I'm in love with your sister. I hope that's okay. If not, we'll give you time to get used to it."

"You're aware of this?" he asks me.

Evie sidles up next to Grant and slips her arm through his. "Let me tell you, I didn't fall in love with this guy for his brains." She pats his arm. "Congratulations, you two. It's about time."

"About time? You mean you knew about this and didn't tell me?"

I move closer to Blaine and cover his hand with mine. If my brother is about to go crazy on him, I want Blaine to know



where my priorities lie.

“Grant, she only suspected. I told her about my feelings for Blaine a long time ago, but nothing... happened for a while because I didn’t know how to tell him.”

“A long time ago, huh?” Blaine chuckles and kisses the top of my head. “G. You can’t tell me you’ve been that clueless. I’ve had my eyes on Marley since we were kids.”

“Don’t we know it,” my mom says.

“Mom! Wait. You knew?” I ask.

“Sweetheart, your father and I have been waiting for you both to stop being so stubborn and admit your feelings for each other for years. It’s been obvious to the world how much you care for each other.”

“The world minus Grant.” Evie giggles. “And you could say Blaine and Marley. I even picked up on it the first time I had the pleasure of being in the same room as them.”

“You never said anything,” Grant sulks.

“I did so. I asked what their relationship was, and you said they’re like squabbling siblings but deep down inside you knew they cared for each other.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know they cared for each other like *that*.”

“Geesh. You haven’t even let Blaine or I get a word in.”

“Which is unusual since the two of you are usually at each other’s throats.”

“I know,” I say with grin. “Don’t expect that to end just because we’re in love.”

“Oh.” My mom sighs and puts her hands over her heart.

“So, this is real.” Grant looks at Blaine and nods at me. “You’re in love with my sister.”

“Yeah,” he says with a goofy grin.

“Am I still your best friend?”

I hold back my laugh, but Evie doesn't. "Seriously, Grant. You sound like a jealous middle schooler."

"My best guy friend. Marley owns every other part of me."

This time I'm the one who audibly sighs.

"Please don't tell me you two are going to be one of those disgustingly sweet couples who wear matching sweaters and finishes each other's sentences."

"You mean like you and Evie?" I ask.

By the smile on her face, my words don't offend her. "Being accused of being disgustingly sweet has been a dream of mine." She tilts her head on Grant's shoulder.

"You'll treat her right?" Grant furrows his brows.

"I'll pretend not to be offended that you even have to ask."

"I've never seen you in love before."

"I've been building it and saving my heart for Marley."

I snuggle into Blaine's warmth, no longer shy to express my feelings for him. "And for the record, I'm never letting go. So if he tries to escape, you'll help me get him back, right Grant?"

"There's no place I'd rather be than here with you in my arms and surrounded by your family."

Evie sniffs and wipes her nose on Grant's sleeve. "You're going to have to step it up a notch, honey. Blaine's got all the right words."

"This is one competition where I don't mind if we all come out as winners." Blaine holds out his hand to Grant, who knocks it away and engulfs the two of us in a hug.

"There's no better man I'd want for my sister than you, B. But watch yourself. She cheats at Checkers."

"I do not." I push Grant away with a laugh.

We spend the rest of the afternoon telling stories from when Blaine and Grant used to gang up on me. Instead of annoying me, I find myself laughing until I'm crying. Later,

after dinner of prime rib and roasted potatoes, we say goodnight to my family and Blaine walks me to my car.

“Thank you for my Christmas present,” I say into his chest as he wraps me in a hug by my car. “As soon as I get home I’m going to curl in my blanket and dream of you.”

“Merry Christmas, Mars.”

“I love you.” I tip my head back and receive his kiss.

“I love you, too.”



## EPILOGUE

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“Do you really need all this stuff?” Blaine asks as we rummage through years and years of storage in the barn.

I bat away the cloud of dust swirling in the air. “Honestly, I haven’t ever gone through it. I store my holiday decorations, extra dishes, and linens in the basement. Since I didn’t move in with any personal belongings, I don’t have anything of personal sentiment in here, nor have I had the time to look through it all.”

He lifts a pile of rotting wood. “It’s mostly boards, scrap wood, and no offense to your grandparents, junk.”

“Gramps is a packrat. When they moved south, they said to get rid of whatever I didn’t want. I just haven’t had the time to do anything about it.”

“Come here.” He holds out his hand for me, and I take it, following him up the stairs. “Grant and I used to play up here when we were kids.”

“Is this where you would go when I couldn’t find you?”

He chuckles. “All the time. You were in your element helping your grandmother in the kitchen and around the inn. Grant and I wanted nothing to do with it.”

“Any other secrets I should know about?”

“Secret talents?”

“I think I’m deserved one.”

Blaine nods and ushers me around the top floor. I’ve never spent time up here. The dirt and spiders are to blame for that.

“The roof and walls have held up well for a hundred-year-old building that hasn’t been maintained.”

“Sure. I guess.”

He leads me to a bay of windows that overlooks the field behind the inn. “I used to sit up here and watch you in the

garden.” He points to where my grandmother and I would tend the garden, now covered in a light dusting of spring snow.

“That’s quite the secret.”

“I have a few more.” He takes both my hands in his and turns me to face him. “Actually, they’re more talents than secrets.”

“Do tell.”

“I’m able to predict the future.”

I glance around the open space. “Is there a crystal ball up here?”

Instead of the playful banter, his eyes soften, and he brings our joined hands to his lips. “I see a master bedroom right here and a balcony off these windows.”

Blaine turns me so my back is to his front and points across the open area.

“Three bedrooms along the side wall and a bathroom at the end.”

“You think I should turn the barn into more rooms to rent?”

He wraps his arms around me and rests his chin on my head. He doesn’t say anything for a few minutes, then leads me down the stairs. Standing in the middle of the crowded barn, he nestles me again, so my back is to his front.

“The front door will open to a living room that’s big enough to accommodate all your family, and the kids Evie and Grant are sure to start having.”

“Living room?” I no longer think he’s talking about extending the inn.

“Mm. Over here,” he guides me to the back half of the barn, “is the kitchen of your dreams and the dining room right off it. I’ll make us a table that can seat twelve. Maybe more. Depends on how many kids you want.”

“Kids?”

I spin around in his arms and tilt my chin up to him. He brushes the hair out of my face and kisses me lightly on the lips. “What do you think about making this barn our home? Our future?”

“Our home?”

“You like repeating me?”

I blink up at him, my heart lodged in my throat. “Just making sure I’m hearing you correctly... and that you’re hearing yourself.”

“I love you with all my heart—that you stole.” He pecks my lips again. “Grow old and comfortable with me, Marley. Marry me. We can make a home for our family right here, keeping you close to the inn and to your family.”

“There’s a lot to process in what you just said.”

“Does that make you nervous?”

I’m not nervous or scared about having a future with Blaine. “I’m nervous someone will pinch me, and I’ll wake up only to discover this is all a dream.”

He pinches my side and I yelp.

“I’ll break it down for you.” He gets down on one knee and holds my hand in front of him. “Will you marry me, Marley? Be my better half? Be comfortable with me forever? Argue with me, make everything a competition, and let me love you for the rest of my life?”

“I get to be the better half?” I say through tears because teasing him is my default, especially when I’m nervous, because Blaine down on one knee in front of me does make me nervous that I’m dreaming.

“Even when you’re wrong and I’m right, you’ll still be my better half.”

The barn doors burst open, and Ashton comes barreling in. “Thought I saw your truck here but couldn’t find Mars anywhere.”

Blaine, still on one knee, growls, and I cover my giggle with my free hand. “Ash. Get lost,” he barks.

“Whatcha doing down there? Gonna get your knees all dirty in this dusty barn.” The more Ashton smiles the more steam I can practically see coming out of Blaine’s ears.

“It won’t be dusty for long,” I say. “As soon as Blaine and I are married, we’re turning this into our home.”

Blaine jumps to his feet and cups my face in his hands, ignoring Ashton’s chuckle behind him. “Is that a yes?”

I cover his hands with mine and squeeze. “That’s a most definite yes. Yes, I’ll marry you. Yes, I want to be comfortable with you forever and turn this into our forever home. Yes, I’ll love you for the rest of my life.”

“Aw, my job here is done.” Ashton turns to leave.

Blaine keeps his hands on my face and tilts his head toward Ashton. “Your job to ruin a perfectly romantic moment?”

“No, numb nut. My job is pushing you together. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“All you’ve done is annoy me.”

“Only because you took your sweet time noticing what’s been in front of you all this time. Congrats, you two. Mars, if he ever gets out of line, I’m a quick call away.” He closes the door behind him and his laughter.

“Remind me again why we’re friends with him?”

“Because he’s a good guy and your personality twin.”

“He’s annoying.”

“And so were you until you settled down. We should find him a girlfriend.”

“Can we forget about him and get back to planning our future?”

“I like that idea. I like it very much.”



If you enjoyed *Wrapped in Comfort*, please consider leaving a review wherever you purchased the book.

I love hearing from my readers. Tell me what you think of Blaine and Marley's story and what you'd like to see from me in the future! You can email me at [mariannericeauthor@gmail.com](mailto:mariannericeauthor@gmail.com). I do my best to reply to every email within a reasonable amount of time.

To keep with all things romance, you can sign up for my newsletter at [www.mariannerice.com](http://www.mariannerice.com). I NEVER spam you, and only send a newsletter out when there's a sale, freebie, new release, or great deals on some of my favorite books.

If you haven't read [\*The Baker's Heart\*](#), Grant and Evie's story, you can one-click it here

Have you read *Marshmallows & Mistletoe*, the first book in my Wilton Hills Christmas series? You can read the first few chapters now, or download from my website:

<http://www.mariannerice.com/a-wilton-hills-christmas-series.html>

# Marshmallows & Mistletoe

A Wilton Hills Christmas Book 1

By Marianne Rice



## CHAPTER ONE

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Ian Ramos had been white knuckling his Ford pick-up's steering wheel for the past twenty minutes, praying he'd get him and his son home safely. The wicked windstorm, on top of the nearly negative temps and an approaching nor'easter, didn't make for a warm and cozy night in the middle of nowhere Maine.

Not that he'd had anything that could resemble a warm, cozy night in a long, long time.

"Hang on bud, okay?" He tossed a quick glance in the rearview mirror and shot his son what he hoped to be a comforting smile.

Thankfully at six, Gabriel was oblivious to the danger of the storm raging outside. Strapped in his car seat in the back, the only thing he cared about was seeing Santa. Poor kid wasn't going to get his wish today.

For that matter, he didn't think any of them would.

It had been three years since Katherine died, and Ian didn't know if Gabriel had his own memories of his mom or if he lived vicariously through the stories Ian kept re-telling in an attempt to keep her alive, and the pictures he had on his dresser in his room.

"Do you think Santa has candy canes?"

"Possibly."

Right now, he didn't have the time to think about Santa. The trees were horizontal, bending in the wind, and he'd been dodging fallen branches and debris for the past six miles.

It was Ian's first winter in Wilton Hills, which was nestled nicely in York County, in between fancy coastal towns and inland sprawling farms, so he hadn't been prepared for the thirty minute drive to find the nearest mall Santa. Who knew Maine only had two malls? The town wasn't big population wise, but the geography was spread out for miles among winding back roads and trees and fields for as far as the eye could see.

Which wasn't very far tonight, with it being nearly pitch black outside, and not even six o'clock. The wind battered the truck like it was a Tonka toy, and to tell the truth, Ian wasn't sure where the heck he was.

A fallen tree had forced him to detour down one back road, which led to another back road, which led him to... he hadn't a clue.

"Will Rudolph be there, too?"

"Not sure, bud." Ian turned his head slightly to the right to look back at the person who meant the world to him.

"What's that?" Gabe pointed out the front window as a bright light sparked in front of them.

"Hold tight!" Ian slammed on the brakes and yanked the wheel to his right just as a huge hemlock took down a telephone pole.

Sparks, lines, trees, and chaos filled the road as he skidded into a mailbox and down into a ditch with a thud. His seatbelt burned into his chest as the airbag went off, exploding a fine, thin powder in his face.

Batting down the bag and gasping for air, he choked out his words as he turned in his seat.

"Gabriel! Are you okay? Gabe, talk to me, bud."

"Daddy," he cried, and Ian's heart dropped.

"I'm coming. It's okay." Frantic, he clawed at his side, searching for the release. When the seatbelt came undone he leaped over the seat, not caring about the searing pain in his side, and ran his hands over his son's tiny body. "Are you hurt?"

"Daddy!" he cried again.

Not sure if the tears were from an injury or fear, he was reluctant to unbuckle him.

"It's okay, bud." He stroked his son's face, wiping away his tears and scanning his body for any visible injuries. If he was hurt, if he lost his son, Ian didn't know if he could go on.

His son had experienced more losses than birthdays.

“That was scary.” Gabe sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

“It was, wasn’t it? Does anything hurt?”

“No.” He shook his head.

Relief filled his body, but there was still the chance of internal bleeding. Hoping it was the right thing to do, he unbuckled Gabe and scooped him in his arms. “I love you, bud. It will be okay.”

Since his wife’s passing, Ian had yet to do anything but work and be with his son. He’d ignored his friends and visited his family in Puerto Rico when he could. And then he took another blow, when the worst hurricane ever to hit his hometown wiped out not only his neighborhood, but his family as well.

Completely alone in the world, with only his son to care for, Ian had hoped the move to Maine would help him kick-start his life and give his son a fresh start.

So far it hadn’t worked. And now, with his small son cocooned in his arms, it brought back too many painful memories.

The phone call from the hospital. Seeing Katherine in the hospital bed, unconscious and hooked up to machines meant to keep her alive. The nurse wearing the scrubs with holiday snowmen and elves plastered all over her top.

The beeping of the heart monitor.

And the change when Katherine flat-lined. Ian being pushed out of the way so the attending nurses and doctors could try to resuscitate his wife.

The doctor’s apologetic eyes, when he turned to Ian with the news.

Her ice skates in the corner of the hospital room, ripped from her feet when they tried to warm her body after falling through the ice.

His son, asleep on his shoulder, oblivious he'd never see his mother again.

And then, a year later, the hurricane. His son would never have grandparents to dote on him, uncles to spoil him, or cousins to play with.

Ian held his son in his arms as the wind raged on outside, rocking the truck from side to side. He'd never been a praying man, but tonight he reached out to God and asked for an angel to protect them.





## CHAPTER TWO

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Noel Johnson stood on her tiptoes on the top rung of the step stool and straightened the star on the living room Christmas tree. It was one of those things she'd been trained to do since she was a toddler waddling in her diapers.

All the Johnson kids were brought up with holiday cheer. Not just for Christmas either. Hunter, being born during hunting season wore camouflage for the first five years of his life, until he went to kindergarten and realized there were other prints and colors out there.

Ironically April was born in March, arriving ten days before her due date. Since their parents had already ordered monogrammed blankets and bedding, they kept her name. It wasn't surprising that her older sister was girly and as optimistic as the spring season.

Learning from their second child, her parents waited until baby number three arrived on March seventeenth and named him Patrick.

Noel was born December twenty-third and Liberty on the third of July.

Somehow, they each grew into, and never out of, their names or their love of every holiday.

Climbing down the stepstool, Noel stood back and checked out the tree. "Much better." She'd helped her parents cut down tree at the local Christmas tree farm and string the lights. The rest of the ornaments would go up when all her siblings arrived in two days.

There were four other trees already decorated, not counting the artificial one she had in her bedroom. The one in the front room, a tall, skinny tree in the foyer, one on the front porch, and a smaller tree tucked in the corner of the kitchen.

Her parents' farm-style house had lots of rooms, as many old homes did, and a huge family-style kitchen. There were so many memories made there. Her mother at the stove, teaching them all to cook, each with seasonal aprons tied around their

waists. Then there was making wreaths and wrapping presents for the toy drive.

Of course, with every holiday came baking. It was a month of cookies and candies, Christmas music on the radio, and heart-warming movies on television every night.

Noel felt like she was the luckiest of the Johnson siblings, her birthday coinciding with the best holiday.

Every year the five of them would come back home on her birthday and stay until the day after Christmas. Even with their busy careers and Hunter and April's spouses and children, they still made it a priority to spend the holiday together.

Since Noel lived the closest and the school where she taught was on break already, she'd come home a few days early. It was a good thing, too. Her first graders had been bouncing off the walls for the past two weeks.

Being an elementary school teacher was a rewarding job, but Noel looked forward to every school break just as much as her students. Just as much as sharing her childhood bedroom with her sisters during the holidays.

Although it was peaceful having the big house to herself for a few hours as her parents went out to finish their holiday shopping. Once the entire family was home, it would be wonderful chaos for forty-eight straight hours.

She plugged in all the trees, the lighted garland wrapped around the railings, and the outside lights. At night, the Johnson homestead looked like a Christmas card.

Even the front porch was decorated with a lighted tree, lights wrapped around the posts and railings, and icicle lights hanging from every gable.

Everything was perfect, even with the wind rattling the windows. At least she was safe and warm inside the house. Noel put another log on the fire and headed to the kitchen to check on the last batch of Christmas cookies.

Tomorrow, she'd make a giant batch of frosting and her siblings would all sit around the long table to decorate them, arguing about whose looked the best.

Right as she closed the oven door, the power went out. “Great.” She sighed and set her oven mitts on the counter. Living at the end of the dead end road, they were usually the last house to get power back.

A few years ago, after Patrick, the baby of the family, moved out, Noel and her brothers and sister chipped in and bought her parents a generator. They felt more assured knowing their parents wouldn’t freeze to death in their home during a winter outage.

There were three fireplaces—one in the living room, another in the kitchen, and a small one upstairs in her parents’ bedroom—but they weren’t enough to heat the entire home for a long period of time.

Fishing around in the drawer by the fridge, she found her father’s favorite headlamp—a flashlight attached to a band he could wear around his head to keep his hands free—and a lighter. Her parents were diligent about keeping emergency flashlights, batteries, and candles in the pantry. This was Maine after all, and the house was old.

Finding them right there should be, Noel lit four candles and carried one to the living room. She’d watched the weather report this morning and knew a wind and snowstorm were on its way, which is why she insisted her parents head out and finish their shopping this afternoon.

Apparently, the forecasters were a few hours off with their timing. Making sure the candles weren’t near anything flammable, she pushed back the curtains from the front window and peeked outside.

The house was set back a ways from the road, but with the leaves off the trees and only a smattering of evergreens in the woods in front of the house, she could just barely make out headlights.

Oddly enough, they didn’t seem like they were facing the road. Instead, they pointed into the woods toward the house, which meant the vehicle was perpendicular to the road. Her parents could be hurt!

Noel shoved her feet in her boots and pulled the first coat she touched from the hall closet. Not caring that it was her father's long wool coat, she ran out the door, not wanting to waste time to find a hat and gloves.

The wind was fierce, and she had to push all her weight against it to trudge through the blowing snow and make her way down the driveway. She slipped twice but managed to stay upright.

As she neared the vehicle, she could tell it wasn't her parents' Subaru. The truck had taken out the mailbox, its front lights pointed up and the tail of the truck sat in the ditch.

The cold, harsh wind whipped across her face as she he squinted, trying to make out the figures inside. No one appeared to be in the front, and as she got closer, all she could see was tinted back windows.

Bunching the coat closer around her neck to ward off the wind, she glanced around, looking for passengers. The next house was more than a mile down the road. Whoever was in the truck wouldn't have walked off, not with her driveway so close.

Noel rounded the truck and gasped when she saw the downed trees and telephone pole in the road. No wonder she lost power. She climbed down into the ditch and knocked on the window with her bare knuckles, the cold biting at her skin.

The door opened and she could barely make out the shape of a person sitting in the dark. Make that two people.

"Are you okay?" She leaned into the backseat and noticed the small figure. A little boy was curled up in a man's lap.

"I think so."

"Daddy. I'm cold." The little boy shivered and buried his face in his father's chest.

The man wrapped his hands tighter around the boy, shielding him from the wind Noel was letting in.

"You two will freeze to death out here. My parent's house isn't far. Just up the driveway. Come warm up by the fire

until...”

Until when? The truck could get pulled out of the ditch? By the looks of the gigantic hemlock, the road wouldn't be clear anytime soon.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. You can't stay out here.”

The man slid across the seat, his son's arms wrapped tight around his neck. Noel waited for him to find his footing then closed the truck door—the wind making the task a challenge—and moved past him so he could follow her up the driveway.

The driveway was now littered with fallen branches making it an obstacle course to get to safety. She could hear the branches snapping from the wind while dry snowflakes whipped across her face.

So far there'd only been a dusting of snow, but according to the forecast, which had proven itself not completely accurate, a foot of snow was on its way.

“We're almost there,” she called behind her unnecessarily. With no power, the house was a mere silhouette amongst the dark sky. It looked almost haunting, instead of warm and inviting as her parents had made it for forty years.

Finally reaching the house, she opened the front door and brushed the lingering snow from her coat.

“We lost power when the line went down, but you can warm up by the fire.”

The man set his son down. “Go warm up, bud.”

The boy looked up to his father in confusion, as did Noel.

“You're not coming in?”

He stayed close to the door and nodded to his son. “I'll be right here. It's okay.”

“You're more than welcome to warm up as well.”

“I need to take a look at the truck. See if I can get it out of the ditch.”

“Even if you can, you can’t get past the downed lines. This is a dead end road. Other than some tote roads snowmobilers and ATV riders take, there’s no way out of here. I’m sorry. You’re both more than welcome to stay here until the storm passes and the lines get fixed.”

With a blizzard on its way, Noel had a feeling it could be days until that happened.

“I don’t want to intrude on you and your family.”

“I wish you were. Unfortunately, they’re trapped on the other side. This is my parents’ house.” She needed to call them. They needed to know there was no way to get to the house before they came all this way. It would be best to find somewhere to stay in town.

It also meant she was trapped in the home with a stranger. She should be feeling more alarmed than she did. It must have been the sight of his crashed truck, his little boy, or the Christmas spirit, but she wasn’t frightened.

The man kept his eyes downcast and gently nudged his son away. “Go sit by the fire, Gabe. I’ll be right here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She wouldn’t let the man stand in the foyer. Not only was it dark, but it was getting colder by the second. “Come defrost.”

Noel tugged his coat sleeve and reached down for the boy’s hand. “I just took cookies out of the oven before the power went out. They’re not frosted yet, but they taste just as good without. Especially if they’re still warm. Would you like one?”

His dark brown eyes went big as saucers.

“Oh, wait. Does he have any allergies?” she asked his father. So many of her students had allergies these days. Peanuts, wheat, dairy, eggs. She stopped having holiday parties that revolved around food and made them about crafts and making silly videos instead. Today’s kids were obsessed with technology and she used that as a distraction from food.

“No allergies. You don’t have to feed us though.”

“Nonsense. Come on.” She tugged harder and he had no choice but to follow her or fall flat on his face.

“You have a Christmas tree,” the boy said, his face brightening with joy. The flicker from the candle cast dancing shadows of light about the room. If the little boy was this ecstatic to see an unlit tree, she couldn’t wait to see his expression when they had power.

“We sure do. My mama likes super fat trees. This one has twenty-one strands of lights on it.”

It was the biggest one they’d ever had. Her father joked how silly it looked, taking up the entire living room, but they rearranged the furniture making less room to walk around and more room for the tree.

“Can you turn it on?” He reached out and touched a snow globe on the table next to it.

“Don’t touch, Gabe.”

“No. It’s okay. It’s meant to be looked at. Touched.” Noel crouched down to eye-level with Gabe and picked up the miniature snow globe. “This one is my favorite, too. Shake it and see what happens.”

With the glow from the fire at their back, she held out the ornament for Gabe and watched as he gave it a shake.

“Cool.” He smiled, and she grinned at the gap in his teeth. “It looks like it’s snowing. Like outside.”

The miniature house in the globe looked like her parents’ house. It’s why she bought it for them so long ago. She’d been proud to spend her babysitting money on a present for her parents, and even more proud when her mom opened it and had tears in her eyes.

Ever since then she bought her parents and each of her siblings a new snow globe or ornament each year. It had been one of their many traditions.

“Why don’t you put it back and take your coat off,” his father said from behind them.



The man seemed overly concerned. About what, she wasn't sure. Maybe imposing? He'd crashed his truck and was stranded on the side of the road. It wasn't like she would leave him and his son to freeze to death.

She watched as he tenderly took the snow globe from Gabe and set it back on the table. He pulled the hat off revealing beautiful thick, dark hair.

Noel had always been blonde and fair-skinned. Over the years, her towhead blonde hair had darkened a few shades, but she'd always secretly wished for dark hair like her sisters and father. Her brothers had sandy blonde hair like their mother and she stuck out like the odd duck.

"You can take your coat off, too." She held out her hand and waited patiently as she would for one of her students.

Hesitation and then defeat crossed his face as he let out a quiet sigh. With what appeared to be reluctance, he unzipped his coat and handed it to her.

"I'm Noel by the way. I take it you're Gabe?" she said to the boy.

"My name is Gabriel, but my dad calls me Gabe."

"What would you like me to call you?" He shrugged. "I guess Gabe and Gabriel it is." She ruffled his hair and patted the cushion on the chair closest to the fire.

The man stood behind Gabe's chair and rested his hand on his son's shoulder. "I'm going to go back to the truck and see if I can fix it, okay, bud?"

"Not in this wind," Noel protested. "You just took your coat off. Why don't you warm up first?" She tucked his coat under her arm as if holding it hostage.

"I don't want to impose."

*So that was it.*

"You crashed your truck and are stranded here until the power company can take care of those live wires. You're not imposing. If anything, you're doing me a favor by keeping me

company. I'd be worrying about my parents right now if you guys weren't here to distract me."

"Are your parents okay?"

"I'm sure they are. I should call them before my phone battery runs out." She patted Gabe's knee. "I'll go get those cookies as well. If it's okay with your dad."

"Please?" His toothless smile warmed her heart.

The man nodded.

"I know you're Gabe, but I don't know your name," she said to him.

The man lowered his dark lashes and avoided her gaze as if ashamed of who he was. "Ian. Ian Ramos."

The name didn't ring a bell. "Nice to meet you, Ian. Make yourself at home. I'll be right back."

She followed the dancing light from the candle on the kitchen counter and picked up her cell, dialing her mom.

"Hey, sweetie. I was just about to call you. Your father is worried about losing power tonight."

"Yeah. About that."

"It's already out?"

"And then some." She told her mom about the downed line and about Gabe and Ian. When hearing about her guests, her father got on the phone.

"A strange man in the house? Honey, are you sure he's not some thug? You're a beautiful woman home alone with no way to leave or to have help reach you."

"Dad. I'm fine. He hardly seems like a thug or serial killer."

The clearing of a voice behind her had her turning around. Ian stood in the doorway, his coat zipped up to his neck.

"Can you keep an eye on Gabe? I'm going to check the engine." He didn't wait for Noel to respond and spun around, leaving as quickly as he'd come.

“Was that him?” her father asked.

“Yes. His son is adorable. I’m keeping an eye on him while Ian goes to work on his truck.”

“In this weather? It’s pitch black outside. How’s he going to see a thing?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, he seems harmless. He’s concerned about imposing on me and offered to stay out in his vehicle.”

There was something soft and sensitive about the man—Ian. It wasn’t just because he was a father. Unfortunately, she’d had plenty of conferences with parents who didn’t have the same tenderness toward their children as Ian had.

“He’ll freeze to death.”

“I know. Which is why I let them in.”

“I’ll call the power company and see how long it’ll be until they can come out and fix the lines.”

“Thanks, Dad. Where are you and Mom going to go?”

“I suppose we can stay in a hotel.”

“But all your groceries. Why don’t you stay in my house? You know where the spare key is. That way the food won’t spoil, and you and Mom can wrap gifts and stay warm.”

“Thank you, honey. We’ll do that.”

“I want to save the battery on my phone but text me when you’re there, okay?”

“The generator is in the garage but it’s dangerous if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Noel wasn’t mechanically inclined and didn’t feel comfortable touching that beast of a machine. Only if they didn’t get power back by tomorrow.

“I’ll worry about that later. I can always charge my phone in the car.”

“Be safe and keep your phone by your side. If that man makes you uncomfortable—”

“I’ll take care of myself. He seems more concerned about his son than anything else.”

“As a father should be.”

“Exactly. I didn’t get any heebie jeebie vibes from him.”

“I’m your father so I’m going to be concerned.”

“I love you, Dad. Love you too, Mom,” she said louder, knowing her mom was listening in.

When she disconnected, she piled some cookies on a snowman shaped plate and carried it out to Gabriel.

“Do you like to drink milk with your cookies?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be right back.” She returned a minute later with two glasses of milk. “I like to dunk my cookies.”

She handed Gabe his glass and smiled to herself when he copied her dunking.

They ate and drank in silence as the fire crackled in front of them. Knowing it was going to be a long night, she was tempted to change into her flannel pajama pants and sweatshirt, but with Ian in the house, she stayed in her jeans and sweater.

“Do you like to play games?”

Gabe shrugged. “What kind?”

“We have Uno. Have you played that before?” He was a little young, but many of her first graders had mastered the game. He shook his head. “Do you want to learn?” He nodded.

“Keep an eye on my cookies. I’ll run upstairs and grab the cards.”

••••

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## **About the Author**

Marianne Rice writes contemporary romantic fiction set in small New England towns. She loves high heels, reading romance, scarfing down dark chocolate, gulping wine, and Chris Hemsworth. Oh, and her husband and three children. You can follow her all over social media, and keep up to tabs with her latest releases on her website: [www.mariannerice.com](http://www.mariannerice.com)