



KASEY STOCKTON



# CABIN CRUSH

A GIFT-WRAPPED ROMANCE

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A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

KASEY STOCKTON

GOLDEN  OWL  
PRESS

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*For Rachael—when I think of chosen family, I think of you.  
Here's to game nights, camping trips, and homemade peanut  
butter cups.*

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# PROLOGUE

# RACHAEL

## Junior Year of High School

I didn't usually attend my brother's parties, but tonight it was unavoidable—and not just because it was happening downstairs. I was still trying to gain brownie points for missing curfew twice last week, and our parents were always happy when I stuck around home. If I wanted my phone back earlier than my grounding permitted, doing whatever I must to make them happy was my objective.

Okay, fine. You want total honesty? No one twisted my arm to be here. It didn't take much convincing to attend a high school party full of people who were not my friends when I knew Josh's best friend would be in attendance.

Max.

Not that he'd pay attention to *me*. Or, he wouldn't have before I found the perfect attention-grabber. I've never known how to do anything halfway, so when I found out my brother was throwing a *costume* Christmas party to kick off winter break, I did what any self-respecting theater nerd would do: transformed myself into the Grinch.

All it took was a fuzzy, warm pajama onesie with the hood up over my blonde hair and some leftover face paint from Halloween when I dressed as an A's baseball superfan. (I wasn't an A's fan. I just did it to bug Josh and Max, and it had totally worked.)



My costume tonight was fitting for the intended audience. I loved Christmas, but I couldn't stand Josh's friends. All except Max, whom I loved with all of my itty-bitty Grinch heart and planned to one day marry and raise his children. He didn't know that yet, though. He was too busy dating half the cheer squad.

If I could get a laugh out of him tonight, I'd count it as a win. If I snuck in a quick Christmas kiss, I wouldn't complain about that either. There was a two percent chance of that happening, but a girl could dream.

I'd helped Josh tack mistletoe to every available doorway in our house earlier so he could kiss Annabelle Jones, head cheerleader and winner of the recent mock trial in which she'd decimated me. I hadn't known his kiss goal at the time or I would have made him do it by himself. When it came to my brother's potential girlfriends, Annabelle didn't have my vote. We'd grown up together but were never friends. Our relationship was more along the lines of Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway from *The Devil Wears Prada*.

She was the devil, in case you were wondering.

Now, I had to go face her and the rest of her little cheer cronies. If I played nice, maybe my parents would unground me from my phone before we headed to Tahoe for our annual Christmas vacation with the Dawson family. As it stood, I wasn't going to get it back for two weeks.

My green-clad feet hesitated halfway down the stairs. Campy Christmas music bumped in the living room, punctuated by girls giggling and macho males trying to impress them. I tried to roll my eyes, but my skin was tight from the dried green face paint. I talked a big game, but Josh's friends were pretty intimidating. Besides the fact that most of them wouldn't want me there, of course. I drew in a breath and pretended I was walking onstage for a role.

Really, I was walking into the dimly lit kitchen in my Grinch pajama onesie and swiping a taquito from the cookie sheet resting on the stove. This green face paint was edible, right?

When I spun away from the stove, I froze. From this vantage point, hanging back in the near dark, I couldn't see anyone, but I could hear one voice around the corner where the party was happening, and I knew it well.

"Whatever, dude," Max said, laughing in a way that brought a natural smile to my cakey lips. Green lipstick: two dollars. "Make it twenty."

"Ten," Josh said. "You're the one getting something out of this, anyway."

It sounded like Max was unsure. "That depends on who the lucky girl is."

If the two of them were talking like this, maybe that meant they weren't draped with desperate girls. Enter my chance for a moment with Max.

Eager, I tossed the rest of my taquito on the baking sheet and filled a cup with water, taking a careful drink to wash away the beef breath. When I faced the open archway that held my crush just around the corner, I caught my brother's gaze. He looked surprised to see me, but he shouldn't have. He knew I was joining the party tonight.

"You ready, dude?" he asked, his gaze sliding off to the side—toward Max, I guessed.

I heard an exhale before I stepped through the doorway.

The next few moments moved in slow motion. I clocked them in a way that made me think I would probably remember this in excruciating detail for the rest of my life. Every. Tiny. Detail. Both the incredible and the horrifying.

Max took my arm when I stepped through the doorway and pulled me toward him. He lifted his hands to cup my jaw while his lips lowered to mine. Our eyes connected for a brief second—maybe even half of a second, if I'm being real—and then there was an utter explosion. Fireworks, dynamite, the car that blew up in *Gone in Sixty Seconds*. I mean, it was wild. I'd never been kissed before, but I could safely say it was just as powerful as I'd hoped it would be.

His hands softened on my face, one of them sliding down my fuzzy Grinch onesie to grip my waist. I stopped being a lazy bystander and drew my hands over his arms—nicely ridged even though the fall baseball season was long over.

When we came up for air, a smile spread over my lips, lit by a town full of singing Whos.

Max opened his half-lidded eyes, catching my gaze. I watched him track the green face paint. Thank the heavens, it hadn't gotten on him. It was well and truly dry.

I was still holding out hope it was safe for consumption, though.

But then his gaze slid up to my hair, back to my eyes, and an expression of abject horror crossed over his face. His well-kissed lips parted, his eyes wide and disgusted . . . with me. He was utterly horrified, grossed out by *me*.

“Rach?” he asked, as if he was still holding onto a shred of hope that it wasn't me. Like I could just wipe away the Grinch costume and magically become someone else. His mouth was turned down, his eyes wide.

My entire body was in flames. I had never felt so consumed by humiliation in my entire life. “Guilty.”

Josh stood behind him, sniggering. “Dude. You just kissed my sister.”

Max swallowed. “I can see that.”

He did not look pleased. All those fireworks had been dumped in a five-gallon bucket of water. Might as well dunk me, too.

“You kissed Rachael?” a voice said, not far behind them. Annabelle. She stepped forward, her long blonde ponytail swinging as she walked. Her arms crossed over her chest in disbelief, her eyes trailing my costume as though they could cast judgment on their own.

Strung-up colored twinkle lights covered the room Josh had poorly decorated. They made enough light to see the crowd gathered. They had been dancing to Christmas music,

but now everyone stood still, staring at us. I looked from Annabelle to each of her friends, my stomach sinking further with each new ugly sweater.

Great. As if my humiliation couldn't get any worse, there was a total of *one* costume in the house, and it was on me.

Max cleared his throat, pointing above my head. "Just because we had to. There was mistletoe."

Annabelle stepped closer, gripping Max's arm with both hands, her mouth forming a little pout. "Oh, good. You had me worried."

My mortification was complete. Max hadn't wanted to kiss me. He was actually, legitimately disturbed by the prospect, so yay for that. And now the girl I couldn't stand was holding his arm possessively. She didn't own it. Why was she stroking him like that? Gross.

"Nice outfit," Annabelle said, smirking.

In this moment, I was grateful for it. That green face paint was fully covering my bright red cheeks.

"You know Rach," Max said, his voice tense. "Always doing something nutty for a laugh."

Yeah, we were gonna roll with that. "Would it really be a Christmas party without the Grinch?" I did jazz hands. No one laughed.

Someone cleared their throat and a Jonas Brothers song came on. I looked for Josh and found him still standing behind Max, directing a scowl at the floor. Was he feeling defensive of me or angry I was causing a scene?

"Let's go dance," Annabelle said, pulling Max away.

He glanced at me once over his shoulder before turning his attention completely on her. So that's what it felt like to be rejected by Max. Just hole me up by myself in a mountainside cave because I wasn't feeling a single ounce of warmth or holiday spirit. Except even the Grinch wasn't alone, was he? He had his trusty dog, *Max*.

I waited for most of the attention in the room to move away from this particular archway before I spun around and hightailed it out of there.

Like, literally all the way outside. We had two Adirondack chairs on our front porch and I dropped into one of them, letting the Sacramento winter cool my hot cheeks.

The front door opened and shut hard. Josh had followed me.

“You told me it was a costume party!” I accused.

“Ugly sweater party,” he bit out, dropping into the chair beside me. We were two years apart, but one grade apart at school—he was the oldest in his grade, I was the youngest in mine. This was his senior year, and while we were never super close, I felt like we had a decent relationship as far as siblings went. But right now, I wanted to take one of those ugly Christmas sweaters and throttle him with it.

“I swear you said costume.”

He shook his head, then lowered it into his hands. “I don’t know. Maybe I did. I didn’t mean actual costume; I meant ugly sweater.” He let out a soft chuckle. “I bet Max is using our mouthwash right now. That had to feel like kissing a sister.”

Exactly what I wanted to hear about the boy I loved.

Silence fell over us, but the music from Josh’s playlist still reached the porch. I watched his slumped form while realization settled over me. He’d known I was coming around the corner just before Max pounced, and he didn’t stop it. He’d asked if Max was ready, hadn’t he? Judging by their conversation, they’d made a bet of some sort, and I was the lucky girl to step into it. “You didn’t come out here to make sure I was okay.”

“Huh?” Josh sat up, confusion creasing his blond eyebrows.

I grew suddenly indignant. “What the crap, Josh? You gave Max a signal. You knew he was going to kiss me, didn’t you? And you didn’t stop it.”

Not that I would have wanted him to, right? I didn't know. My feelings were all sorts of jumbled right now.

"Maybe." He had the grace to look sheepish.

I reached over and shoved his arm. "You know, most older brothers would do more to protect their baby sister."

"Like you need it," he grumbled, slouching in his seat. He looked so defeated, frowning at the porch railing. But, also, he was still out here with me. Not inside his party with his friends. That was fishy.

"What happened? Is it Annabelle?"

Josh didn't bother denying it. "I guess she's with Max now? That's what it looked like, right?"

"She was pretty possessive. But if they were together, he wouldn't have kissed me." Max was one of the good guys. Boy Scout, All-American baseball pitcher, the one who left *Call of Duty* hanging to help Mom bring groceries in without being asked.

"I guess."

"What was the bet, anyway?" I asked.

Josh looked at me. "Just that he'd kiss the next girl to walk through the door. I didn't know it was going to be you. I was hoping for Molly Harrison."

I stood. "Well, I'm going to shower off this green paint and hide until my dignity is restored. You owe me *big time*."

"I know." Josh didn't follow me to the door.

"Maybe try to convince Mom to give my phone back before we leave for Tahoe? Then we'll be even."

*Tahoe*. My stomach swirled unpleasantly. Remember when I mentioned our annual Christmas trip with the Dawson family? Max *Dawson* was part of that. My eyes closed against the impending storm of discomfort. This was going to make things so weird between us now—I knew it.

Josh looked unconvinced. "I'll try. Don't get your hopes up."

I went back inside and hurried toward the staircase before I could catch anyone's eye. If people were in the kitchen grabbing snacks, I didn't want to get caught. My foot had hit the bottom stair when Max stepped from the kitchen.

“Rachael—”

I let out a shrill laugh that was somewhere between an awkward cackle and a cry, my toe snagging on the step and pitching me forward. I straightened quickly, ignoring my throbbing shin. “Hey, Max. Don't mind me. Just going up to change.”

His gray eyes were shuttered, but even he couldn't erase all the humiliation pouring through me. “You're coming back down, right?”

*Hard pass.* “I'm in the middle of a really good book right now, so I think I'll just—”

“Rach.”

Why did he have so much power over me? I stalled on the third step up and turned back to face him. My face was hot, my fingers gripping the banister like it was the only thing keeping me up. Maybe it was.

Max's eyes were so full of soul, so identical to our golden retriever, Buddy, that I couldn't hold his gaze. “So, that kiss,” he said, leaving the word dangling over a four-hundred-foot cliff.

What would he do now if I told him I thought it was incredible? If I told him I'd loved him for years, and it was just as amazing as my fantasies led me to hope? His eyes locked on mine, worry splashed in their oceanic depths.

Max didn't want a love confession. He wanted Annabelle. He was waiting for me to absolve him, probably. Remove any sort of weirdness so he could return to his friends guilt-free.

I drew in a breath. “Don't worry about it.” I tried to grin like I wasn't bothered in the least, my skin stretching from the dried face paint. “We don't have to let it be weird.”

He looked uncertain.

“Seriously.” I started walking up the stairs again, backwards, ignoring the pain in my shin. “Just enjoy the party. I’m gonna go take this miscommunication off.” I gestured to my costume.

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m totally sure. Get ready to be destroyed at Snow-Ball, by the way. I’ve been practicing my swing.” It was only the best outdoor snow game ever invented—which I could humbly say since I was part of the team of Harvey/Dawson kids who had come up with it.

His lips formed a tight smile. “Can’t wait.”

Funny, he sounded the opposite.

“Max?” a girl called, stealing his attention. I took the opportunity to run the rest of the way up the stairs and escape into my bathroom. Goodbye, love of my life and the possibility of enjoying myself over Christmas break.

I had a feeling things between Max and me would never be the same.



# CHAPTER **ONE**

## RACHAEL

### Eight Years Later

“**T**hat’s a wrap!” our director, Lisa, called, clapping her hands high above her head while her bracelets jangled with tiny jingle bells. The team for *A Christmas Carol* gathered in a circle on the stage, the curtain lowered between us and the audience. I moved my wide-hooped skirt out of Scrooge’s way, adjusting the off-the-shoulder sleeve. For all of my brief stage time, I had felt like a Victorian goddess. The corset underneath this gown kept my spine straight, and I was just waiting for someone to hand me a wand so I could start doling out wishes.

I knew Victorians didn’t grant wishes like Glinda the Good Witch, but don’t snow on my Christmas parade. This dress made me feel *divine*.

And I wouldn’t get to wear it again. We’d just delivered final bows after our last show, and our families were waiting in the auditorium of the community theater to give us praise and flowers.

Lisa’s bracelets jangled for attention. “Enjoy your holidays, folks. Don’t forget to add *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* auditions to your calendars for January tenth. Merry Christmas!”

“And God bless us, every one,” Jackson, the young teen who played Tiny Tim, said. He got a good chuckle for that.

“Now go see your families!”

The curtain parted again, bringing in the hot stage lights and making it difficult to see the audience. I knew my parents were out there with Josh and his girlfriend, Savannah. We all planned to leave first thing in the morning for Tahoe, a day later than we usually did. It was kind of them to sacrifice a night at the cabin so they could see my show, especially because the Dawsons were probably already there.

It was a Dawson year to decorate, and Sharon liked to go all out. We traded off picking a theme and dressing up the cabin every year. Harvey years were understated and typically based on colors; Dawson years were based on things. There was a Snoopy year with figurines, Woodstock as the tree topper, and a snow-covered red doghouse for the tree train to puff through. One year they did Rudolph, with red-nosed reindeer everywhere. Sharon even did *Christmas Vacation* once, calling it our Griswold Family Christmas, and got creative with the signs and dry turkey centerpiece. The thing smoked. I was pretty sure dry ice was involved.

It was a level of creativity that spoke to my soul.

Someone squeezed my bare shoulder. I turned to find Tristan there, his Victorian getup matching mine, since we'd played Ebenezer's nephew and his wife. "Have a great Christmas, Rachael."

"Thanks."

His gaze dropped to my wide skirt. "You need help down the stairs?"

"I figured I'd let my family come to me."

"Rachy-Rach!" Josh boomed, coming up on stage with his girlfriend. He looked nice in a navy sweater and dark jeans, his blond hair styled up and to the side.

"And here they are." I gave Tristan a smile, but he didn't leave. He only retreated a step so Josh could barge in with a hug.

"Loved the accent," Savannah said, leaning in for a hug when Josh moved. Her straight black hair hit her waist, swinging as she walked.

My parents were next.

“You nailed it, hon,” Dad said, pressing a kiss to my temple. His sweater vest had tiny Christmas trees on it. Adorable.

Mom tucked back a lock of faded blonde hair, looking amused. “Does this mean the British accent is coming with us to Tahoe?”

“Obviously.” I tended to enjoy letting my characters bleed into my normal life. By day, I was an elementary school front desk attendant, so no one ever seemed bothered by my quirky accents or silly costumes. The kids lived for it.

At night, I was fairly involved in our local theater. Since Sacramento was huge, there were quite a few theaters around, but River City Playhouse was my home away from home.

Correction. *That* would be the cabin my family co-owned with the Dawsons up in Tahoe. But this theater was a close second.

“I got you a succulent for your collection,” Mom said. “I’ll swing it by after Christmas.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“With Tahoe tomorrow, we didn’t do flowers,” Dad added.

“Max did, I think,” Josh said, looking over his shoulder toward the audience.

Excuse me? What now? I followed my brother’s gaze but didn’t see anyone tall, dark, and holding my beating heart in his hands.

Mom gave him a *hush up* look and he stopped. “You need to learn to keep a secret.”

Josh looked fake-wounded. “I can keep a secret.”

Savannah shot me a commiserating look, her dark eyebrows disappearing into her curtain bangs. I loved my brother, but he didn’t know the first thing about locking a piece of information away. The second he knew something, he shared it.

Tristan, my Victorian husband, lifted his hand in a small wave, still hovering behind my family. “Hey, Rachael, can I talk to y—”

“Here he is,” Josh said with a hint of triumph when Max stepped onto the stage.

My hands grew shaky, my heart quickly picking up speed. Max was *here*, watching my play? No one had told me he was coming. Which was just as well, because I didn’t know how it would’ve affected my performance if I’d known he was sitting in the audience. I was half-ashamed of myself for not having felt the disturbance in the force when he walked into River City Playhouse. My Max-ometer was off.

Did that mean I was finally getting over my crush?

His smile fell on me when he approached, a slash of white teeth under expressive eyes. He must have come from the office, because he was wearing slacks and a fitted button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal corded forearms. Except for the bit that fell over his forehead, there was not a dark chocolate hair out of place. My stomach exploded with a mass of wings from four calling birds and a pair of turtledoves.

Nope, I was just as in love with him as ever.

“Great job, Rach,” he said, leaning in to give me a side hug. A bouquet of classy red and white flowers pressed between us. Their fragrance lifted sweetly to my nose, but Max’s cologne still overpowered them. Man, the guy smelled good. He handed me the flowers, followed by a package of tree-shaped Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. He knew me so well.

“I should have thought about the candy,” Dad said, snapping his fingers once. “Reese’s won’t die on your kitchen counter while you’re in Tahoe for a week.”

A stricken look passed over Max’s face, his gray eyes drooping to the flowers.

I hurried to reassure him. “I’ll bring these up to the cabin. Do you think your mom will let me put them out?”

“They’ll clash with her decorations, but when have you ever bothered with following the rules?”

Again, the man knew me so well.

“Do you head up tonight, Max?” Mom asked.

“Not until tomorrow morning.”

“Rachael?” Tristan asked again. The guy really needed to read the room. I was happy to talk to him, but not while I was talking to my family.

I stepped around my brother. “What’s up?”

Tristan took off his top hat, and the gel in his red hair glistened beneath the stage lights. “Listen, with it being the last night of the show, I realized I wouldn’t get to see you for a while. I was wondering if you’d be interested in going out sometime next week?”

“On a date?” I clarified, stupidly. Of course he meant on a date. He’d been amping up his shoulder grazes this week, using every opportunity he could to touch my bare skin, thanks to this off-the-shoulder gown.

“Yeah. I was thinking dinner, maybe? I know a great Italian place.”

Oh, lasagna, my weakness. I shook the thought and ignored my overly loud grumbling stomach. “I’ll be in Tahoe for the next week.”

“Maybe when you get back?”

I could feel the eyes burning on my back—my entire family plus the man I loved all watching me get asked on a date. Ever since *the incident* at Josh’s Christmas party junior year, Max and I had developed an easygoing, pretend-it-never-happened attitude. But we didn’t really talk about our love lives after that, either. Before, no subject was off limits. Post-kiss, it became taboo.

Well, there was that one moment on the dock shortly after that kiss, but if anything, that only solidified our we-don’t-talk-about-our-love-lives relationship. It was better left forgotten.

Not that I didn’t know who he was dating or the ins and outs of his love life. My brother was his best friend and

couldn't keep things to himself, remember? I also had to suffer through Max and Annabelle's two-year relationship following that stupid mistletoe kiss. Max had already graduated and moved on to college for half of it, but he still showed up to every high school event for Annabelle during my senior year, and she'd taken perverse pleasure in rubbing him in my face.

They were long over, but he'd gone through a handful of other girlfriends in the years since. Max didn't ever stay single for long. The current girl, Gabriela, was too gorgeous to compete with, and super nice, too. It made it so much harder to hate her.

I, on the other hand, never kept boyfriends for long. I was more of a *date them a few times and move on* kind of girl. Which meant Max probably didn't hear about them as much. Maybe Tristan being here was good, proving I could get a date. He was cute, even as a Dickens character. His bright copper hair was gorgeous.

Max shifted on his feet in my peripheral vision.

"I'd love to," I said. "You have my number, right? Just text me."

He nodded, leaning in for a hug. "Have a good Christmas, Rachael."

"Thanks. You too."

When Tristan walked away, I turned to face my family, all of whom stared at me with varying degrees of amusement.

"What an adorable nerd," Josh said, smirking. "If you get married, you can have little theater babies and name them artsy things like Spotlight and Improv."

"I think he was cute," Savannah said. She always took my side, which I loved about her.

"Anyone up for frozen yogurt?" Dad asked.

It was sweet they wanted to celebrate, but I still needed to pack.

"I have to do laundry for Tahoe," Josh said.

“Same,” I admitted.

Mom sighed. “I’ve taught you two nothing. I bet Max has already packed.”

We all looked at Max, who was watching me. The weight of his attention took me by surprise, but he quickly looked away. “Actually, I still have to throw a few more things into my bag.”

His nice way of not chucking us completely under the bus. The man was prepared, end of story, but he wouldn’t make us look bad if he could help it. Sometimes I wondered if he had the opposite of a hero complex, whatever that would be called. He often deserved to be the hero, but he’d say whatever he needed to so he didn’t get that distinction.

“I just want to get out of this dress,” I muttered.

Max looked at me swiftly, forcing a blush to steal up my neck.

“So,” I said, extra loudly, sliding into my British accent. “See you all at Casa Dawson-Harvey tomorrow?”

I hugged them all goodbye, careful not to linger on Max, even though I wanted to get an extra whiff of his essence. It had been a while since I’d seen him without Gabriela on his arm, and it was easier to picture myself there while she was absent. Less guilt-inducing.

Not that I’d do anything about it. Those fantasies were strictly for my brain alone.

Besides, there was a very real chance this would be our last Christmas in Tahoe without Gabriela joining us. Until now we’d had a strict *no outsiders* rule for the cabin—Dawsons and Harveys only—but Josh was bringing Savannah this year, which changed everything. I was glad my brother loved his girlfriend enough to take this step, but I did worry about how things were going to change.

The dress took way too long to get out of. How did women do this every day? Or multiple times a day, like the period dramas showed, when they had to change for various activities. I didn’t mind stepping into the past while acting, but



I sure loved my modern conveniences, like yoga pants and DoorDash.

The parking lot was mostly empty when I made it out to my ancient Ford Focus. My car was on its last leg, but elementary school secretaries didn't make tons of money, and River City Playhouse paid even less. If things went my way, I wouldn't be a secretary much longer, but until I heard back on the new job I'd applied for, I wasn't going to get my hopes up. Either way, I was saving for a new car when this one finally kicked the bucket, but I didn't quite have enough yet, so it needed to last another few months.

It was going to take even longer now that I'd received the letter about my rent increase at the start of the new year. Since I couldn't afford the rent they wanted from me anyway, I chose to pretend it wasn't happening yet. Kind of like I pretended the mountain of debt on my shoulders from school loans was going down every month. I made the payments, but there was no noticeable change.

I pressed down on the clutch and turned the ignition, but the car didn't want to turn over.

"No." I drew out the word. "Come on, baby. You can do it. Start for me."

I tried again, coaxing the car as I went, until it finally turned over and the radio came on. *Santa Baby* blasted from the local Christmas station to the sound of my joyous hollering. My phone lit up with a text, so I read it while my car idled in the parking lot.

MAX

Great job tonight. I really enjoyed being there and watching you shine, Rach. 10/10 impressed.

My chest warmed at the praise. I couldn't remember the last time Max attended one of my plays. It must have been in his Kelsey era, so at least three years ago.

Come to think of it, I couldn't remember the last time he'd texted me, either. I scrolled up, and our last conversation was a

meme he'd sent me of Spanky from *The Little Rascals* being impatient with the text, "Is it December yet?" I'd haha'd his message but said nothing else at the time. If this was any other guy, I'd totally read into his attendance tonight or the fact that he was texting me now, but this wasn't just any guy. This was Max. Our long-standing relationship was enough to shove that thought out of my brain before it had even fully entered it.

RACHAEL

Thanks. But you're just saying that so I'll go soft on you at Snow-Ball

MAX

Foiled. I should have known better than to add "impressed"

RACHAEL

Don't beat yourself up over it. Either way, I'll show no mercy

MAX

You're heartless, Harvey

I hesitated for a second before typing again. Would it be weird if I made a Grinch reference? No. It would mean nothing. We were past that, and he was in a loving, committed relationship now.

RACHAEL

I have a \*tiny\* heart. Not the same thing

MAX

Maybe I need to make sure it grows three sizes this week. Challenge: accepted

So we were referencing the Grinch and things weren't weird. Improvement. It only took years to reach this point.

RACHAEL

Thanks for coming tonight. That was really thoughtful of you

MAX

No worries. My parents would have been here, too, but Mom wants the cabin decorated before everyone gets there tomorrow, and she couldn't do it alone

RACHAEL

Are we about to step into a winter wonderland?

MAX

Something like that

You still have that Grinch onesie?

My heart started racing.

RACHAEL

Yes

MAX

Bring it.

# CHAPTER **TWO**

## MAX

**T**his would be the first Christmas I spent at the cabin as a single man in I didn't know how many years. Almost a decade, maybe? The last time was at some point in high school. Which was totally irrelevant, of course. But I would think of anything to distract me from what I truly worried about. I conjured up things I liked. Snowballs in Josh's face. Mom's lasagna. Rachael's ridiculous accents.

Nope, not working.

Truth was, it was the first time I hadn't looked forward to going to the cabin in years. I was holding a huge truth bomb to drop on my parents that would totally wreck their vacation. Their year. Maybe their lives?

In fact, I should probably just plan on going home after Christmas. I could share my news, let Mom cry her disappointment on my shoulder, then give them space to mourn in the comfort of their closest friends.

I hadn't lived farther than twenty minutes from my parents my entire life—counting college—and I was all they had now. They weren't going to take the news that I'd accepted a job at a firm in San Francisco well at all. It could be worse. It could be LA or New York or Maui. But they wouldn't see it that way. Add in Bay Area traffic, and I might as well be moving to Bakersfield.

The last time I'd even broached the subject of moving away, when I was eighteen and told my mom I'd applied to UCLA, she had gone into a depressive episode that wasn't

fixed until I showed her my faked rejection letter. I was already tensed for my parents' pure disappointment. There was no way around it.

I cruised along the 80, passing signs for Auburn and debating pulling over for a Coke, when my phone rang. Rachael's name popped up on my car's screen, so I hit accept.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Have you already left for the cabin?" she asked, the desperation in her voice hitting me right in the gut.

I was immediately on high alert. "What happened, Rach?"

"Just answer me."

"Are you hurt?"

She laughed, but it was a strained sound. "Max! I'm fine. Have you left for Tahoe?"

"I haven't. Not yet," I said, lying through my teeth. Didn't know why, but the words just slipped out. There was a 50/50 chance I'd said what she wanted to hear, so I held my breath and waited.

Rachael let out a relieved sigh. Apparently, I chose the right answer.

"You're scaring me," I said.

"My stupid car won't start." There was a thud and a hiss like she'd just kicked it and hurt herself. "Would it be too much trouble if I hitched a ride? My parents left early this morning and Josh said he and Savannah are halfway there."

Shoot. That meant Josh was somewhere near me on the road because I was about halfway there, too. I pulled off the next exit before he could see me in case we happened to be close to each other.

"I'm happy to pick you up." I cleared my throat. "It's gonna be a bit. I have some . . . errands to run first."

"I don't mind tagging along."

"Oh, I'm already out. I'll text you a ten-minute heads up?"

“Sure. Thanks, Max. You’re a lifesaver!”

I hung up the phone and ran a hand over my face. The light turned green, so I flipped around and got back on the freeway going west. What was wrong with me? Was I really driving all the way back home to pick up Rachael? If anyone had to turn around for her, it should have been her brother. Except it had been ages since Rach and I spent much time together without our Josh buffer nearby. I missed her friendship.

We used to be close, but lately she just felt like one of those family friends you caught up with occasionally before returning to your regularly scheduled life. To be perfectly honest, things had never really gone back to normal after the Grinch kiss incident in high school. We both pretended nothing was weird, of course, but there was that underlying current between us that hummed gently along, saying things like *your lips have touched each other AND YOU LIKED IT*.

Well, *I* did. She was quick to shove it under the rug and run away from me.

That was probably the worst part. That had been the best kiss of my seventeen years up to that point. I had theories on why that was, and each of them were carefully buried beneath a heap of *don't ruin this relationship* or *she is clearly just a sister*. Not that I *wanted* anything to happen between us. I wasn't pining over her or feeling pathetically unrequited or anything. It was probably Mom's current decorating theme combined with seeing Rachael up on stage last night that had set these thoughts loose in my mind like a swarm of angry bees.

But all of that was in the past. Rachael was like a sister. Maybe this two-hour car ride would give us a little time to make things better this year. This could be the Christmas we put it all behind us and went back to the way things used to be.



Rachael was waiting for me outside when I pulled up, holding a vase of the flowers I'd given her and sporting a River City

Playhouse sweatshirt cut at the neckline to fall off her shoulder. Her blonde hair was thrown up in a messy bun, but even in her ultra relaxed state, she was still beautiful. I shook the thought and got out to load her stuff in the trunk of my black 4Runner.

We got her bag, blanket, and gifts all situated. She slid into the passenger seat and breathed out. “I owe you.”

“No worries. I’m heading there anyway.” *Again.* Not that she needed to know that part.

She turned around to fit the flowers into a cup holder behind us. They must have been secure, because she nestled in her seat flower-free.

“Is it just a dead battery?”

Rachael sighed, slipping her shoes off and putting her feet up on the dash. “My neighbor thinks it’s the starter. He helped me try to jump it after I got a hold of you, but no dice.” Her voice went higher, revealing her anxiety about the situation. “The clutch is going to die any day now, and the whole thing will be more expensive to fix than the car is worth.”

“Does that mean you get to go car shopping?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Or rely on public transportation for a few months. I’ve done it before, but it takes so much longer to get anywhere.” She drew herself up, making her voice bright. “It’s not the end of the world. It wouldn’t be forever, at least.”

I wouldn’t point out the possibility of asking her parents for a loan. She was too independent. We pulled onto the freeway, the conversation floating along naturally from one topic to the next. She filled me in on how she mostly liked working at the elementary school. I told her about my new downstairs neighbors who liked U2 a lot, and they liked them *loud*.

She described the gift she’d gotten her parents: a commissioned watercolor of Buddy, their family dog who had died over the summer. “It’ll be our first Christmas at the cabin



without him, so I thought putting up the picture would be nice.”

“Then he can always be up in Tahoe with us,” I said quietly.

“Exactly.” Rachael sounded fine, but I knew this was going to be a tough thing for her family. Buddy wasn’t even my dog, and I already missed him stretching out before the fire or wagging his tail, waiting for empty boxes to demolish on Christmas morning. “I thought we could hang it next to . . .”

She couldn’t say it. Next to Johnny’s portrait. My throat clouded with emotion. “Yeah. That’s . . .”

“Unless you think it’s insensitive?” She sounded suddenly anxious.

I cleared my throat. “No. Not at all. That’ll be perfect.”

“How’s work?” Rachael asked, changing the subject. Emotion popped and sizzled around us, uncontained, alive. Her efforts at a new topic were like shoving bubbles into a box. “Any crazy tax clients this year?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Busy season is just around the corner, so I could answer that in a few months.”

“Are you still happy at . . . don’t tell me. I know it’s a president and . . . Fernando!”

I chuckled, some of the tension releasing from my neck. “Fernando & Jeff—”

“Jefferson!” she yelled, clapping. She beamed at me, her brown eyes glittering. “Are you still happy at Fernando & Jefferson?”

I was tempted to answer her honestly. Rachael wasn’t like Josh. If I told her something, she could lock it away and store it deep down, never revealing that she even *might* know something. Another representation of her acting abilities. I became aware of her skill after she found out I got Josh prime Giants tickets for his birthday when we were fifteen, and she kept the secret for three months. Since then, she’d never let me down.

But this was a huge thing. It wasn't just baseball tickets. It was my entire life changing, and how terrified I was to tell my parents. She knew why that would be hard, though.

"I'll take that as a no," she said, leaning forward to turn on her seat warmer.

"I wasn't unhappy there," I said. "It was fine. I didn't have any huge complaints."

"*Wasn't?*" Rachael put her feet down and pivoted to face me, the weight of her gaze making me want to tug on my T-shirt collar.

That was the perfect opening. If I told her the truth, it could be like a practice round for the real thing. *Okay, Max. You've got this.*

I kept my eyes on the road. "Yes. *Wasn't.* I accepted a job at a new firm."

"Whoa, a promotion?"

"Yeah. There's a pay raise, and the company is a lot bigger, so there's more opportunity for growth. I'll miss some of my old clients, though."

"Is there a non-compete? Like you can't invite them to follow you over to the new place?"

"I can't invite them to follow me." *Here goes nothing.* "Because the new place is in San Francisco."

"Oh, cool." She did a double take, her hands rising dramatically. "Wait, *what?*"

I was glad I had the excuse to focus on the road so I didn't have to see her expression. "I'm moving."

The car went silent. Like you-could-hear-snowflakes-fall kind of silent. I hazarded a look. Rachael's hands were still suspended, her gaze glued to me. "When?"

"January. I have a place lined up. A guy in the new office was looking for a roommate. It'll be a big change for me. It's been years since I've had to put up with a roommate."

"Does that change also include season tickets?"

She knew me so well. Yes, okay, maybe part of the reason I wanted to move was so I could go to more Giants games. To say I was a longtime fan would be putting it mildly. But the new job was really a huge step up in my career, so that was an important component too. “It might. If you’re lucky, I’ll even let you go with me sometime.”

She fanned herself playfully. “Whoa there, tiger. Don’t get my hopes up.”

“I won’t be that far. You know you can come see me anytime, right?”

“Once I get a working car, maybe,” she said, watching me closely. “That’s an exciting new adventure. How did your parents take the news?”

“They don’t know yet.”

Rachael jerked in her seat to face me. “Maxwell Nathaniel Dawson! You haven’t told them?”

“I will. Sometime this week.” My neck warmed. She was right to be full-name indignant. I should have told them weeks ago. “They won’t be happy.”

“That’s an understatement. You’re going to *gut* them.”

“Gee, thanks for the pep talk, pal.”

“You’d prefer I sugar-coated?”

“No.” Right? Or maybe I wanted Rachael’s sunniness to fill some of the shadows in my thoughts. Now that I’d given my notice at work, there was no turning back. But I was questioning how much I really wanted to leave Sacramento.

I loved my home. We had mountains, snow, beach, city, culture, all within a reasonable driving distance. Living in San Francisco would be a whole new adventure. Something I’d wanted for a while now, but I had been too scared to take the plunge. There were definite drawbacks. My future might hold more Giants games, but there would be *way* less snowboarding, family, and time with my best friend Josh—less of the entire Harvey family, for that matter. Maybe I wasn’t ready? I’d signed the rental agreement already, but I

was pretty sure my firm would take me back if I said *never mind, I want to stay*.

Nothing was set in stone yet.

Well, except the job offer I'd already accepted. That was ironclad.

I couldn't think about this for another second. "How's your life going?"

"Max."

"Anything new or exciting to share?"

"*Max*," she said.

But I couldn't do it now. I couldn't keep talking about this. It was hard enough knowing I had to tell my parents that their only living child was abandoning them. I was terrified we were in for a repeat of Mom's depression. "Tell me about this redhead from last night. Has he been checked out?"

She shook her head softly, but let it drop. "Yes. By me. Every night of the play," she said in a dramatically jokey way.

"Really?"

Rachael cleared her throat. "No. He's just a friend. Or, he was, I guess? I don't know. It's just a date. I don't have to decide how I feel about him yet."

"Then you aren't dating anyone else?"

"I'm not really a girlfriend type of girl. It's a lot of pressure to be so much to one person." She shifted a little in her seat, like she was growing uncomfortable.

I guess I'd never thought about it that way before. I was hardly ever *not* in a relationship, so being single felt weird to me. It was odd to only have to think about myself. I was used to always needing to consider someone else, too. "That'll change someday though, right? I mean, if you ever want to get married, you'll have to really commit to being everything to one person."

Her shoulders shook like she'd gotten the chills. "Maybe I'll never get married, then."

I laughed. Rachael didn't join me.

I faced her briefly. "Wait, are you serious?"

She shrugged. "Who knows. I'm young. I don't really have to worry about it yet."

That was true. But still . . . to even think of the possibility of never marrying just wasn't something my brain would wrap around. My parents were so in love it was nauseating, but they'd set an example for me, and I wanted to have what they had someday. The Harvey kids were as close as I got to siblings these days, but they weren't actual family. When I married one day, my wife would become my family and we'd expand it ourselves. I looked forward to that prospect.

The Harveys had met my parents in college, and they clicked in one of those lifelong friendship ways. All of them had attended UC Davis, none of them were from California—or even the west coast, for that matter—and all of them stuck around in Sacramento, buying houses in the same town and raising us kids as if we were cousins. I'd gone back to Virginia once to visit extended family, and it was enough to understand why my parents had claimed the Harveys and built their own holiday traditions together out here. They understood each other too. While they varied in their chosen careers—psychiatrist, OB/GYN, anesthesiologist, and pediatrician—they were all doctors, and they'd gone through the grueling med school years together. We were a family in all the ways that counted.

The next few hours with Rachael passed quickly. I had to put my vehicle into four-wheel drive to make it to the cabin, but we pulled up at last through the snowy lanes to the A-frame wooden house that was probably my favorite place in the world. It was just a half notch above Oracle Park, but it was still higher.

The cold winter air was crisp up here, and the tall pines boxed us in, making the cabin feel secluded and cozy, despite the neighboring houses that were slightly visible through the trees. Our feet crunched on icy sludge toward the trunk of the

car. I reached for Rachael's bag, holding her gaze while I handed it to her. "You won't tell anyone, right?"

She knew exactly what I meant. "Of course not. But Max, you shouldn't wait too long."

I knew that. I really did. Maybe that was another reason I'd told Rachael—so I would be motivated to get the truth out sooner rather than later.

We lugged our stuff up the front porch to the door, Rachael cradling the vase of flowers I'd given her in one hand and her bag in the other. We'd need to return for the gifts later.

Mom swung the front door open, her wide smile welcoming us warmly. "Rachael! Max! You made it!"

We stepped inside, and Rachael faltered in the doorway. Mom may have outdone herself this time. The house was covered in fuzzy, gaudy garland, the tree in the corner decked out in huge goofily shaped ornaments. Lights were strung intentionally haphazardly, and the tablecloth sported Grinch faces alternating with Max, the dog sporting an antler on his head. Everything was bright colors and wacky shapes, like a Dr. Seuss book had thrown up all over the cabin.

Rachael seemed to take it all in. It was an attack on the senses. "Wow."

"Welcome to Whoville!" Mom said, wiping her hands on a dish rag as she came forward to greet us. She looked above our heads and a grin spread over her lips, her rosy cheeks rounding. "Oh, look at that. You're standing under the mistletoe."

CHAPTER  
**THREE**

## RACHAEL

**T**here was absolutely no mistaking the way Sharon's eyes lit up when she informed Max and I that we were stuck beneath a sprig of plastic, awkward-inducing mistletoe. Her gray eyes—soooo like Max's—were glued to us, a smile curving her thin lips. Sharon Dawson was refined. She was an OB/GYN with girl power to the max and an avid romantic. I couldn't tell now if she was just teasing us or not, but the gleam in her eyes was slightly condemning.

I would just go ahead and file that away for further inspection later.

A clumsy laugh bubbled out of my throat when I turned to look at Max, which was my first and largest mistake. He was looking down at me, his hand gripping the handles of the duffel bag thrown over his shoulder, putting his white knuckles and corded forearm right in my line of sight. Were his fingers straining from an extremely heavy bag, or from resisting the urge to tell off his mom for making things weird?

Grinch faces and Whoville shouted at me from every angle in this room, while Max's sublimely kissable lips pressed together, unamused. I was being thrown from the present to the past repeatedly in a blinding strobe light of shame and rejection. But his *eyes*. And his smell. And the way his broad shoulders filled the doorway but also pressed into my arm . . .

He lifted one eyebrow at me. Was it a challenge or a *why the heck are you not moving?*



So I did the only thing that made sense. I spoke in a singsongy British voice. “Can’t anger the mistletoe gods, obviously.” Then I reached up on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to his rough, scruffy cheek, inhaling his aftershave on my retreat.

Was it just me, or did Sharon look disappointed? Adding that to the analysis file.

My dad came into the room, sparing me further humiliation. “Anything left in the trunk?”

“Just bags of gifts,” Max said, his voice tight.

“We’ll need a crane, then.” Dad pulled me into a hug and kissed the top of my head with a goofy smile. “Hey, kiddo.”

Ah, it felt good to be at our home away from home.

The front of the cabin was a tall A-frame covered in windows, filling the room with natural light, but the place was still cozy, even with the vaulted ceiling. The open floor plan on the main level was large and inviting, with a railing above the kitchen that partitioned off the loft. Straight ahead from the front door was a hallway that went to the kids’ bedrooms and ended at a staircase to the loft and the parents’ bedrooms—they’d renovated years ago so both couples had masters—and an enormous TV. But the living room downstairs still had a reasonably sized TV, and it was now playing a Hallmark movie from the look of the fake snow on screen.

“It wouldn’t be Christmas without the cheesy jokes, would it?” Max asked, leaning forward to give my dad a hug.

“Or the cheesy movies, but your mom has that under control,” he said, nodding toward Sharon.

I scoffed. “Don’t act like you don’t love them, too.”

Dad pointed toward the loft. “Not as much as Rob does, and you both know that.”

Savannah came out of the hallway. “I don’t think the heater is working yet, Dr. Harvey.”

Dad faced her. “It’s Harry, remember? Too many doctors in this house for titles. We don’t want it going to any of their heads.” He winked, taking my bag out of my hand and starting

toward the kids' bedrooms. "Come on. Let's see what we can do about that heat."

I followed them, noticing Max head off toward the kitchen to speak to his mom.

This wing had two bedrooms. One for the boys, and one for me, though we always had a bunk bed in each for some reason. That came in handy now that Savannah was joining us for part of the week. I finally had a roommate. The downside was we all shared a bathroom. I kept hoping they'd renovate again, adding another set of rooms or at least another bathroom on this level. Sharing with teenage boys had been the worst, and sharing with men didn't seem much better.

We filed into the small bedroom, and it was like walking through an icy cloud to enter the freezer section of Costco. There was a definite chill in my room. It was always colder than the rest of the house, but never this bad. I went to drop my pillow on my bed but stalled. Savannah had claimed my bed already, her bag resting at the foot.

"I hope you don't mind. I took the bottom bunk," she said, probably noticing me staring at her bag.

I snapped my eyes away. "Of course not. You're the guest."

"I can move if you—"

"No, really, it's fine!" I tried to reassure her. I wasn't mad she'd taken my bed; I was just adjusting to the reality that this year truly was going to be different. I loved Savannah, but that didn't take all the difficulty out of accepting change.

Dad put his hands on his waist and looked up at the ceiling vent. "I'll need the stepladder. There might be a clog."

"It's always cold in here," I reminded him.

"This cold?"

"Maybe not *this* bad, but you and Rob chalked it up to the position of the room years ago. The ducts had something to do with it."

“Hmm.” He walked away, his forehead creasing. “We’ll see.” The challenge was there, I could hear it. He wanted to fix this problem, and Savannah’s and my comfort were only a small part of the motivation.

It took only a few more minutes to get everything else from the 4Runner and into the house. I carried the vase of flowers to the kitchen and set them in the center of the island amongst pans of sugar cookies cut into various undecipherable shapes.

Sharon’s gaze dropped to my roses. “Those are . . . pretty.”

Translation: they didn’t match the rest of her Dr. Seuss Wonderland.

“Max brought them to my play last night. I didn’t want them to die from loneliness while I was away.”

Her face softened. “I’m glad he picked up a thing or two from his dad.”

“I think he picked up far more than that.” Rob was Max in thirty-five years. You couldn’t see them together without marveling at the resemblance, both in appearance and attitude.

My stomach clenched uncomfortably, watching Sharon transfer cooled sugar cookies to the counter in stacks, a smile playing on her lips. She was thinking of her husband or her son, I guessed—likely both. When Max told her about the job in San Francisco, she would be completely heartbroken.

This was not a fun secret to hold.

Why couldn’t Max be a normal son? The kind who didn’t follow their parents’ plans exactly and found themselves twenty-four years old with a job that hardly paid the bills, a dead car, no degree, and very little direction. Okay, maybe I was projecting. I just knew if I told my parents I’d gotten a killer job in the city, they’d go bonkers. In a good way.

Well, first they would question the legitimacy of my supposed job, but we’d get to the excitement in the end.

But Max wasn’t normal, and his relationship with his parents was different. You didn’t go through the trauma that

family endured—losing their older son to leukemia when he was eight years old—without some of it lingering, shaping the future. I looked at the portrait of Johnny on the wall watching over us, and swallowed.

Max couldn't put it off any longer. He really needed to tell them soon.

"Is my mom around?" I asked.

"She ran into town to pick up the marshmallows." Sharon pulled a face. "Can you believe I forgot them?"

"Not for a second." I reached for one of the sugar cookies that looked like the state of Florida.

She slapped the back of my hand away. "All in due time."

I lifted my hands in surrender. "Okay. Need help making the frosting?"

"Actually," Sharon said, her wide gray eyes blinking at me. "There was something else I wanted to talk to you about. I need help getting your parents' Christmas gift set up tomorrow. The boys will do the heavy lifting, but can you distract your mom and dad for an hour or so to give us time to put it together?"

"Sure."

"Great. I can't believe we only have three days until Christmas." She shook her head a little. "This year has just *flown*. So, sometime tomorrow, then? Maybe you can suggest picking up food in town or something."

I nodded. "What did you get for them?"

"It's something we used to do together a lot in college." Her eyes sparkled, but then widened, lifting toward the door. "Andrea, you're back!" Sharon yelled in my ear to the sound of the front door closing behind us. She was just as bad as Josh when it came to secrets.

Mom carried a reusable grocery bag to the counter, throwing a suspicious look over her shoulder. Her faded blonde hair was shot through with gray and twisted back in a claw clip. "What are you hiding?"

Sharon averted her gaze. “Just Christmas secrets. Don’t ask.”

“Okay.” Mom piled a bag of marshmallows on the counter with various candy bars for our s’mores later. “I’ll pretend I didn’t catch it then. Hey, honey.” She paused to lean over and give me a hug. “Have you told Sharon how well you did as Scrooge’s nephew’s wife last night?”

Was it just me, or did my mom’s voice go up an octave anytime she talked about my theater passions? Her fake enthusiasm was a little patronizing. Not all of us were made to be doctors or accountants or lawyers. Some of us couldn’t even finish a regular degree.

I wasn’t twelve, and the play last night wasn’t my first middle school acting role. I was an adult, for heaven’s sake.

Mom stacked a bag of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups on top of her candy mountain. I reached for it. “Ooo, my favorite! Can I—”

She slapped my hand away. “Those are for s’mores later. Why don’t you go find your brother and see what he’s up to?”

“He’s in the loft, I think,” Sharon said.

“No one wants to satisfy my sweet tooth. It’s like neither of you love me.”

“Mention that again tomorrow,” Sharon sassed, eyebrows up while she gestured to the piles of oddly-shaped sugar cookies.

“I kid, I kid.” I went off to find Josh like the child I was. He was in the loft, flipping through Christmas movie options on Netflix. Savannah lay on the sofa, leaning against Josh and together taking up all three cushions. The only available seat was the tiny space on the loveseat beside Max.

Right next to him. All up in his business.

I stared for a second, but no one seemed to notice. Which was dramatic of me, I got that. If I made it a thing and hesitated to sit so close to Max, it would only be announcing to each of them that my crush on him was very much alive.

Not that they knew about my crush at all, but I wasn't about to inform them. Time to put on my acting skills.

“What are we watching?” I asked, dropping onto the seat beside Max. It was old furniture, and we both caved toward the middle a little. Forget the bathroom renovations—our parents needed to invest in better seating.

Josh toggled over to Disney+ and down to their holiday movies. “*Home Alone* marathon, anyone? Or we could find *The Grinch*. We all know how much Rach loves him.”

“Jim Carrey is an actor worth studying,” I defended, though I knew Josh was just making a jab at my costume mishap from his high school party.

“I like that one,” Savannah agreed.

“Not as much as Rachael does.”

“Let it go,” Max said. “It was so long ago. It was your fault she showed up all green, anyway.”

My brother tilted his face toward me, his eyes lit up. Oh, great. Now he'd been baited. “Coming to her defense, are we?”

Max rolled his eyes. “If you want *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, just turn it on.”

“It's either that or sledding . . .” Josh left it hanging before seeming to sense that no one wanted to go dig in the attic for the sleds.

“We could play a game,” I said. “Hearts? Golf?”

Max nestled a little more into the love seat, his shoulder pressing into mine. “I'm good with a movie for now.”

It was hard to be nonchalant when his body was touching mine.

“Movie it is,” Josh said, switching to our saved movies and finding *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

It was the same every year. I saw Max regularly enough outside of Tahoe—Thanksgiving dinners or birthday parties or 4th of July picnics—but the cabin was different. At all those

other events there was more mingling. Girlfriends. We only had a few hours together before we returned to our lives. But the cabin? That was seven days of uninterrupted time together. It was harder to subdue my impossible, unrequited feelings when he was *always there* and his girlfriend was absent.

Our families guarded this togetherness closely. We never brought outside friends or family members to the cabin, which proved how serious Josh was about Savannah that he invited her this year. They'd been together for three years, but it was her first time coming to Tahoe with us. The few times we or the Dawsons had family members fly into California for Christmas, we celebrated at home. No one came up to the cabin during the holidays except us, which made it special, but it also meant there were no buffers between me and Max—except Josh, of course.

It used to be the thing I loved most about Tahoe. Now it just made it harder. If Gabriela was here being her perfect buffery self, I wouldn't be having all these arm tingles, because Max would be sitting with her and not me. What were my boundaries made of? Snow bricks? They crumbled too easily.

I glanced at him from the side. He looked at the TV, focused, his breathing relaxed. Being near me didn't do *anything* to him.

Oh, I was so pathetic. Time to reinforce that crumbling boundary wall with steel plates. "What's Gabriela doing this week?"

"Probably going down to Fresno to see her family, but I'm not really sure."

"That's weird."

He looked at me, bringing his face far too close. His gray eyes looked blue in the sunlight streaming through the windows. It was good we were discussing his girlfriend so I could be actively reminded not to lean into him and pretend he was mine.

"Not really. I haven't talked to her in months."

Um, what?

Max lasered my face again with his eyes. “Did no one tell you? We broke up.”



CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

## MAX

**S**omething was wrong with Rachael. She'd always been a little quirky, a little bit out there, but she'd never actively avoided me before . . . and I didn't like it. From the moment our movie ended, she had been doing whatever she could to stay out of my general vicinity. I was oil and she was balsamic vinegar, moving away every time I tried to get close. Had I done something to offend her? Maybe asking her to keep my secret was too much of a burden and it was ruining her mood.

I would ask her, but she made it impossible by constantly running away from me.

"Max, would you mind finding the roasting sticks?" Harry asked from the stove, stirring his infamous baked beans that everyone pretended to love but gave each of us digestive issues later. No one had the heart to tell Harry he was hurting us with his beans. In his defense, they did taste good. Not good enough to warrant the issues they would later bring, however.

The worst part was that we *had* to eat the beans, unlike Mom's overly sweet fruitcake. We could sneak bits of cake to Buddy, the Harveys' dog, so we didn't have to suffer through a whole slice. But beans were a no-no for the canine.

Not that we could sneak Buddy anything anymore.

Harry watched me expectantly, waiting for a response.

I hurried to answer so I wouldn't have to tell him I was thinking about his dog. "Sure thing."

“They’re probably in The Closet,” Harry called while I walked away. The Closet deserved its own uppercase letters. It was a walk-in mishmash of everything we needed for the cabin that didn’t have a place to go. “Wade in at your own risk!”

I lifted a hand in acknowledgment while I slipped around the corner, then had to pull up abruptly to avoid running headlong into Rachael. “Sorry.”

She put both of her hands up, stepping back like she couldn’t come too close or she might get burned.

This was getting a little old. Did I have the plague? No. Would she blister if I *accidentally* touched her? No. Had she ever acted this way toward me before? No.

Cue the internal childish whine.

She began walking away, back to her bedroom.

“Rachael,” I called, probably louder than I needed to.

She startled, jumping out of her skin. “What the Hamlet!”

That brought a smile to my lips. “Still using Shakespearean swears?”

“Only that one.” Rachael narrowed her eyes. “Why would I stop?”

I had no good reason to give her.

“Did you need something?” she asked.

“Just the roasting sticks. This closet is a jungle, though. Any chance you’re free to help me search?”

“Sure.” I earned a bit of side-eye, not that I blamed her for that. It really wasn’t a two-person job.

I flicked the light on and held the door open. Rachael stepped inside first, looking among the shelves. I followed her in. It was a fairly large closet, and we both should have been able to search comfortably without being in each other’s space, but the place was packed full and a hazard in its own right.

“So, you planning to tell me why you’re being weird now?” I asked, spotting the roasters on the top shelf, stacked in a pile against the wall. There were a handful of tissue boxes in front of them, which meant I could reasonably let this search go on as long as Rachael didn’t bring in a ladder.

“It’s weird to help you search for roasting sticks?” Rachael moved aside a handful of board games to look behind them. “Okay, roasting hot dogs in December *is* weird. But you can’t argue with tradition.”

“Except I believe this whole tradition started because we were picky kids and hot dogs were something all of us would eat. Why we *continue* to do it is another question.”

“I’m just in it for the s’mores, really.” She stopped, spinning to look at me. Her brown eyes shone like round twinkle lights. I wondered if Rachael knew how entrancing she was when she lit up like this. “My mom bought Reese’s.”

“I gave you Reese’s last night.”

“I ate all those,” she said dismissively. “Now we have more. Have you tried one on your s’mores yet? Once the peanut butter gets all melty, it’s sublime.”

“I haven’t, but you’re making me want to.” It was also debatable whether she had changed the subject intentionally or not. If she had, that was smoother than peanut butter.

She spun back around to keep looking. “My mom got a selection of candy bars to try on our s’mores. If you don’t choose Reese’s, you’re missing out. Actually,”—she lifted her finger in the air—“don’t bother with the Reese’s. You’ll hate them.”

Which she only said so there’d be more for her, obviously. I fought a laugh. “Rachael?”

“Yeah?” She looked at me over her shoulder.

“Why are you avoiding me?”

She coughed, stepping back until she bumped into the shelf. She hit a box and it flipped into the air, crashing on the floor in a sea of puzzle pieces.

“Oh, fetch.” Rachael knelt with the box and started picking up pieces.

I knelt to help. “You gonna answer me?”

Her attention stayed on the floor. “You’re being weird. Would I watch an entire movie with you if I was avoiding you?”

Had her behavior started after the movie? It certainly wasn’t noticeably strange before. Our entire drive to Tahoe had pleasantly passed in conversation and confidence sharing. I sat back on my heels. “Is it because I told you . . . the thing?” I leaned in and lowered my voice. “They’ll know soon. You don’t have to keep this secret for long.”

Rachael reached away from me to pick up another puzzle piece, dropping her gaze to the floor again. “It’s hard to talk to Sharon, knowing what I know. I can’t do this the entire time we’re here.”

“You won’t have to,” I vowed. At least she wasn’t mad at me for something else. There was a cooling sense of relief in knowing her strange behavior had a valid reason, that it would go away soon. Or, within the next few days, more likely. I definitely wasn’t ready to tell my parents today. This was something that needed gearing up. Preparation. The right moment.

Okay, maybe I was avoiding it a little.

Harry poked his head through the door, his silver-threaded hair gleaming under the yellow lights. “Find them yet?”

“We dropped a puzzle,” Rachael said, scooping up another few pieces.

Her dad *tsked*. “You know what that means.”

Rachael looked up sharply, catching my eye. Her lips pressed together, unamused. “We have to put it together.”

“We?” I stoked, wiping my dusty hands on my pant legs. “You knocked it over, Rach.”

She gaped, tossing the last few visible pieces in the box and rising. “Because of you.”

“How was it my fault?”

“You startled me.”

“Figure out the puzzle later,” Harry said. “We need to roast some dogs.”

I stepped around her, moving aside the tissues to grab the roasting sticks. “Found them.”

Rachael watched me hand the sticks to her dad, suspicion lurking on her brow. “You knew where those were.”

“I saw them,” I admitted as Harry left. “But you needed help with the puzzle.”

Not a lie *exactly*.

She stood, holding the box in both hands, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Which you *will* help me with.”

I blocked her exit. “Maybe.”

“Max.”

“Rachael.”

A smile played over her lips, but she was fighting it. “Tell them soon.”

All levity fled my body immediately. “It will ruin their week.”

“The longer you wait, the worse it will be.”

She was right. I knew that.

“Hot dogs,” Harry called from the kitchen. “Dinner at the fire pit!”

Rachael put her hand on my forearm, squeezing lightly. Her blonde hair was still up in a messy bun, that oversized sweatshirt falling off her shoulder. She was coziness personified, giving me the sudden and overwhelming desire to wrap myself in a blanket with a warm cup of cocoa. Maybe it was the understanding that she wasn't actually mad at *me* that gave me this soothing sense of comfort, but I didn't like that I was the reason for any of her discomfort at all.

“Listen,” I said quietly, and her hand tightened slightly on my forearm.

“What’s going on here?” Josh asked from just behind me, forcing me to jump forward and knock into Rachael. She pulled on my arm to keep herself from falling, holding the puzzle box to her chest. I stepped forward to catch her and my free arm went around her on impulse, landing us in a very compromising position.

Or a hug. It could also look like a hug.

“Cleaning up Max’s mess.” Rachael disentangled herself from my hold. Did she sound breathless? There was definitely an airy quality to her voice.

She shook the puzzle box, brushing past me toward the hall.

“You dropped a puzzle?” Josh asked, grinning. “You know what that means.”

“Later,” Rachael said. “The fire is ready.”

I walked with Josh to the back door, following his sister. When she stepped outside, he pulled on my arm to slow me down. “Hey, I need your help with something.”

“What’s up?”

Josh looked around us before lowering his voice and leaning in. “I’m proposing to Savannah on Christmas Eve, and I was hoping you could be my wingman.”

“Of course, man. Congratulations.” That was only two days away, so I hoped he had a plan already.

He grinned. “Thanks.”

“I’m happy to help with whatever you need.”

“Even hiking up to the top of the ridge to hide so you can film it without her knowing?”

I laughed. “You trust me with that?”

“You kidding? I’d trust you with my life.” He pushed open the door and we stepped onto the back deck. The fire pit was

in the center of the deck, surrounded by patio furniture. The clearing under the deck bled down to the dock. The lake, glassy and dark, stretched out toward the icy blue twilight sky. Josh turned around and pushed on my chest, his eyebrows raised. He dropped his voice to almost a whisper. “But I don’t know if I’d trust you with my sister, man, so if that was anything more than it looked like, rein it in.”

*What?*

He shoved me playfully. “I’m not kidding. She’s off-limits.”

“You’re crossing the line,” I said as he walked away, aware that everyone was now looking at me.

“That’s fine,” Josh said, sidling up behind Savannah and putting his arms around her waist. “As long as *you’re* not crossing any.”

What the heck? I was waiting for the laugh, the smile, whatever he would do to indicate he might be joking. Nothing came. His blond eyebrows stayed lowered, his eyes serious.

First off, why was I not trustworthy enough for his sister? I was the most trustworthy of all his friends. He was in *law school*. Second off, he had it all wrong. The idea of Rachael and me together was laughable. She was my baby sister. The girl who’d played with me in the pool in our underwear when we were in preschool. The one who showed me how to play MASH and painted my nails on summer vacations for practice.

I might’ve been single, but that didn’t mean I was jumping to fill the position with my pseudo-sister.

Besides, Josh didn’t know about San Francisco yet.

I looked to Rachael, who stood by the table, spearing a hot dog with a roasting stick. She was beautiful, of course, and kind. Sort of wacky, but it was part of her charm. And totally, completely not my type. Josh should know that.

Besides, we’d both been standing on that stage last night when the goober asked her out and she’d said yes.



Which, to be honest, had been super annoying. I didn't know why it bothered me, except that I could see in about two seconds flat how Rachael was settling when she agreed to go on that date. She hadn't wanted to say yes, but something made her change her mind, to accept the situation, and it ate at me. She shouldn't have to settle for anyone. She might not be *my* type, but she was incredible and could do far better than the likes of carrot-headed theater boy.

She could date a *man*, for starters.

But not me, obviously. That hadn't even crossed my mind. I couldn't think of any reason I'd given Josh to think there was something going on there, that I'd even so much as considered something happening between Rachael and me.

My dad approached, carrying two roasters with hot dogs speared on the ends. "Hungry?" he asked, handing one of the sticks to me.

"Thanks."

He pushed his round glasses up on his nose again, peering at me, the fire reflecting from the lenses. "You okay, son?"

"Yeah. No head-shrinking necessary today."

"I don't shrink you," he said with a reprimanding edge. "You know that's my cardinal rule."

I did know that. "Separation between work and home," I replied automatically. My dad had always held a lot of importance in not making me feel like I was one of his patients. He wanted to be my dad, not psychiatrist Dr. Dawson, analyzing my behavior. I was sure his brain did it automatically to a degree, but I was grateful to not be a victim to long explanations about the teenage psyche and *why* it was so devastating that Maria Ferrera broke up with me in ninth grade right before summer vacation started.

He let me find conclusions on my own. I suspected he guided me toward answers more often than I realized, but that was just the way he was.

We all took our seats around the fire, roasting hot dogs over the open flames—except my mom, the vegetarian, who

roasted a plant-based vegetarian dog. I really didn't want to think about how that worked. It was probably less scary than thinking about how actual hot dogs worked, though, and her plant-dogs were surprisingly good. I'd give her that.

I watched the fire curl up into the air, disappearing into dark smoke that gathered on the deck ceiling and escaped toward the forest. When I lifted my gaze, it was to find Rachael watching me across the circle.

CHAPTER  
**FIVE**

## RACHAEL

“Someone’s dinner is burning,” Savannah said, pushing her bangs out of her eyes.

I pulled my gaze away from Max, a blush rising to my cheeks from having been caught staring. *Hello, pathetic obsession, welcome to hot dog night.*

“Rach!” Mom said. “Your dog is on fire.”

I looked down to find the hot dog on the end of my roasting stick fully covered in flames. A scream tore from my throat. I lifted it from the firepit, blowing on it with huge puffer fish cheeks.

It wasn’t going down.

“Dunk it,” Josh said.

But I couldn’t see the water bucket anywhere. I ran toward the corner of the deck and down the stairs before plunging the flaming hot dog into a bank of snow. My heart raced. I left it there for a moment before pulling it out, smoke rising from the charred hot dog.

When I turned around, most of my family and the Dawsons were standing at the edge of the deck looking down at me. I lifted the roaster. “Crisis averted!”

“Come on,” Dad called. “You can have mine.”

I climbed the stairs while everyone moved back to their seats, some going inside to put together their dinner plates. “That’s okay. I’ll do my own. I just need to focus better.”

He took the black hot dog from the stick and tossed it into the fire before getting me a new one. Almost everyone had gone inside for condiments and a helping of Dad's deadly beans. "What happened?" he asked.

I was relieved he hadn't caught the focus of my attention. "I was distracted."

Dad's brow furrowed. He tugged on the sleeve of his UC Davis sweatshirt. "By what?"

"By Max," Josh said, bumping his shoulder against mine. He was not smiling.

I bumped him back harder, glad no one else was out here to listen. "I had the stares, and he was across from me. Don't read into it."

Josh didn't look convinced, so I spun away and went back to the firepit.

By the time we had all eaten our dinner and moved on to s'mores, avoiding Max felt childish. So what if the guy didn't have a girlfriend anymore? That was a *me* problem, not a him problem. Nothing else about him had changed, and if he really was moving to San Francisco in January, I would be seeing a lot less of him as it was. Fewer family dinners, birthday parties, Marvel movies, and BBQs. Fewer opportunities to run into him at my parents' house or see him at my plays.

My life was about to become significantly more Max-less. So why was I avoiding him now? Aside from bringing attention to my immaturity, it was also wasting my last few weeks with him . . . at least for a while.

Maybe I could just pretend he wasn't single. Put the wall up myself. Create my own barrier of off-limits that wasn't dependent on his relationship status.

I twisted my roasting stick slowly above the coals until the marshmallow was perfect, then carried it to the folding table, set up near the deck railing, where Sharon and Mom had set out all the fixings. Two halves of a graham cracker, one Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, one marshmallow: perfection. I

created my sandwich and carried it back to the chairs, taking the empty seat between Savannah and Max.

“Flashlight tag tonight, anyone?” I asked.

Savannah pulled her marshmallow away from the coals and looked at it before putting it back in the pit. “Isn’t it a little snowy for that?”

“That’s what makes it fun,” Max said. “But tonight won’t work. I think we’re looking at the air ducts soon.”

“Isn’t that easier in the morning?”

He eyed me. “Not if it means you both freeze in your sleep.”

Savannah looked startled.

“He doesn’t mean *to death*,” I promised. Or at least, I didn’t think he did. “We should take some extra blankets to bed, though, to be on the safe side.”

Josh sat down, biting into his s’more. “We could start Clue.”

“No,” Max and I said in unison.

Savannah’s eyebrows lifted. “That was emphatic.”

“Your boyfriend cheats at Clue,” I told her. “Be warned now.”

“It’s not cheating! I’m just really good at guessing.”

Max and I shared a look. No one could be that good. “It’s probably cheating, but we haven’t figured out how he does it yet,” Max said. He looked at me. “Are you planning to eat that?”

“I’m giving it time to melt.”

“Sounds messy.”

“I think you mean delicious.” I checked it, but it wasn’t quite ready.

“Fine.” Max got up and speared a marshmallow with a roasting stick. “You’ve convinced me. I’m making myself one of those.”

“Why?” Josh asked.

Max dipped his head toward me. “Rachael makes them look good.”

My chest went all warm and fuzzy, which was a weird and overly dramatic response. My body enjoyed hearing him say I made anything look good. It didn’t discriminate between food and, say, cute River City Playhouse sweatshirts that were definitely not warm enough for the weather, even with the fire three feet away.

“What is Gabriela up to this week?” Mom asked, taking a seat across from us and roasting a stack of two marshmallows.

“I’m not sure,” Max said, looking down at the fire. “We broke up.”

Mom grimaced. “Oh, Max, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s been a few months, so it’s not very fresh.”

“Months?” Mom looked suitably surprised. I was glad not to be the only one who felt out of the loop.

Sharon cringed from where she stood by the s’mores-making table. “Did I forget to mention it? That’s my fault.”

“Who are you dating now?” Mom asked, leaning back and eating a piece of chocolate. “I want to hear about her.”

Max went kind of frozen, looking from the fire up to my mom. “No one, currently. I thought maybe I’d take a break from women for a while.”

“Since when?” Josh asked.

“Since it became apparent that I need to.” He looked at me and away again. “I didn’t realize I was known for . . . well, if it’s this much of a surprise that I don’t have a girlfriend three months after ending my two-year relationship, maybe I need to reevaluate.”

So *he’d* ended it? That was interesting.

Rob poked his head through the door. “Max, you ready to help?”

“Absolutely.” He got up, handing his roasting stick off to me.

I lifted my s’more toward him. “Take mine. I’ll make a new one.”

Max stood above me, narrowing his eyes. “Why?”

Obviously because I felt bad that he was feeling the way he was. I felt responsible, which was clearly some sort of misplaced guilt. But I wanted to cheer him up. “I’ll have your marshmallow and make a new one.”

“Okay.” He took the perfectly gooey Reese’s s’more from my hand and took a big bite, pushing warm melted peanut butter and marshmallow out the other side of the s’more and right onto my face.



*Max*

Okay, I had to admit the Reese’s s’more was pretty good. I moved toward the house and was going for a second bite when Josh’s rolling laughter drew my attention back to the group at the firepit . . . and to Rachael, who was now handing off her roasting stick—*my* roasting stick—and trying to wipe goo from her eyes. What the heck?

“You got it all over her,” Josh said through his laughter.

Savannah slapped him on the arm, but she was chuckling herself. “Knock it off.”

Andrea got up. “Come inside and we’ll clean you up.”

Rachael avoided my eye. “I think I need to shower before the grease from this peanut butter makes me break out.”

“Let’s wipe up what we can,” her mom said.

I held the door for the women, the s’more resting guilty in my limp hand. A laugh bubbled in my chest, so I coughed to



suppress it. “You want the rest?” I asked Rachael as she passed me.

“That’s all yours.” She disappeared down the hall with her mom.

“Sorry, Rach,” I called after her, my mouth full, a grin spreading my lips wide.

Mmmm. This really was good.

I went to look for our dads and found them upstairs in the Harveys’ room, where the entrance to the attic was in their closet.

Dad handed me a flashlight. “Heater is up there. Video everything.”

“You aren’t coming?”

“My knee won’t let me climb that ladder, which is why we need your help.”

“Hey, while you’re up there, look for the sleds, will you?” Harry asked. “Josh mentioned wanting to take Savannah out.”

I did as I was told, checking out the heater—though to be honest, I had no idea what I was supposed to be looking for—then locating the sleds, which were stacked in a dusty pile against the wall. I took photos of the duct system, as directed, and video of the heater, which sounded like it was running normally. I handed my phone down for the dads to look through, then went back for the sleds. The mindless activity was nice, giving me something to occupy myself.

Andrea hadn’t meant anything by it when she’d asked me who I was dating now. I knew that. But it didn’t change the fact that her assumption came from a pattern of behavior I’d exhibited over the years. What *was* my longest stretch of being single? A few months, max. Maybe this break was the longest I’d gone.

Gosh, what was wrong with me? Was it a flaw to be incapable of remaining single? It wasn’t like I ended a relationship and immediately began looking for my next girlfriend. They were all organically obtained, and none of

them started in the same way. Annabelle I'd known from school. Hannah had studied in the library at the same time as me, so we frequently found ourselves walking out together when it closed. Darcy was a friend of my coworker whom I'd met at a Halloween party. Kelsey was the hygienist at my dentist's office. Gabriela went to law school with Josh, and he'd introduced the two of us.

See? All normal starts. Organic relationships. Nothing fishy.

My trouble wasn't meeting women or a lack of gumption to ask for their number. It was clearly something else.

"You find them okay?" Harry called up the ladder.

"Yep." I picked up two of the sleds and carried them to the attic opening, feeding them down to where Dad and Harry waited. "There are two more."

It didn't take long to get the sleds to the dads and climb down.

"This doesn't look like anything we're qualified to fix," Dad said, shaking his head and handing back my phone. "I don't know the first thing about ductwork or how to tell if they're clogged."

"We'll need to call someone," Harry agreed.

"Not until Christmas is over."

Harry snapped. "In the meantime, we can shrink wrap the windows."

"Oh, good idea." Dad checked his watch. "Tomorrow. We'll have to tell the girls to layer up tonight."

"Or sleep on the couches. The loft doesn't have any trouble heating up."

"True."

They both faced me.

"I'll pass on the message," I said, watching them pick up all the sleds to stack on the back deck.

Josh and Savannah were nowhere to be seen, and the moms were busy cleaning up after dinner—we had a rule that whoever didn't cook had to clean. Rachael was sitting at a card table she must have pulled from the garage, sorting puzzle pieces into piles, a fuzzy blanket over her shoulders like a cape.

I pulled out the chair and sat beside her. “What’s the puzzle?”

“The Grand Canyon,” she said dryly. “Lots of red rock and various other shades of rust.”

“How big?”

“One thousand pieces.”

“Sounds like a challenge.”

“I think it will be.” She looked at me. “You don’t have to help. I was the one who knocked it over. Technically, I’m the one who has to take the punishment.”

“Punishment?” I lifted my eyebrows. “That’s how you see it?”

“What else would it be?” She reached for a corner piece and added it to a small pile.

“A logical solution . . . the puzzle dropped. How else can you know if you’ve found all the pieces besides putting the thing together?”

“Bunch of left-brained bozos,” she muttered quietly.

My lips couldn’t help curving into a smile. “What was that?”

Rachael shot me a bright smile. “Nothing.”

I shoved away from the table. “I guess if you don’t want any help—”

She grabbed my shirt, tugging at me to stay. “That was definitely not what I’d said. In fact, forget I said anything at all. Without your oversized left brain, I’ll be doing this puzzle the entire week.”

“You were right the first time. It’s not my punishment.”

Rachael looked up, beseeching me. Her brown eyes were perfectly round and deep, getting me in the gut. “If you love me, Maxwell Dawson, you will not force me to do this on my own.”

“Hmmm.” I tapped my lips, pretending to think it over. She *had* only meant love her as a sister, right? Of course she did. What was wrong with me?

Her hand pulled at my shirt. “You can pitch first at Snow-Ball.”

“I always pitch first.”

“But this time I won’t fight you for it.”

That wasn’t really motivating, though. I enjoyed it when Rachael tried to fight me for something.

Kind of like this moment. Of course I was going to help her with the stupid puzzle. But I might as well make her beg for it. It was more fun this way. “Nah.”

“I’ll go make you another Reese’s s’more.”

“Too full for that now.”

“You can pick the next movie we watch?”

That one could actually be useful. “How will you get Josh on board?”

“I’ll give you my vote. Whatever it is, I’ll agree with you, so you have more power.”

I dropped into the seat beside her. “Done.”

Rachael visibly relaxed.

I bumped her shoulder with mine. “You didn’t think I would make you do this alone, did you?”

She looked at me sharply. “Then what was all that about?”

“Now I get something out of it.” I grinned. “Did you have to knock over the hardest puzzle in the entire closet?”

“You’re welcome.”

I winked at her, but I couldn't deny the humming in my chest. This was where I was most comfortable—hanging out with Rachael, our moms chatting while they did the dishes, our dads somewhere problem-solving. Christmas music played from the speaker in the kitchen and a candle on the mantel burned a pine scent to mask the fact that our tree was made of recycled plastic.

We were just missing Josh, but after his comment earlier, I was kind of okay with him and Savannah doing their own thing.

This was a perfect Tahoe night, just the way it was.

CHAPTER  
**SIX**

## RACHAEL

icles had climbed into my bedroom overnight and grown on the ceiling above my head. Okay, so not really, but it felt cold enough for them. I was sure I'd be able to see my own breath if the room was bright enough to see anything at all. Where was a personal heater when you needed one?

I turned over, trying to wrap my blankets more fully around my legs, but hitting a new spot on the mattress only made me colder.

I fished my phone out from under my pillow and checked the time. Just after three.

*Ugh.* That was it. I couldn't stay in here and freeze all night.

Careful not to wake Savannah, I climbed down from the bunk bed, dragging my blankets with me. I carried them to the dark hallway and up the stairs to the loft, feeling warmer already. Moonlight streamed through the tall windows, making it possible to see vague outlines as my eyes adjusted.

The long sofa up here was probably the most comfortable piece of furniture in the entire house. I bumped my shin on the coffee table as I rounded it, sucking in air through my teeth and letting myself fall onto the couch.

Except, I didn't land on the soft, pillowy cushions—I landed on something hard and jagged and *bony*.

“Ahh!” The bony thing let out a wail, flailing.

I tried to jump up, but I'd fallen too far and the overstuffed cushions were eating me.

"It's just me!" I said in a whisper-yell, tipping head first into the couch. There were four male people I could have fallen on, but the most likely two—Josh or Max—didn't need to act like I was there to attack.

"Rachael?"

Okay, so apparently I was tangled up with Max. I wriggled, pressing down on what I now could see was his chest—his firm, warm, bare chest. How the *heck* was the man sleeping shirtless? It was freezing in this house.

Well, up here it wasn't. But it was still cold.

My fingers pressed into his very warm skin, answering the question on their own. He was essentially a personal heater.

Universe, when I said I'd wanted one of those, I hadn't meant Max. But he would do.

"What are you doing up here?" he asked.

"My room is Antarctica."

He gave a throaty, tired chuckle, running a hand over his face.

"Why are *you* here?" I asked, pushing back so I could remove my fingers from his skin.

"Your brother was snoring." He sat up, scooting on the couch so he came out from beneath me.

I straightened, shifting to the other end of the sofa and cocooning myself in the wad of blankets I'd carried up. Feeling was beginning to return to my toes. I stuck my hand out, palm up, and fisted my other hand over the top of it. "I'll play you for the couch? Best two out of three."

"Deal." He positioned himself for rock-paper-scissors.

We started at the same time, hitting our fists to open palms. It was a well-practiced ritual in this house, and I won the first round, my rock to his scissors.



“Yes!” I said, dragging out the word.

“Don’t get cocky.”

We played again. He won, his paper to my rock.

“Game point.” We played again, and I flattened my hand into a paper, while he seemed to hesitate, moving his fingers before fisting his hand into a rock.

Um, excuse me? Had he been trying to let me win?

Max rose, in nothing but joggers with a blanket thrown over his arm, positioning his well-sculpted chest right in front of me. “Couch is yours.”

“You cheated.”

There was a beat of silence that held his guilt. “No, I didn’t.”

I stood to face him, keeping the blankets wrapped around me. “Yes, you did. You were about to scissor your fingers, but you made them a rock after you saw my paper.”

Yes. I really sounded that ridiculous.

He watched me. “Don’t you want the couch?”

“Yeah, but . . .” He was right. Why was I fighting him on this? My stupid inability to allow him to let me win. “We need a do-over. You can’t cheat.”

“I don’t want the couch, Rach. Just take it.”

“You wanted it five minutes ago.”

“I was asleep five minutes ago.”

“Exactly.”

“So I want to be asleep again. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Okay, that was fair. “Maybe Josh isn’t snoring anymore.”

“Josh always snores. He always has, and he probably always will.” Max shrugged. “I just forgot ear plugs this time.”

I’d forgotten that bit about my brother. It had been so long since our rooms were near each other. “We can get you some in town tomorrow. I have to distract my parents while you

guys set up their surprise, so I plan on asking them to take me to the store.” I drew in a quick breath. “What is it, by the way?”

He narrowed his eyes. They shone in the moonlight, glinting like he had something up his sleeve. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Yeah. I would. Which is why I asked.”

“Hmmm.” He made a show of considering me. “I think you can wait and find out when they do.”

“Is it that exciting? Oh!” I hopped once. “New couches?”

“Why would we need those?” He sounded equal parts offended and amused. “These might be old, but they’re basically like sitting on clouds.”

I lifted a shoulder. “We’ll just keep growing, so we’ll need more space. Soon you’ll be bringing someone, too. Then we’ll have nowhere for Josh and Savannah’s many children to sit.”

“You’re jumping us, like, ten years into the future,” he said wryly.

“Am I, though? I doubt it’ll be much longer until that’s the world we’re living in. Fighting for couch space, stuffing five adults on a loveseat.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, looking amused. “Where’s your theoretical husband in this mix?”

“Probably doing a tour on Broadway or off accepting a Tony award. I mean, if I get married, the guy has to be epic.”

“That’s something we agree on.”

Something about the lowness of his voice made three French hens take off in my stomach. Despite my feelings for Max—or maybe because of them?—I loved it when he got all defensive of me. It was totally an older brother thing, but I could pretend otherwise.

He watched me now, making the silence loud. It was quiet outside while the animals slept and the snow gave everything a layer of sound-proofing. No one else in the house was awake.

We were completely, utterly alone. I could say anything now without fear of being overheard. And I even had a green light, because he was single at Christmas for the first time in our adult lives. Single. Not attached to an incredible power-woman. What would Max say if I admitted my long-time crush? Probably panic and run for cover, because it would be coming out of left field.

He *was* an excellent pitcher, though. Maybe he could catch the ball, even if it was unexpected.

But if I admitted how I felt now, would that change the nature of our relationship forever? Sure, we'd kissed before and that hadn't ruined us, but the look of utter shock and horror on his face was forever emblazoned on my memory. No one wanted their kiss to incite such disgust.

It was hard to forget.

I would probably combust if I revealed my feelings to him now and he gave me that face again.

No, I was right to suppress my stupid crush. It was only ever hard to manage one week of the year: when we were together here at the cabin. I could get through this week and go back to my normal life. He would go on to San Francisco, resume his normal life, find himself a lawyer who moonlighted as a model and also saved kittens from trees.

We could maintain our close brother-sister relationship. Nothing had to get in the way of that.

No, correction: I would not *allow* anything to get in the way of that. Even my stupid feelings.

"Well, thanks," I said, deflated.

Max seemed to shake himself back to alertness. He must have been falling asleep on the spot. "No problem. Anything for my favorite Grinch."

"Awww, I'm your favorite?"

"Don't tell Jim Carrey or Benedict Cumberbatch."

I drew a zipper over my lips and tossed away the imaginary key. Max's gaze followed the motion to my mouth,

lingering there for a while.

Okay, the man needed to be careful, or he'd make me forget that face he made after we actually kissed.

I swallowed, shoving away my attraction and the very silent, very secluded situation we were in. This was dangerous territory for me. I thrived on boundaries and walls and things that kept me from even thinking about how much and how long I'd adored this man. "Good luck sleeping through the bear sounds."

"How do you know what a bear sounds like?" he asked.

"Just an assumption."

Max seemed to hesitate for just a second more before he turned toward the stairs. "Good night, Rach."

I curled up on the sofa where Max's warmth was still steeped into the cushions and drew my blankets over me. Already I'd left Norway and found my way toward Australia. Okay, so maybe not *that* warm, but it was a definite improvement up here.

Except it took a long time to fall asleep. I lay there, staring up at the wood beams under the slanted ceiling and thinking of the way Max had watched my lips when I'd zipped them shut. His eyes were dark, but there was something else that had caught my attention. He'd almost looked *hungry*.

But that couldn't be the case. It was probably a trick of the clock. Nothing good ever happened after 2 AM. Nothing that wasn't later regretted, at least.

I pushed aside all the thoughts of what it would feel like to kiss Max now—years later and older and buffer—and shut my eyes, waiting for sleep to come.



The yeasty smell of cinnamon rolls woke me up the next morning, but my body fought it. I never did well on little or broken sleep, and this was no exception. Sunlight streamed

through the open windows, dancing on my eyelids and giving me little motivation to get up. But man, those cinnamon rolls smelled divine. It was almost like they were right under my nose.

I peeled my eyes open and was startled to find a plate hovering directly under my nose.

“I told you it would wake her up,” Josh said, pulling the plate away. He and Savannah stood shoulder to shoulder above me.

“Now give it to her,” Savannah said, sporting her UC Davis T-shirt. Yep, I know. Even Savannah graduated from the same school as Josh, Max, and all four of our parents. You know, that school I dropped out of and am still paying off.

“I will when she’s up.” Josh proceeded to cut a bite off the cinnamon roll and shove it in his mouth.

“Hey,” I said, my voice groggy. “Is that mine?”

“Yeah.” He spoke around the mouthful, unapologetic.

I sat up so fast black sparkled the outsides of my vision. I gave it a minute to recede and reached for the plate. “I’m up.”

He cut another piece and ate it. Why did he have to eat such huge bites?

“Knock it off,” Savannah said, taking the plate from Josh and handing it to me.

It was nice having someone on my side after spending so many years being outnumbered by Josh and Max. I nestled into my little blanket nest and cut a bite. The icing was perfectly cream-cheesy, all hot and melty on the roll. “Thanks.”

Savannah sat beside me on the sofa.

“Were you freezing last night?” I asked.

“I was when I woke up. But I’m a pretty deep sleeper, so it didn’t really affect me. Your dad went to the hardware store with Dr. Dawson, though. They said something about shrink wrap.”

“Maybe they should pick up ear plugs while they’re there,” I muttered.

“For who?”

“Max.”

“He’ll live.” Josh dropped onto the end of the couch on Savannah’s other side. “Hurry and eat that. We’ve been waiting for you.”

I stuffed another bite into my mouth. “For what?”

Josh grinned. “We’re going sledding.” He looked at his girlfriend. “Savannah’s never been.”

I groaned. If she hadn’t sledded before, then Josh would want to give her an epic experience, and that meant only one thing.

“Get your hiking boots on, Rach. We’re going up to the ridge.”

# CHAPTER **SEVEN**

## MAX

**C**old wind bit my cheeks while the sun glared against the snow. Even my sunglasses weren't enough to block the shine hitting my eyes. Apparently, I hadn't hiked in a while, either, because my lungs were fighting the last bit of this steep incline.

It had been years since we'd hiked the sleds clear to the top of the ridge. There was a good little sledding trail right outside the back door of the cabin that had kept us happy until our pre-teen years, when we found the ridge trail—a steep sledding experience that had satisfied even the most daredevilish of eleven-year-olds. We'd used the ridge for a few years before we discovered snowboarding, and the sleds were pulled out less and less frequently each Christmas.

Why hike to the top of the mountain yourself when you could pay for a ski lift to take you?

“Almost there,” Rachael called behind me, completely out of breath. Her huffs and puffs were comically loud.

I turned to give her a thumbs up. “You can make it!”

“That . . . was . . . a *question*.”

Oh, whoops. “Yes! Only a few more minutes to go!”

Probably. If I remembered correctly.

I looked up again and second-guessed just how close we were to the top. The white sky beyond all the trees blended with the snow on the ground and made it hard to have any sort of depth perception.



Josh and Savannah were way ahead of us, moving further out of sight. I cast a glance back over my shoulder, but Rachael had stopped. She leaned forward, her hands on her knees.

I rested my sled against a tree, waiting to make sure it was steady before climbing back down to where Rachael had stopped.

She looked up. “Are you here to offer me a piggyback ride?”

“Not unless your legs are broken.”

“Oh, they are.” She beseeched me, her brown eyes wide. “Complete Jell-O. There’s no way I could take another step without crumbling.”

“Jell-O doesn’t crumble. It jiggles.”

“A jiggy step can still cause tripping,” she argued. “You don’t want me to fall down the mountain like Princess Buttercup and Westley, do you?”

“I was thinking more like the guy in *Hot Rod*.”

“That’s no better.” Rachael’s breathing struggled, her chest moving up and down rapidly. I was tired from climbing the hill, but nothing close to how she seemed.

I took her sled, then turned away from her and crouched. “Climb on.”

“Seriously?”

“Only if you hurry.”

“Okay! Yes! I’m hustling.” She jumped on my back, her arms going around my neck.

It took a minute to find my balance before I started up the hill again. I picked up my sled when we passed it on the trail, stacking it on hers and holding them both in one hand while my other gripped her thigh. Rachael’s hold on me was sturdy. That girl wasn’t going anywhere.

But holding her while climbing the mountain turned out to be a lot tougher than I’d imagined. Evidently, we were not as

close to the top as I'd thought. My steps slowed, Josh and Savannah pulling further and further out of sight until they disappeared on the trail ahead of us.

It took another ten minutes to reach the top of the ridge. I was highly regretting not bringing water with me. My parched throat and worn-out lungs screamed at me with every breath once I came to a stop.

Rachael slid down my back, her hands resting on my shoulders. "You're a lifesaver, Maxwell Dawson."

"And *you* get to rub my feet later in gratitude."

"Your feet?" she asked, wrinkling her nose. "I know how badly your running shoes smell. Not sure I want to touch the reason for that stench."

"My shoulders, then. Those were equally challenged in this hike."

"Okay, deal."

I looked back at her. "What?"

She shrugged. "You earned it."

My brain flashed back to sitting on the couch last night, my shirt off, Rachael there . . . only this time, she was giving me a massage, her fingers pressing into my skin, the house calm and dim.

My heart raced while my lungs worked to go back to normal. It wasn't a reaction to Rachael, obviously, or the idea of her giving me a bare-shoulders massage that had my body in a tizzy. Climbing the mountain did it, and the fact that I've been starved for human affection since breaking up with Gabriela. I could hardly be blamed for liking the idea of a massage, anyway.

It wasn't *Rachael* that sent my pulse into overdrive. It was *massages*.

I handed the neon green plastic sled back to her and we lined up on the edge of the incline, looking down over the hill that provided the best steep sledding in the immediate vicinity.

The side of the mountain was dotted with trees, but if we went one at a time on this path, it was safe.

We'd tested enough other places to figure that out the hard way.

Ten feet over was a lookout that included Lake Tahoe, the wide blue sky, and the best picture you could grab this close to our cabin. This was the place Josh was planning to propose to Savannah, so I did a quick sweep over my shoulder for a good hiding place, pleased to find several. As long as I didn't wear bright colors, I could hide in some of the foliage, phone camera out and ready to go.

"Who's first?" Savannah asked.

"You."

She pushed against Josh's shoulder. "Nope. One of you has to prove that this isn't some weird cabin initiation thing."

"It is, though," Rachael deadpanned. "You aren't one of us unless you can stomach the hill."

Savannah looked between us, and we—miraculously—held strong, serious faces.

"But I'll go first anyway to show you the way," Josh said, stepping forward. He leaned toward her and pressed a kiss to her lips, grinning. "Are you nervous?"

"I wasn't until a moment ago." She flipped her long, dark ponytail over her shoulder, eyeing the hillside below us.

I looked at Rachael, surprised to find her smiling, watching their interaction. Did she know about the proposal? Maybe Josh had asked her to help me be the film crew. If he hadn't told her though, I couldn't be the one to do so.

Josh put his sled down, climbed in, and pushed off. We watched him slide down the steep hill, his arms going in the air at one point.

"Show off," Rachael muttered.

"Yeah, you should definitely hold on," I warned Savannah.

She nodded, not taking her eyes off Josh. He looked back over his shoulder toward us when his sled hit something and got some air, tipping and pitching him face down into the snow. We all drew in short gasps, watching him, but he didn't move.

"Is this a joke?" Savannah asked, looking from me to Rachael.

"No." I put my sled down and jumped on it, pushing off toward him. It wasn't easy to steer. Wind whipped over my face, sending icy bits of snow at me while I hurried down the mountainside. I gripped the rope of my sled and bailed out well before I came close to Josh, then tossed the sled aside and ran down the rest of the way to meet him.

"Josh!"

He groaned. "I think I broke something."

"Did you hit your head?"

"No, but it hurts my shoulder when I move my arm."

I swore. That was concerning. "Can you walk?"

"Probably. I don't know if I can get up."

It took a minute of careful assistance and a few breath-catching hisses to get Josh into a seated position in the snow. He cradled his left arm, his face chalky and pale.

I looked over my shoulder to see Savannah barreling toward us. She bailed out ungracefully, far too close for comfort.

"He's okay," I called, hoping to ease her concern. "Might have hurt his arm."

Rachael was already on her way toward us, boots dragging to keep from going too fast.

"How can I help you?" Savannah asked, crouching before Josh.

"Kiss it better," he suggested.

She pressed a kiss to the top of his beanie-covered head. “Come on. Let’s get you up.”

I had to hand it to her, she was pretty cool under pressure.

Rachael tumbled out of her sled, rolling in the snow. She hopped up, hitting the powder from her pink coat and snow pants.

“Broken arm,” Josh said. “Or shoulder. Something isn’t right.”

“Can you walk?” Rachael asked, her blonde eyebrows bunching together.

I moved to help him up and he cringed. “Do I have a choice?” he muttered.

“Max gives a mean piggyback ride.”

Josh glared at Rachael. “I’d slug you if it wasn’t so painful.”

Savannah got on his other side and hovered, trying to help but really just getting in the way.

Rachael must have noticed it as well. “Max, you help Josh down to the house. Savannah and I will get the sleds. We can run ahead and start the car so the engine’s warm.”

“My keys are on the dresser in my room,” I told her. “Better take mine.”

She nodded, gathering two of the sleds while Savannah got the others.

It took ages to pick our way down to the cabin. Once the girls were out of earshot, Josh didn’t hold back, cursing at every unstable rock or painful step. He had one arm over my shoulders and the other cradled to his stomach, which wasn’t a good sign.

My 4Runner was idling in the driveway beside the tire tracks of the Harveys’ missing SUV, heater on full blast, Rachael in the driver’s seat.

I got Josh situated in the passenger seat and walked around the front of the car to open my door.

“What?” she asked, far too innocently to actually be innocent.

“I can drive.”

“So can I,” she said.

“Move, Rach,” Josh said from the front seat.

She narrowed her eyes. “Fine. But I could get us to the hospital quickly and safely.”

I opened the door more fully for her to get out. “Maybe, but not in my car.”

She slid out of the car but stood right in front of me, narrowed eyes locked on mine. “That was *one* time.”

“Once is enough.”

Rachael huffed, but she got in the backseat. Savannah came running out of the front door of the house, Andrea behind her.

“You’re taking him to the hospital?” Andrea asked, coming straight to my side.

“Unless you’d like to. You can take my car.” Most twenty-six-year-old men didn’t need their mothers to take them to the hospital. But most of them probably didn’t have anesthesiologists for mothers, either.

“Unfair,” Rachael muttered.

I ignored her.

Andrea tucked a piece of graying blonde hair back into her clip. “Actually, would you mind?”

“Of course not, Dr. Harvey,” Savannah said, sliding into the backseat beside Rachael and shutting her door.

I was starting to think rolling into the emergency room with five adults for one broken arm was a bit much.

“Not at all,” I echoed, and held the door for her.

“You got my wallet?” Josh asked.

Savannah lifted it. “Right here. We’re good.”

“I don’t need a whole cheer squad in the waiting room,” Josh said, shooting a look at his sister.

“That’s my cue to exit.” Rachael hopped out of the car, crossing her arms over her chest.

Andrea rolled the window down, looking at her daughter. “Will you call Dad and fill him in?”

“Sure thing.” Rachael leaned into the window, talking to her brother. “And that, my friends, is why you don’t try to impress your girlfriend when free sledding down a wild mountain.”

Savannah laughed. “It could have happened to anyone.”

*Says the woman with zero sledding experience.*

Rachael shot raised eyebrows at me. It seemed we were of the same mind on this.

“It’s probably pretty hard to injure yourself sledding,” I said.

Josh shot me a wry smile. “Leave it to me to defy statistics.”

Rachael and I stood side by side and watched them drive away in my 4Runner.

She shot me a side-eye. “Rude.”

Little firecracker. I knew exactly what she was referring to. I pretended to find great interest in my nails. “That I trust your mother, an adult with a PhD, to drive my car in the snow, but I don’t trust the woman who rear-ended her brother’s car *while using a backup camera?*”

She walked ahead to the house. “College degrees have nothing to do with it. I’m a perfectly good driver.”

“I’m sure you are. But we won’t test it on my car.”

My mom was humming upstairs, doing something in the loft area. She peeked over the ledge, her eyes lighting up when they fell on us. If there was anyone my mom would graft into our family and claim as her actual daughter, it wouldn’t be any of my past girlfriends. It would one hundred percent be

Rachael Harvey. Mom *loved* her, which was kind of surprising when you knew what a mess Rachael was most of the time—the exact opposite of Mom in most ways.

But they clicked.

Mom's dark, silver-threaded hair fell forward while she leaned over the ledge of the loft railing. "You guys didn't go to the hospital?"

"Josh didn't want an entourage," Rachael said.

"Good." Mom's grin spread wider. "Then you two can help me set up your parents' Christmas present while they're gone."

I swallowed a groan. I *hated* putting things together. The Allen wrench that came with these things was never meant for extended use; my fingers always hated me by the end.

"What if Harry comes home?" I asked. The dads were at the hardware store, last I heard. Even with pit stops to wash the car or grab a drink, they could be home any minute.

"I'll keep him downstairs," Mom said. "Come on. Let's get it done quickly. We only have two days until Christmas, so our window is closing."

I shot Rachael a look, but she was buzzing with excitement. "Yeah, Max. Come on. It'll be fun."



CHAPTER  
**EIGHT**

## RACHAEL

**M**ax grumbled and chucked the Allen wrench across the loft, where it hit the wall with a ping and flew somewhere under the sofa. Apparently, when Sharon had roped us into this chore, she had also excused herself from it. She gave us the box—or pointed it out, rather, because the thing was heavy—and went downstairs to get started on lunch.

She never came back up.

Max lay down on the rug and crossed his arms over his face, making his biceps pop. Pieces of the dismantled foosball table littered the floor around him, the instructions laying haphazardly over his stomach. I watched them move up and down slowly with his breathing from a few feet away, my knees pulled up and my chin resting on them.

“Want me to give it a try now?”

I’d only offered four hundred times. Eventually he’d pass the torch, and I’d be able to prove my prowess with assemble-it-yourself furniture.

I had a special skill for interpreting their picture instructions. It was like a language I could easily read. Maybe there was a side hustle in this somewhere. People could pay me to assemble their IKEA furniture and I could chip away at the voluminous student loan that was pointlessly killing my budget and forcing me to get a second job.

Or was that just Sacramento’s economy forcing it on me? Either way, I probably needed to focus on this foosball table, spread out in pieces around us, before anxiety gripped my

stomach and made it impossible for me to successfully put together anything.

He groaned. “Can’t we just pay someone to do this? It’s been”—he looked at his phone and closed his eyes again—“over an hour, and we’re not even close to finishing it.”

*We?* He hadn’t even let me look at the manual. “I bet I could put the entire thing together in under an hour by myself.”

Max laughed.

“Hey.” I kicked his foot. “I *could*.”

“Sure you could.”

“Watch me.” I crawled toward him and swiped the instruction manual from his chest.

He grabbed my wrist with lightning-fast motion. “Let’s make it interesting.”

Max’s gray eyes looking up at me, shadowed from the way I leaned over him, were making my knees weak. Not a good thing when those knees were supporting my weight. I yanked my wrist free and sat back on my heels, flipping the manual back to the beginning. “What’s the bet? Winner has to finish the puzzle by themselves?”

“That’s not interesting.”

“Okay, winner has to jump from the deck into the snow.”

“And break their leg? No.” He sat up, rubbing his eyes. Then he dropped his hand and speared me with a stare as if a lightbulb had gone off right above his head. “If I win, you have to give me a foot massage.”

“Eww.” I made a gagging sound. Feet were gross. His feet had a special stink all their own. His mom used to make him keep his shoes in the garage—that’s how bad it was. “I don’t want to touch those.”

Max shrugged. “Then get it done in under an hour.”

What a butt. He totally thought he had this in the bag. “And if I do? What do you have to do?”

“If you finish the entire foosball table by yourself in under an hour, you’re off the hook for both massages, and I’ll give you one instead.”

“No.”

He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his bent knees. “You don’t want a massage?”

From him? Of course I did, but I knew how unwise it was. Max’s hands on me would send me into cardiac arrest, and one hospital trip was enough for this Christmas.

I held his gaze. “When I succeed—”

“When?”

“—you have to tell your parents *the thing*.”

He froze.

“Tonight,” I added. “Rip off the Band-Aid. Get it over with. Take away my anxiety.”

Max drew in a slow breath, his attention entirely on me. “I shouldn’t have told you. I didn’t think about how it would stress you out.”

I dropped my knees to sit cross-legged and reached for his arm, squeezing it softly. “I’m glad you told me. I like that you trust me. But you know it’s going to be hard on them, and the longer you wait to tell them, the more it might hurt.”

He lowered his gaze, looking at my hand on his arm. “If I tell them now, it’ll ruin their Christmas.”

“Them knowing you harbored this secret the whole time you were at the cabin is worse, I think.”

He shut his eyes. “You’re probably right, but I still want to wait until Christmas is over.”

“Unless I can put this bad boy together in under an hour without help?”

A strained chuckle slipped through his lips. “Yes. Fine. We’ll make that deal.”

Only because he didn't think I could do it. But he also didn't think telling his parents about his move was a good idea while they were enjoying Christmas. Well, I would prove him wrong in more ways than one.

They'd already lost one son during the holidays. Waiting to tell them his news would only drive the hurt further into their hearts. If he was upfront with them *today*, it would give them an entire day to come to terms with it before Christmas, and everyone would be happier without this hanging like a cloud over us.

Well, over Max and me, mostly, since we were the only two people who knew.

"Deal?" I asked.

He held my eyes. "Deal."

I put my hand out to shake and Max took it, wrapping his large, warm hand around mine. How was he so warm when all he wore was a T-shirt and jeans? I had to wear a sweater in the house and I was still chilly.

"Get your timer ready." I flipped to the first page of the instructions and got reading.

I might not be a doctor or an accountant or have a master's degree—or any degree, really—or go to law school, but I could interpret an IKEA manual like nobody's business, which meant this non-IKEA foosball table would be a piece of cake.

The thing I didn't account for? How hard it would be to do without a second pair of arms to help me lift and hold things in place. I'd sped through the preliminary set up, but now that it was time to take all the pieces and screw them together, it was becoming increasingly more difficult as a human with only two hands.

"Want help?" Max asked from where he sprawled on the couch, watching me try to hold the leg in place and spin the Allen wrench at the same time. I was sweating now, the exertion of trying to get the thing done quickly making me clumsier than usual.

“And void our agreement? No.” I bit my lip and angled the leg better, pushing against the Allen wrench to get it in the hole correctly. Almost . . . there . . .

Got it.

I finished tightening that leg and sat back on my heels. When did it get so warm in here? My sweater was clinging to me in all the wrong ways, so I peeled it off and tossed it on the empty end of the sofa. I never hung around in a tank in the winter, but this room was only getting warmer.

Max sat up. “I really can help, you know.”

“Oh? Have you realized I was totally not lying when I said I could do this?” I picked up the other heavy leg and tried to get it angled correctly, but when I reached for the wrench, it was too far. Dang it. I straightened my legging-clad leg, stretching my toes toward the wrench. It was barely within reach.

“I can get that for you.”

“And cancel our bet? Heck no.” I stretched further, nicking it with my toes and sending it the wrong direction.

The door downstairs opened and slammed shut to the sound of our dads. I looked up quickly, catching Max’s eye, and he jumped up from the couch. His foot hit the wrench when he passed it, sending it close enough for me to grab.

But he hadn’t seemed to notice. I snatched it up, tightening the screws on the leg while he bent over the railing, looking down where our dads were in the kitchen. “That took a while,” he called down to them. “Did you stop for lunch on your way to the hardware store? Maybe trekked through the woods for a bit, grabbed a drink, changed your oil while you were at it?”

“Only about half of those,” Rob called back.

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Yes,” Dad said. “Just need a blow dryer and we can seal those windows better.”

“Still not sure that’s gonna do much,” I muttered, moving to the other side to finish the legs.

“Andrea has one,” Dad said, and I could hear him move into the hallway.

Max was a step ahead, going to block him. His voice trailed from the head of the stairs. “Can’t come up here, I’m afraid.”

“Why not?”

“Christmas secrets.”

It was a code widely accepted in this house. You heard those words, you dropped it and walked away. No one wanted their gift ruined, right? No one in our families, at least. Well, Josh might not care, but it worked for everyone else.

“Tell him to get the blow dryer out of my bathroom, under the sink,” I called.

Max relayed the information, and when he was satisfied that my dad wouldn’t rush the stairs or whatever it was that kept him there for a minute, he came back . . . to find me finished.

I put both arms in the air like I’d crossed the finish line. “How much time is left?”

He glanced at his phone. “Twelve minutes.”

My arms moved into slow motion flex poses. “That’s what they call crushing the competition.”

Max’s dark eyebrow lifted. “Didn’t realize we were competing.”

“You just thought you were getting free labor while you sat and did nothing?”

“That was part of the bet!” he defended. “It was hard not stepping in while I watched you do every little thing.”

I stood, crossing my arms over my chest. “Was it?”

A slow grin spread over Max’s lips as he crossed the rest of the loft and stopped right in front of me. “Not even a little bit. It was immensely enjoyable.”

“Immensely, eh?” I tried to lift one eyebrow, not sure if I was succeeding. I tipped my head back to hold his gaze better. “You want to know what’s *immensely* enjoyable? Knowing I’m better than you at something.”

His chin dropped a bit, bringing his gaze more in line with my own. “You’re better at a lot of things.”

“Okay, charmer. We both know that’s not true. But I *am* better at this. You might be able to understand *taxes*, but you can’t decipher a flat pack manual to save your life.”

“That’s true.”

“And I can.”

“Also true.” A little chuckle bubbled from his chest. “You’re such a little gloater.”

“It’s not often I have a reason to gloat, Max. I have to milk these moments for all they’re worth.”

The shadow of a line formed on his brow. “What do you mean? You’re crazy talented.”

The laugh that came out of me was somewhere between a guffaw and a scoff. Not very cute, regardless of how you spun it. “It’s okay. I’m not that competitive. I don’t really care.”

Which was only partially true. I didn’t care about games or winning as much as either of the guys did. I only heckled them because it was fun to rile them up based on how much they both did care. But when it came to achievements in Casa Dawson-Harvey, I was well and truly at the bottom of the totem pole. Like, so far down, I was probably not even *on* the pole at all.

“Maybe you lose at Snow-Ball every year, but that doesn’t mean you don’t have a reason to gloat about anything.”

“Yeah?” I asked, tilting my head to the side, a little peeved by his insistence. He was such a good guy, such a gentleman, that he couldn’t bear to agree with what we both knew: I wasn’t a very successful person. “Give me one thing.”

He stared at me, his eyes flicking all over my face. Was he trying to read me? All he managed to do was make me



hyperaware of his attention, of how close he stood. Silence stretched between us, punctuated by the distant sound of our dads tinkering with the blow dryer downstairs and his mom doing something in the kitchen. The tide of discomfort flowed within me while he stood there struggling to even think of one thing.

“Exactly,” I whispered. “I’m a dropout, barely skating by as an elementary school secretary who can’t even land a good role in the community theater, with no talent in cooking, singing, or baseball. But I can make a mean s’more, so maybe not all is lost.” My bitterness made his face contort into something akin to confusion.

“Rach—”

“No. You couldn’t even think of one thing.” I started to walk away but Max stopped me, his hands gripping my bare shoulders, his eyes brooding and serious.

“I can think of a hundred.” The quiet conviction in his voice stopped me.

I tipped my chin up to look at him and the rebuttal died on my tongue. His gray eyes were snapping, more serious than I remembered seeing them in a while.

He didn’t step closer, but he didn’t need to. His hands dropped to his sides. “I care about you. Why didn’t you tell me how you felt, Rach?”

The blood drained from my face. For a split second I wondered how he’d figured it out, discovered the crush I was *so* good at hiding. But I realized he didn’t mean *that* secret. He wanted to know why I had suppressed my loser-ness. “As if I’d need to?”

My hands needed to be occupied. I moved to the edge of the foosball table, shifting it gently onto its side. I looked up at him, waiting for him to take the other end, and he did, exactly like I knew he would.

We lifted it together until it was right side up and looking perfect. The thing was heavy duty, and a grunt may have slipped out.

“You have a lot of skills and talents, Rach—”

I shut my eyes, gripping the edge of the foosball table. “Don’t patronize me, Max. Please?”

When I looked at him again, his eyes were hard, his jaw set.

“Just focus on how you’re going to tell your parents, okay? A deal’s a deal.”

Max’s face cleared. “How about you get ready to rub my feet tonight, because I think I actually won the bet.”

I scoffed. “No. I didn’t get any help.”

“I kicked you the wrench.”

My mouth dropped open, a blush bleeding into my cheeks. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“You thought precision like that was an accident?”

“Fool that I was, *yes*.”

He gave me a lopsided smile, nodding down to the table. I lifted it with him and carried it to the corner. He covered it with a blanket.

“I’ll make a sign that says *Christmas Secret* so they leave it alone,” I said, feeling a little peeved that he’d tricked me. No matter how I spun it, a deal was a deal, and I’d gotten help.

“And I’ll shower tonight so you don’t have to be disgusted by my nasty feet.” Circling around the side of the foosball table, Max leaned in and whispered in my ear. “Talent number two. You’re never a sore loser.”

My breath caught.

A grin spread over his lips, making my mouth go dry. “Which is good, since I won fair and square. A deal’s a deal, babe.”

*Babe?* I scowled at his retreating back, fighting the urge to jump him for a kiss he didn’t want.

Right now, distance would do us good. My overactive imagination was sending my heart rate through the roof. It was

time to cool off before I got lost in fantasies of Max whispering sweet things in my ear. *Deep breaths, Rach.* I could really go for a cold ball of snow to the face.

Or I would settle for a normal pattern of breathing for whenever Max cashed in on that massage. Fingers crossed he'd wait until I was over him.

But ... that would be *never*.

CHAPTER  
**NINE**

## MAX

**B** *abe?* When in my entire life have I ever called Rachael *babe?* It had slipped out completely without my permission. In the moment, it felt right, but the aftertaste sat strangely on my tongue. She wasn't that type of girl. She was Rachael. My best friend's little sister. My pseudo-sister. The woman I'd known my entire life, who was familiar with all my faults and embarrassing stories.

I shook myself, pushing the frosting around a sugar cookie I believed was supposed to be something like the Grinch's head, but really just resembled the *Nickelodeon* splat. Mom had brightly colored frosting and sprinkles set out on the table, and we already began decorating, even though the hospital group hadn't returned yet.

The dads had each done one cookie before taking them to the couch five feet away and turning on a Hallmark Christmas movie while they munched.

"Is this one supposed to be Max?" Rachael asked from the other side of the table, lifting a cookie and squinting at it. Her blonde hair fell over her shoulder in a soft wave, and her little nose scrunched while she examined the cookie.

Mom beamed. "Yes!"

"You made a cookie of me?"

"Of the Grinch's dog," Rachael corrected without meeting my eyes.

That made more sense.

She glanced at me and dropped her gaze quickly, avoiding any prolonged eye contact. Which was fine with me. I would just focus on my adorable green blob. Maybe with the right accents, I could make it resemble Rachael the Grinch.

When Mom had asked if we wanted to get a start on the cookie decorating after dinner and revealed she'd done homemade shapes from the book *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, how could I refuse? That would reveal that I was unsettled, and the last thing I wanted to do was give Rachael any indication she'd thrown me earlier.

But she had. Like, a lot.

Not the babe thing. That was weird, but just a slip of the tongue. *My* tongue, so I couldn't blame her for that anyway.

Her revelation about the way she viewed herself as a failure was jarring, too, but that wasn't even what bothered me the most.

No, it was the fact that she was struggling. Why was she still a secretary when it wasn't going to cover her rent? Why wasn't she trying out other theaters who could appreciate her talents better if she wasn't happy with the roles she was being offered? Why didn't she make a change in her life if it wasn't enough to satisfy her?

Kind of like I did, accepting the job offer in San Francisco.

I glanced up and caught her watching me before she shifted her attention quickly to my mom. "I'm not sure we can give these to the neighbors," Rachael said, nodding to the frosting massacre in my hand.

Mom followed her gaze to my cookie and laughed. "I'll tell them the children helped decorate."

"Don't they know your children are adults?" I asked. We'd been Christmas neighbors with these families for most of our lives.

"Yes." Mom kept frosting her . . . whatever her yellow and pink blob was supposed to be.

The front door opened to admit a gust of cold air, followed by Josh, Savannah, and Andrea.

“Broken collar bone,” Josh announced, his left arm in a black sling, the other hanging free.

Ouch.

Rachael rose from her seat and leaned on the back of her chair. “How bad is it?”

“Could be worse,” Andrea said.

“It’s painful, but it should heal quickly. Six weeks-ish,” Josh said, like this wasn’t a total bummer. He must have been given something to help with the pain. At least it wasn’t his writing arm, so it wouldn’t affect his schooling too much.

“He needs rest this week,” Savannah said, helping him to the recliner in front of the TV.

Harry pointed to his son from the opposite sofa. “No more sledding for you.”

“Or snowboarding,” Josh said sadly.

“Or Snow-Ball,” Rachael added.

Josh shot me a look of resignation. “Or hiking.”

Shoot. This totally ruined his proposal plan. From the way he grimaced while adjusting in the chair, it was obvious he wouldn’t be walking up the ridge anytime soon. Maybe we could come up with something else.

Mom jumped up from her chair and went to stir the crockpot. “We’ve eaten already. Are you guys hungry? I have stroganoff and egg noodles.”

“Starving,” Josh said.

Andrea shared a small smile with Rachael as she passed, shaking her head.

“I’ll get it for you,” Savannah said, her long ponytail swinging as she walked. She was so attentive.

While they worked to get Josh situated and fed, I kept making my cookie worse and worse. Not intentionally, just

from sheer lack of talent. The attempt to Rachify the cookie was an utter failure. It looked terrifying now.

Maybe I could fix it.

Rachael had completed her tenth cookie, effortlessly making a cute little snout and antler horns on a dog or quirky ornaments or Cindy Lou Whos. She sat at the opposite end of the table from me, chatting with my mom about the office politics in her school, then moving on to the various reasons *Twilight* was an underappreciated series. Andrea served herself some stroganoff and took the other empty chair down on the women's end of the table, listening to their conversation with growing amusement.

But the more they talked about sparkly vampires and aggressive wolf men, the more irritated I became.

"She lost me in the end, there," Mom said, dipping her knife into the green icing. "The moment I realized Bella was about to drink blood, I closed that book and never looked back."

"No," Rachael said, dragging the word out. "You missed so many good things!"

Mom shook her head. "I can't unsee the blood thing. Call it a hazard of the profession, I guess."

"We all have different tolerance levels," Andrea added. "I can't handle the drama. Give me a Sandra Bullock film any day of the week."

"*While You Were Sleeping!*" Rachael all but shouted, a smile spreading over her lips that made my fingers drum up a rhythm on my leg. "We should turn it on."

The dads had taken their Hallmark movie upstairs after the noise came in and made it hard to hear, so the TV down here was up for grabs. Rachael glanced at me before directing her attention straight to Savannah and Josh on the couches.

The little elf was avoiding my eye contact still, and that irked me. She could pretend to be unbothered, but she wasn't, and it was slightly satisfying to know how hard she was



working to avoid me. It was also incredibly frustrating. I'd done nothing wrong.

"Oh, I do love that one," Mom said.

"I was thinking *Die Hard*," I said, shooting Rachael a look.

"That's not really a Christmas movie," Savannah argued.

"Neither is *While You Were Sleeping*."

Mom gave me a look that clearly told me to knock it off. "You know everyone considers it one."

"Because it has Christmas in the movie? So does *Die Hard*."

"I'm with Max," Josh said around a bite of stroganoff. "If you don't want *Die Hard*, you can watch the lovey movie upstairs with Dad."

I watched Rachael's face as I spoke. "Let's take it to a vote."

She looked at me sharply. We had a deal. I'd helped her on the puzzle, she voted on the next movie with me.

Well, I was cashing in, and she knew it.

"All for *Die Hard*?" I asked, raising my hand.

Josh lifted his hand in the air. Rachael slowly raised hers, watching me.

"But *While You Were Sleeping* was *your* idea," Andrea said, startled.

Rachael glared at me. "I owe Max a movie vote."

Savannah tossed her arm in the air, too. "Josh deserves to watch a movie he likes after what he went through today."

"His own recklessness—"

"Rachael," Andrea said in a warning. "Be kind."

She rolled her eyes and lowered her arm.

"All for sleeping through a romance?" I asked.

Both moms raised their hands, shaking their heads.

I sat back, satisfied. “Well, I guess you get to do that upstairs, then.”

“And *you* get to wash the dishes tonight for being a smart aleck,” Mom said, pushing back her chair. She rounded it and kissed the top of my head. “I’ll get you started.”

I dropped the ugly splat cookie on the table and followed her into the kitchen, listening vaguely while Savannah passed Josh the remote and he searched for the movie.

“I’ve got this, Mom.” I nudged her gently aside, taking over at the sink.

The movie came on behind us.

“It’s okay, Max. Your movie is starting.”

Like I really cared about it? I was just trying to get a rise out of Rachael. A lot of good that had done me. Our interaction had lasted all of fifteen seconds.

I took the plate Mom was rinsing out of her hands. “You cooked. I’ll clean.”

“Okay,” she said, wiping her hands on a dish towel and setting it on the counter. She walked away, but she didn’t leave. I washed all the dishes from dinner and moved on to the pots and pans she’d used to cook while she and Andrea moved the finished cookies to the counter and cleaned off the table. When the kitchen was clean, they went to watch the movie upstairs with the dads, leaving us down here with Bruce Willis.

The TV downstairs was smaller than the one upstairs, and the couches were more formal. Ergo, less comfortable.

To be honest, I didn’t really love *Die Hard*. Go ahead, revoke my man card. Jake Peralta would be totally ashamed.

I leaned back against the counter, drying my hands on a towel. It was dark except for the kitchen light. Rachael had moved over to the puzzle table and was leaning over it, looking closely at the pieces. When did I become a prepubescent kid, obsessed with my feelings and Rachael’s

feelings and making sure we were on the same page? It was weird and also consuming.

Bruce could do whatever he wanted on screen. I only had one thing on my mind, and it was my best friend's little sister.

Better talk to her, clear the air, and nip this weird new obsession in the bud.

I pulled out the chair beside Rachael and took a seat, surveying how far she'd gotten already.

"You really don't have to do this. You can go watch your movie," she said, not looking up at me.

But I couldn't. Rachael never struggled to meet my gaze, so there was definitely something broken between us. "I'd rather help you."

She dropped the puzzle piece she was holding in a pile and gave me an overly bright smile. "Thanks. That's nice of you."

What? No barb? No joke? No bringing up the arrangement that forced me to help her with this puzzle?

This was not the Rachael I knew. "What's going on?"

She widened her eyes almost comically big. "I don't know what you mean."

"I think you do, so you can drop the act."

"There's no act—"

"Thanks?" I repeated. "That's nice of you?"

She blinked at me. "It *is* nice of you to help."

"No, it's me holding up my end of the bargain, and you know that."

"Well, *excuse me* if I'm trying to be normal—"

I waited, but she didn't continue. "Why would you need to try?"

Rachael made a guttural, frustrated sound that did something weird to my stomach, drawing a buzz down the center of my core. She leaned closer. "Why are you doing this?"

It was a good, valid question. One I didn't have the answer to. Honestly, I wasn't sure why I couldn't just let it go, but Rachael had gotten under my skin, and I needed to get her out of my head.

I leaned in too, lowering my voice. "Because I want us to actually *be* normal."

She held my eyes, her own sizzling. Dark brown pools I could jump into and never leave again.

I stood, taking her hand and pulling her with me. "I think I might've seen that corner piece in The Closet." I made sure my voice would carry so Josh and Savannah wouldn't think our sudden exit was weird. If they could feel the charge in the room, though, they wouldn't be buying my excuses anyway.

When we got around the corner and out of sight, I tugged Rachael into The Closet but didn't bother turning the light on. My ragged breath cut through the quiet room. "I'm sorry if I was weird, but we can't keep pretending, because it's not actually working."

"Weird?" she asked, her voice just as passionate and just as quiet as mine.

She was defensive. *Finally*, we were getting somewhere.

"You called me babe!" she accused in a whisper-yell, her brown eyes dark and snapping.

"I didn't mean to. It just slipped out." Had I stepped closer, or had she? I could smell her pomegranate shampoo, so I was probably closer than I needed to be. But I wouldn't back down first. "Want me to promise I'll never say it again? You've got it. I won't."

"Okay, great."

"Awesome."

"Fine."

"Wonderful."

"Now that we've settled that . . ." She tried to sneak around me, but I put my arm on the wall to stop her and she

bumped into it with her nose.

“You gonna be normal now?” I asked quietly.

“You gonna keep your shirt on?”

I looked down. My shirt hadn’t suddenly disappeared.  
“Huh?”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“What does my shirt have to do with anything?”

“It’s like ten degrees in here—”

“Exaggeration.”

“—so you should keep covered up, that’s all.”

A thought hit me that was too delicious to be ignored. “Do you . . . *like* me without a shirt on, Rachy Rach?”

She looked mortified. “Of course not! Gross.”

My hand stayed where it was, keeping her in The Closet. She could slip out if she really wanted to; the door was open behind us. But I guessed she didn’t. Light bled in from the front room, but only just enough to see. I lifted my shirt with my free arm, flexing my ab muscles just for fun. “You mean this is gross?”

Rachael’s eyes dipped down before they landed squarely on my face again. She blushed, obvious even in the dimness, which meant her cheeks were probably scarlet.

Good grief. What was I doing?

“You know two can play at this game, right?” she asked, her voice chillingly normal. It sent a wave of goosebumps down my spine that I chose to ignore.

I swallowed, cocking my head to the side. Nerves made my body tight, but I ignored them. “You mean you can pretend you think I’m gross?”

Rachael’s cold hand pressed to my abs, making me suck in a breath. “Oh my gosh, you’re actually *emitting* heat.” Her other hand joined in, fingers grazing my stomach, dipping under my shirt. Chills swept over my body, chills she could

undoubtedly feel. She looked up and held my gaze. “Fine. I’ll admit what we all know. You’re not gross.”

I dropped my shirt, watching her face.

“I wouldn’t want to hurt their feelings, anyway,” she muttered.

“Whose?”

“All six of your abdominal muscles.” She slid her hands free, resting them on her hips, and I missed them immediately. “Tell me, why does an accountant need a body like that again?”

*A body like that?* She’d checked me out? I mean, apart from just now when I’d literally asked her to. I cleared my throat. “For the number crunches, obviously.”

A smile lit her face, just as bright as my chest was warm.

We were back.

“Can I go finish my puzzle now?” she asked.

“You still owe me a massage.”

Her eyes snapped to mine. Maybe I should have waited to bring it up.

“We can get to it later, though,” I said.

“Good. This puzzle needs my attention.”

I dropped my arm and watched her leave.

I stayed in the dark for another few minutes, but my body was still humming, my heart still racing, my brain in panic mode. What the heck was going on between Rachael and me, and why wasn’t I doing anything to stop it?

Josh’s face popped into my head. *She’s off-limits.*

Guess I needed to find a way to forget basically everything that happened today.

Huh. That was more disappointing than I expected.

# CHAPTER TEN

## RACHAEL

**M**y spoon dragged through the oatmeal in my bowl, swirling the milk to mix it in better. No one else was in the kitchen yet, and I appreciated the quiet in the morning light while I sorted my jumble of thoughts. I wore my Rudolph onesie with a sweatshirt on top and an extra pair of fuzzy socks over my hooves. I probably looked weird, but *man*, I was warm.

I'd almost donned the Grinch onesie last night, but it felt a little weird after the whole closet incident.

Max was behaving strangely, and I didn't know what to do about it. I couldn't reveal how I felt about him, obviously. Last night's moment in The Closet proved he wasn't interested in me, not with the way he clammed up as soon as I started flirting back for real. But I also couldn't avoid him. We all saw how well *that* went down. Hint: it had led to the whole closet incident.

So I was stuck between awkward and uncomfortable, with no clear path to normalcy.

A door closed in the loft area, followed by footsteps down the stairs. I took a bite of my mostly cooled oatmeal as Rob came into the kitchen.

"Morning, kiddo," he said, reaching for a mug. He pulled out his tea stash. "Merry Christmas Eve."

I saluted. "Same to you."

He filled the tea kettle with water. "How was the room last night? Any warmer?"



How much lying was acceptable this early in the morning?  
I cringed.

He caught it. “Not any warmer, then?”

“I layered up more, so that helped.”

Rob shook his head. “Then the problem is in the ducts. It hasn’t always been this bad, right?”

“No, not this bad, but it’s always been chilly in that room. I’m used to layering. And I always bring my weighted blanket.”

“You shouldn’t have to, though. We need to get someone out here to look at it, but I doubt anyone can fit us in this close to Christmas.”

“What about a space heater?” Max asked just behind me, his voice low and husky from sleep.

My shoulders tensed, but I pretended they didn’t. Maybe he didn’t notice the effect he had on me.

He padded into the kitchen in a Henley and charcoal joggers, then pulled out a bowl and a box of Frosted Mini Wheats.

“A space heater could work,” Rob said.

“I don’t want to spike the electric bill.”

Rob gave me a look, shaking his head. “Don’t worry about that, Rach.” He dunked the tea bag in his hot water. “Worry more about where we’ll find one on Christmas Eve.”

I heard the challenge in his voice. He liked having a project, and if I was a betting girl, I’d put money on the fact that he would recruit my dad and be out of the house within the next hour on the hunt for a space heater.

“How is work going?” Rob asked, dropping a slice of bread in the toaster.

“It’s work.” I shrugged. “The kids are a hoot, but the parents are less fun.”

“Who do you deal with more?”

“It’s about half and half. More parents than I’d like.”

“What would you rather be doing?”

“Teaching.” At the theater, which was why I’d applied for the open position last week. All my fingers and toes were crossed for it, but I was still waiting to hear back.

“You’d make a great teacher,” Rob said, buttering his toast at the counter.

“What subject?” Max asked, putting the milk away.

“Little kids.”

Max slid into the seat beside me with his cereal and a banana. “I don’t think that’s a subject.”

“I just like them the most. I can’t actually teach in the state of California, anyway. You need a certification for that.” After finishing a bachelor’s degree, which I also didn’t have.

“And you’re much too old to go back to school,” Max deadpanned.

His dad didn’t catch the sarcasm. “You’re never too old to go back to school, son. Especially not when you’re still in your twenties.” He picked up his toast and mug and started out of the kitchen. “If your dad comes down, Rach, tell him to get ready to leave. We’re finding you a heater.”

“You got it.”

Max took a bite of cereal, eyeing me above his spoon. “So, teaching?”

I didn’t want to have this conversation with the golden boy. I took a bite of oatmeal and pointed to my lips like *oh no, can’t talk with my mouth full*.

He watched me eat.

Which was oddly discombobulating.

When I swallowed, he asked again. “So, teaching?”

“Gosh, you’re nosy.”

“And you think you’re really good at avoiding me, but I get you every time.”

“You sound like a creepy stalker.” I took a bite of my oatmeal. “Or an extended warranty salesman.”

“Lucky for you, I’m just an invested friend.”

“Invested, huh?”

“I’ve put a lot of years into this friendship,” he defended.

Okay, *invested* was fair.

Max sat back a little in his seat. “All joking aside, you know you can trust me, right?”

Could I, though? If I voiced my goals aloud, wouldn’t that somehow jinx me into not getting the job? I really, really wanted this teaching job at the theater. It was for elementary and middle school kids, both during the day for the homeschoolers and after school. Taking the job would mean a slight pay cut, but at least I’d be doing something I loved, right? I could pick up a second job to cover the rest of my rent. I needed to do that now, anyway, with the increase coming in January.

Which meant I probably needed to skip the auditions coming up for *Seven Brides*. That was oddly not as depressing a thought as I would have expected. Maybe a little break from being on stage would be good for my stress levels and time management. But still, another job on top of the one I already had sounded exhausting.

“What’s the frown for?” Max asked.

“Just calculating something.” The hours of free time I wouldn’t have anymore, to be precise.

He looked at me earnestly, his face open and entirely trustworthy. What did I have to lose? Nothing, really. I toyed with the cold dregs of my oatmeal. “I applied for a job at the River City Playhouse teaching theater to kids.”

Max’s gray eyes lit up. “Rach, that’s great!”

“Well, kind of. It doesn’t pay well, so I’ll need to get a second job, but the hours overlap, so I can’t keep my secretary position.”

His expression dropped. “You want to take a new job that requires you to work two jobs?”

“My rent is going up, so I’ll have to work two jobs anyway starting in January. If I can get another job that soon.” The money I’d been saving up to replace my car would cover me for a little while, at least. Except . . . now my car needed it.

His eyebrows lifted, and he dropped his spoon in his bowl. “Why don’t you find somewhere else to live?”

“Have you seen my tiny apartment? It’s already a studio. I can’t go smaller than that. So far my rent has been manageable and much lower than the roommate situations I’ve looked into.” I shook my head, getting up to put my dishes in the dishwasher. “It’s fine. I can’t even cross that bridge until I hear back on the theater job. Lisa told me I’d know soon.”

He didn’t look convinced. “Will you even be happy if you’re working that much?”

“I’ll be much happier than if I had one nine-to-five job that paid well and sucked my soul. Can you imagine me sitting at a desk and counting . . . numbers or something all day?”

His lips quirked into a smile and he brought his dishes to the sink. He rested his hip against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest. The Henley accentuated his biceps, but I didn’t let my eyes linger there. “You know I do more than *count numbers*, right? Which is repetitive in itself.”

“Yeah. You figure out how much money is owed to the government and make people write enormous checks.”

“Sometimes I make the government write checks, too.” He rolled his eyes, but he was grinning. “It’s not as boring as you make it sound. I enjoy the systems and the numbers and figuring out how to best help my clients.”

“Which is why it’s a good thing you finished school.”

He peered down at me, and I wasn’t entirely convinced he wasn’t looking straight into my soul. I really hoped he wasn’t, or he’d be seeing a lot of hearts drawn around pictures of his face or clumsy cursive *Mrs. Rachael Dawsons*. And those were just my doodles from last week.

“It’s not too late, you know,” he said.

For us? I bit my bottom lip, eighty percent sure that’s not what he meant.

Max looked at me earnestly. “You could finish your degree. Then it’s, what? Another two years for teaching certification?”

“One.”

He smiled. “You’ve looked into it.”

“Maybe.”

“That means you’re interested. You could do it, Rach, if you wanted to. There’s nothing stopping you.”

That was where he was wrong. “Except the two jobs I’ll be working just to pay my rent? The scholarship I *don’t* have to cover tuition and books?”

I was still paying off my student loan from when I *didn’t* get my degree. I’d gotten just over halfway, which meant I had at least three semesters left just to finish my undergrad.

Max was still watching me intently. “How many credits do you have already?”

Okay, I knew what was happening here. Max wanted to crunch my numbers, and not in a sexy way.

I reached across the counter and pulled over the vase of flowers he’d brought to my play. I sniffed their rich rosy scent. “It’s not on my radar right now.”

“But it could be, and it could mean doing what you really want to do and earning enough to cover all of your rent.”

“Years from now.”

He shifted on his feet. “Well, yeah. You can’t reap the rewards without putting in the work first.”

I stilled, dropping my hand from where it was cupping a perfect red rose. Finishing school and getting my teaching certification would be more than just work, though. It would be sacrificing, and it would take years and years to get all the

classes finished that I needed while also working and trying to survive. How long would it take to finish if I took one class each semester? Ten years? Twelve?

Max stepped closer, fingering the velvety petals of the rich burgundy rose I'd been admiring. When he faced me again, he was much closer than necessary. It shot me back to last night in The Closet and the weird—wonderful?—moment we'd shared with his abs.

“Rachael,” he said, his voice low and soft like that rose. “Listen, about last night—”

“Good morning,” Josh said, making Max jump back so fast you'd think I pinched his stomach. I didn't, I swear. The temptation only crossed my mind.

I faced my brother. “How's your collar bone?”

“It hurts.” Josh shuffled into the kitchen and stopped on the other side of the island. He looked at us suspiciously, his blond hair mussed.

“I'll get you breakfast,” I said. “Since you're infirm. Cereal? Bagel?”

“Cinnamon raisin with cream cheese.”

I pulled a face. “Yuck. But if it's what you want.” It was good to have something to occupy my hands and give me a reason to not face Max with rosy cheeks.

“Are we still playing Snow-Ball today?” Josh asked.

“You aren't,” Max said, leaning against the counter in front of the toaster.

I nudged him aside.

“I can cheer from the deck.” Josh yawned. “You shouldn't skip it just on my account.”

“We can't play yet anyway,” I said. “The dads are going out to hunt space heaters this morning.”

“After lunch, then?” Max asked.

I focused on spreading cream cheese on Josh's bagel while he sat at the table. "Works for me."

Max sat by Josh. They bent their heads together, whispering about something. After a minute, I carried the plate to the table and they both fell quiet.

"What's going on?" I asked, holding Josh's breakfast hostage.

He looked at me, narrowing his eyes. "If I tell you, you can't tell anyone."

Max shook his head. "She isn't *you*, man. She can keep a secret."

Josh's raised eyebrows deserved no response. He looked at me. "I'm proposing to Savannah tomorrow."

I almost dropped the plate. It wasn't that surprising, really. If the woman was allowed at the cabin for Christmas, she was practically engaged to him already. But that he would do it now, at our cabin, in a location that he didn't really have a history with her . . . that surprised me.

Josh eyed his bagel. "The plan was to do it up on the ridge, but that won't really work now."

"We can't think of something equally romantic to make up for that view," Max said.

"Aww." I set the plate down in front of Josh. "You guys are trying to be romantic. That's cute."

"I'm open to any ideas you might have."

Max rubbed a hand over his chin. "If you were getting a proposal here, Rachael, where would you want it to be?"

"Easy. The ridge."

"If that was impossible due to an inability to hike a mountain?" Max pressed.

There was only one other place here I'd want to be proposed to, but it had nothing to do with the gorgeous lake or mountain or the pretty trees or any of it. It had to do with the person I went there with and the moment we shared.

“You have an idea,” Josh said, sounding adorably excited. “What is it?”

I kept myself from looking at Max. “I know the perfect place, and it’s easy to walk to from here, so it would take you minimal effort. *And* the view is almost as good as the one from the ridge. Some may say it’s even better.”

“Where?”

I shrugged. “The dock.”

Josh pumped his good arm in the air—albeit *very* slowly—and closed his eyes. “You absolute genius. That’s perfect.”

I shrugged, skirting around the table. “You would have thought of it, too.”

He didn’t argue with me, and neither did Max, who sat there stone silent while I walked around the table and toward my room again. I needed a moment away; my nerves were dancing and my breathing anything but normal.

“Thanks, Rach,” Josh called.

I looked back when I reached the edge of the room, but my gaze sought Max first. That was a mistake. He was watching me, his eyes steady and questioning, his brow furrowed.

There was no doubt in my mind he’d thought of the same exact moment on the dock I had. I could already see the questions percolating in his mind.

And that was why I was going to do my best to stay away from him for the rest of the day.



CHAPTER  
**ELEVEN**

## MAX

**W**e were basically babies when the dock night happened—okay, so sixteen and seventeen, respectively—and had sworn an oath never to bring it up again. It was barely a week after I'd kissed her at Josh's Christmas party. We were all up at the cabin together for Christmas and Josh had spent the entire week avoiding me. I didn't know what I'd done to make him mad, and he wouldn't admit anything was wrong, so I shuffled my sad little feet outside one night and sulked in the most beautiful place in Tahoe—our private dock on the edge of the lake.

What I hadn't expected was Rachael following me to make sure I was okay. I wasn't, so she sat next to me, our feet hanging over the edge, dangling above the water, and I complained. It had been a good moment for our relationship, healing the weirdness that had buzzed between us since that kiss.

When we stood to go back into the house, I'd helped her up and she'd landed far too close, sending my mind straight back to how it had felt to kiss her only a week before. I'd wanted to do it again, and she knew it by the way I'd stared at her lips. I'd started leaning forward, and Rachael broke the trance by stepping back, leaving me rejected and embarrassed.

But I had almost kissed her again. Without mistletoe, without a bet, without anything influencing us from the outside. It was a moment that would have changed our dynamic forever. Our connection had leveled up emotionally,

and I'd almost ruined it because I'd been attracted to her. She made her position perfectly clear when she backed up.

Rachael agreed when I said it was better if we just pretended the whole thing had never happened, so we'd promised never to bring it up again. It was a pivotal moment in our relationship, and we pivoted toward family and friendship and away from my stupid teenage hormones. Things after that were fairly normal for us. Except we stopped talking about the guys or girls we liked.

And we never mentioned the dock if we could help it.

When Rachael said the dock as her proposal spot, was she breaking the oath? Or had she forgotten all about that night and was just naming places Josh could easily walk to?

It was the question that plagued me for the better part of the day.

I'd ended up pulling out my computer and watching the Giants win the old 2014 world series game. MadBum in his glory days usually cheered me up, but this time that didn't even help.

By the time we had all gathered outside behind the house—except Josh, who was covered in blankets and situated on a reclining camp chair on the upper deck, his feet up and his arm in the sling—it was well into the afternoon, and I was super close to pulling Rachael back in the house and dragging her into The Closet so I could ask what she'd meant by bringing up the dock.

It was official: something was wrong with me. I never thought about her this much, but ever since I had stood on that stage and listened to the guy ask her out, my mind had been occupied by little else. It wasn't normal. Yeah, we were close. We'd always been close. But not like *this*. We were close like teasing and sharing milkshakes and knowing each other's favorite movies and food aversions—cherries for her, fish for me. There had always been a respectful boundary that reminded me just how little-sistery she was to me.

For some reason, my brain wanted to completely squash it. Step over it. Remove the boundary altogether.

Maybe it was Mom's whole Whoville theme that had thrown my brain back to senior year of high school and the time we'd kissed under the mistletoe. Maybe it was remembering my teenage hormones going into overdrive and subconsciously also recognizing that Rachael was now a beautiful, quirky woman with a lovely smile and a . . . *nope*. That needed to end there.

If we were going for total honesty, then it was time to admit that when we'd arrived at the cabin a few days ago and my mom pointed out the mistletoe above our heads, there was a split second when I hoped Rachael would actually kiss me. I'd been so tense, waiting for her to make a decision. I'd wanted to know if there would be any of the same dynamic fireworks we'd had the first time. Her cheek kiss had raised my heartrate to an unreal degree, but also sent me into major crashing disappointment.

Yeah, there was definitely something wrong with me. Time to lose myself in a family-friendly game.

Between the house and the path down to the dock, we had plenty of space for Snow-Ball. The mountain curved up on one side of our backyard and sloped down to the water on the other. It was a beautiful sight, but that dock was still the thing grabbing my attention the most.

"Harveys against Dawsons?" Dad called from where he was using a snow shovel to clear the paths between the bases.

"Only if we get Savannah," Rachael said, gripping the bat far too low and practicing her swing.

"I'm staying with Josh," Savannah said from up on the deck. "But we'll cheer both sides on!"

Bummer. "We could do boys versus girls?"

Rachael pointed her bat directly at me. I was glad it didn't swing free of her hands. "That. I like that idea."

"I'm game," Mom said, giving Andrea a look.

We decided that the girl team—the Ruthy Babes, ridiculously—would bat first.

Andrea clapped Rachael on the back, nodding at her to take the home plate first.

Snow-ball was simple. It was like baseball but with snowballs, and all you had to do to start running the bases was hit a snowball with your bat and obliterate it. You ran the bases while the pitcher and basemen made new snowballs. The only way to get out—aside from never making contact with your bat—was to be hit by someone’s snowball. They couldn’t start making them until you started running, and you were always safe on a base.

It was actually really fun, and much trickier to run in the snow or make a snowball under pressure than it sounded.

I took the pitcher’s mound, bending to gather a handful of snow from my bucket. It was the one advantage given to the pitchers. Rachael got into position, holding the bat down near the very bottom, like she did every year.

“Choke up, Rach.”

She raised her eyebrows. “No, thanks.”

I lifted my arms. “What?”

“How do I know you aren’t trying to sabotage my swing?”

“He’s not,” Harry called. “You’re holding the bat way too low, hon.”

Rachael scowled but did as we suggested. We had this same conversation *every* year. I packed the snowball as tight as I could and let it arc toward her. Rachael swung and missed. It landed behind her with a plop.

“Strike one!” Josh called from above us.

Rachael got into position again while I packed another snowball. She held my eyes, hers sparkling. The sun beat off the snow with blinding light, which I kept at bay behind my sunglasses. But Rachael hadn’t worn any, which made her squint adorably. I tossed the ball, and she made contact with the bat.

She squealed, throwing the bat behind her and taking off for first base. It took me that long to make a new ball, but when I turned, she was running for second.

“Get her!” Dad yelled, still trying to form his own snowball. I threw and missed.

She kept running.

Harry was waiting at third base with a snowball in his hands, so Rachael stopped running halfway there and retreated to second. Her dad had to drop the ball, as per the rules of the game. The made-up rules Josh and I had painstakingly painted on a piece of plywood that was probably buried somewhere in the garage.

Mom was the next batter.

Weirdly, my brain was locked on the woman standing behind me instead of the one I was supposed to be striking out. Even more oddly, my brain stayed on her for the rest of the game. It didn't matter what position I was in or where I was meant to be throwing snowballs, I was clocking Rachael's movements for the next hour and a half while we played hard and surprisingly fairly even.

It was three to three, I was up to bat, and Rachael had taken the pitcher's mound.

“Game point?” Harry called.

Mom agreed. “I need to get started on dinner soon, or we'll be eating at midnight.”

An exaggeration, but I understood. I held the bat, allowing my focus to fall on Rachael wholly and completely for the first time all day. It wasn't polite to stare, but I could pretend this was a tactic to unnerve her, right? Really, I was just taking in all her features, from her squinting eyes—thank you, sunlight—to her wrinkled nose and full lips. Her beauty was so simple, not in your face or exaggerated, but straightforward and organic and clean.

*Why* had I never noticed before? Or maybe a better question was why was I noticing now?

A snowball arced toward me and hit me square in the face.

“Max!” Dad called. “You didn’t even swing!”

I wiped the snow from my cheeks with the pads of my gloves. “I was distracted.”

“You were staring right at her,” Savannah called unhelpfully from the deck.

Exactly. *Distracted*.

I shook out my shoulders and refocused. Rachael threw another ball and I shattered it with my bat, then took off running. I had barely passed first base when a snowball smashed against the back of my neck, making me jump. The cold, icy bits trailed down my back, and I shook, wiping it off.

“Out!” Harry called. He was on *my* team.

But judging by the beaming smile he directed at Rachael, he was just proud of his daughter.

Based on the way she grinned, she was also proud of herself.

“The game’s a tie,” I said.

Rachael shook her head. “You agreed to game point.”

“But you didn’t get an actual point.”

“Semantics,” she called. “Ruthy Babes won, and you know it.”

I walked up to her, like she was a trash-talking player on the opposite team, getting all up in her business. “You lost, fair and square.”

“We *tied*, fair and square.”

“And I’m going to make lasagna,” Mom said, passing us.

Rachael’s face lit up. “Can I help?”

“Of course.”

She faced me again, grinning. “Helpers get the extra noodles!”

A laugh tore from my chest. I'd forgotten her affinity for plain pasta. "Weirdo. You don't want to wait until it's slathered in sauce and cheese?"

"I mean, that's my all-time favorite thing, which I think you know. But there's just something about a plain lasagna noodle that's just . . . *mmm*."

"I guess it's good you have something to console you after *not* winning Snow-Ball."

Rachael's eyes snapped to mine. "Take it back."

"It's the truth."

She pressed her hands to my chest and pushed, but I didn't move much. "Take it back."

"I think your plain noodles are waiting for you."

She dug a finger into my chest—not painful at all, thanks to my coat—and lowered her voice. "I think you can't bear the fact that you couldn't get me out, but I got you."

"Are you kidding? I love that. It's number one on the list now. Rachael Harvey: great at Snow-Ball."

"What list?" Her brow puckered, and she dropped her hand.

"The list of things you're good at. It's pretty dang long, and I think it's time you heard it."

She froze, leaning back. "We had this conversation already. You could only think of one thing."

"No, I was just taken off guard. I told you, I can think of a hundred. And I'm going to spend the rest of the week making sure you know every single one."

Rachael stood there, giving me the oddest expression, like she was trying to work out a puzzle or do a math problem. "What's gotten into you?"

She'd noticed. I swallowed. "You shouldn't undervalue yourself, Rach."



“Okay.” She shook her head. “I’m going to go learn the secrets of the Dawson lasagna recipe. You can be honest with me when you’re ready.”

It hadn’t occurred to me until now that our parents had all gone inside, leaving us out here alone. “Why’d you mention the dock?”

Rachael looked at me sharply—so much so that she gave herself away. “Because it was a good idea.”

Was she avoiding the question? “It didn’t make you think about that night?”

She stepped closer, lowering her voice. “Of course it did, but we swore a pact never to mention it again, and until now I’d done a really good job of not thinking about it, either.”

“But now you’re thinking about it?” My voice had gotten thick, heavy, like it carried the weight of what I was saying. It was foolish of me to crack this memory open and lay it between us, raw and vulnerable, but I couldn’t help myself. My body buzzed with thoughts of the past and the way she was looking at me now, swirling together old and new, questions and uncertain feelings.

“So are you,” she countered. Then she shook her head. “Nothing even happened then.”

“It almost did.”

“And you’re bringing it up, like eight years later? Gosh, Max. What’s your angle here?”

What *was* my angle? I was single and ready to mingle and the only available girl was Rachael? No. That wasn’t true. Was it that I cared about her and didn’t like the way she looked at herself and wanted to fix that? Yeah, but that reason alone wouldn’t make my blood hum the way it was now, just from standing close to her.

She looked up at me with round brown eyes and wind-bitten rosy cheeks, and the overwhelming feeling surged within me to slide my hands around her and kiss her senseless.

I could do it, too. She was open and waiting. How would it feel to—

“Max!” Josh called from the deck above us, startling both Rachael and I into jumping apart.

Well, crap. I’d forgotten about his little warning for half a second. I’d forgotten about him entirely. I looked up and caught him watching us with a hard expression. Savannah was nowhere to be seen. Had he been watching us during this whole conversation?

I stepped back from Rachael. “Enjoy your tasteless noodles.”

“Hey,” she said, clearly trying to navigate us back to normal just like I was. “You used to love them, too.”

“I grew a palate.”

She stuck her tongue out at me before mounting the stairs to go back inside. I followed her, but walked over to where Josh was set up in his zero-gravity camp chair, reclining.

“You missed a close game,” I said, leaning against the railing and crossing my arms over my chest.

“Oh, I saw everything.” He didn’t sound amused. The door shut behind us, leaving us alone in the quiet cold. “I told you to stay away from Rachael.”

I tensed. “It’s not what you think.”

“I’m not blind. You guys have been weird this week. What happened? Did you kiss her again?”

“Again?”

He looked at me like *don’t play stupid*.

Fine, then I wouldn’t. “No.”

Josh shook his head. “It’s not a good idea, man. You shouldn’t mess with family like that.”

“I’m not—” I narrowed my eyes slightly. “You know we aren’t actually blood-related, right?”

“That doesn’t make us any less family.”

“No, it doesn’t, but it also does. Rachael isn’t my sister.”

Josh looked like I’d slapped him. It was a really weird thing to be hurt over. “You’re playing with fire.”

“I’m not *playing* with anyone.”

“I meant our family dynamic,” Josh said. “You’re going to screw everything up if you have a fling with Rach and break her heart.”

No one said anything about a fling. The idea was almost offensive. “Who’s to say she wouldn’t break mine?”

Josh tucked his chin, his eyebrows lifting. “Uh, *you* haven’t been pining over her for a decade.”

*What?* The deck felt like it fell out from beneath my feet, plummeting me down to the snow beneath us. “That’s a major accusation.” I was proud of my steady voice despite my haywire heart rate.

“You might have been blind until now, but just think about it and you’ll know it’s the truth.”

I dropped into the seat beside him, Savannah’s vacated chair, and tried to see Rachael through the new lens he’d offered. Pining sounded a bit excessive, but still . . . we were close. I couldn’t imagine her living an unrequited life or anything, but the idea that she might have been harboring feelings for me was fairly inflating to my mood. I couldn’t think about what it might have meant for our past relationship, but if Josh was right about the way she felt, then it could mean something for our future.

Except he didn’t want me to have a future with her. “Why are you telling me this now?”

“So you don’t toy with her.”

I rubbed a hand over my face. “You know, we never would have kissed the first time if it wasn’t for you.”

“Yeah, I own that. I was a stupid kid.” He looked at me, his brown eyes dark under his lowered brow. It seemed like he was making a decision, and I could see when he grew resolved. “It was a selfish move on my part. I had like a split-

second to make a decision when I saw Rachael coming out of the kitchen that night, and I knew she was crushing on you because she always got extra weird when you were around. I also knew Annabelle was giving you attention, and part of me hoped if you kissed someone else, Annabelle would stop going after you.”

That was news. “You liked Anna?”

Josh shook his head. “It doesn’t matter anymore. The Rachael thing didn’t work out anyway, and by the time I’d realized what I’d done to her, it was too late to take it back. I felt like the worst brother ever. It wasn’t a good night for me.”

“That’s why you wouldn’t talk to me for most of that Christmas break, even out here.”

“Yeah, I was sulking. You got the girl, and I really wanted her.”

I stood, needing space and maybe a long run to work through everything I was feeling. His explanation was years too late. How different would things have ended up for all of us—for me and Rachael, specifically—if he’d talked to me then? I’d almost *kissed* her, days after the mistletoe, just because I’d wanted to. But she’d stopped it, and I let it go.

If Josh had been upfront with me, would I have let it go? Would we still have walked away from the dock, promising never to bring it up again?

Annabelle became my girlfriend when we got back from Tahoe, and I dated her for two years. But when we were in Tahoe that Christmas, I hadn’t committed to her yet. I could have walked away from her if Josh had only been honest with me. “Why didn’t you tell me how you felt?”

Josh scoffed. “I was young and stupid? It wasn’t your fault she chose you.”

“If I’d known you were into her, I would have chosen you over the girl.”

“Will you do that now?” Josh countered.

His words were like a fist to the throat. Choose him, his family, my relationship with them over these weird, foggy, uncertain feelings for Rachael that were coming out of left field?

Savannah opened the door, poking her head out. “You guys ready to come inside? It’s *freezing* out here.”

I looked at Josh. “I’m gonna go for a run.”

He didn’t look surprised.

I walked away when Savannah came to help Josh in, but I turned back at the door. “Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t keep a secret, man.” Ten years was a long time. He’d never even revealed a hint that he’d known anything about how his sister felt.

Josh looked at me, a wry smile on his face.

“You’re a freaking vault,” I said.

“Yeah, when it’s that important, I guess I can be.”

*When it’s that important.*

Great. How was I going to come back from this now?

CHAPTER  
**TWELVE**

## RACHAEL

**W**hat was it about rolling up a freshly al dente lasagna noodle and sinking your teeth into it? No? Just me? Fine, I was weird. But I loved it.

“Is Max back yet?” Sharon asked, pausing in her bustle to plate all our ugly Christmas cookies and wrap them in red cellophane.

“Not yet,” Rob said from the recliner, his attention on another Hallmark movie. I was pretty sure he’d blown through a half-dozen of them already, and we’d only been here a few days. My mom sat at the puzzle table, trying to piece together some of the bits that had evaded me. That puzzle was *hard*.

“I was hoping we could go caroling while the lasagna baked, but maybe we better wait until dinner is over.”

Rob paused the TV and came into the kitchen. “I’ll get started on the dishes. You go put your feet up.”

“Thanks, honey,” Sharon said, pressing a kiss to his lips before reaching back to untie her apron. She joined my mom at the puzzle table—no complaints from me there—and I pilfered the last unused lasagna noodle.

I moved to help with the puzzle when the front door opened and Max stepped inside, fresh from his run. His chest heaved, and he pulled up his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face, revealing a set of contracted abdominal muscles that would forever be imprinted pleasantly on my brain.

“Might want to close that gaping mouth,” Mom said softly, amusement coloring her words.

I sat quickly, stuffing the rest of the lasagna noodle in my mouth.

Mom and Sharon shared a look that had no business passing over either of their faces.

“Good run?” Sharon asked.

Max looked up, his gaze sliding over me quickly. “Not long enough.”

“I think we’re going to carol soon.”

He smiled. “Sounds great.” He started to walk away but stopped himself. “Actually, you can go ahead without me. I have some things to catch up on.”

“Sure, hon.”

The room was silent when he left. The sound of dishes hitting soapy water, puzzle pieces sliding on the table, Josh’s laughter from the loft upstairs all felt distant. Was Max avoiding me now? That seemed kind of unfair. But it was probably a good thing if he’d reined himself in after whatever that was that happened after Snow-Ball.

I’d thought maybe he felt . . . but if he didn’t, then . . . yeah, this was for the best.

Even if it hurt.

“Should we go caroling now?” Sharon asked. “I don’t think there will be a big group of us this year.”

“That sounds good to me,” Mom agreed, standing. She squeezed my shoulder softly. “Want to go invite Savannah?”

I nodded. “I’m going to grab a few thousand more layers, too.”

Savannah was into the idea, and she fetched her coat from upstairs while I got a sweatshirt and a pair of mittens to go under my coat. I was sliding on a second pair of thick wool socks when the door opened in the hallway and Max came out of the bathroom wearing a towel, his wet hair dripping water down his bare chest. Steam chased him into the hallway in a ridiculous recreation of a romance movie.



Oh, come on. He was doing it on purpose now, wasn't he?

I looked down at the floor, focusing on pulling my socks up and waiting for him to leave before I did something stupid like drooled.

"Try to sing on-key," he said, and I looked up to find him leaning in my doorway.

Yep. Most definitely doing it on purpose. He was Scrooge, doing everything he could to ruin my Christmas.

Well, at least I was the Grinch. I'd dealt with the Whos of Whoville. I knew how to fight back.

Eyes *up*, Rachael.

"I only did that once, and it was entirely to embarrass you in front of Annabelle. I won't be doing it again." I yanked up my sock. "Also, I'm not in high school anymore."

He folded his arms over his chest, bringing definition to his biceps. "Clearly."

I looked at him, doing my best to keep my gaze respectfully on his face. "Did you need something?"

"Just . . . yeah. It can wait."

"Maybe until you're dressed."

His smile turned lazy. "Sure. You *did* mention that I needed to keep a shirt on."

I raised my eyebrows. "You remembered? What's this, then? You just trying to show off?"

"Maybe I wanted to get a reaction out of you."

"Who's acting like a teenager now?"

"Definitely me." His grin widened and he shook his head as he started walking away. "You're right. I'll leave you alone."

"Well, I never said that," I muttered.

Max's head popped back in. "What was that?"

“Nothing,” I sing-songed loudly. My phone rang and I turned it over, laughing. When I saw it was a call from Lisa, my stomach flipped.

There was only one reason she would be calling me, and it wasn't to praise my rendition of Scrooge's nephew's wife.

I swallowed, bringing the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Rachael, hi. It's Lisa. Is this a good time?”

Max's gaze was hot on me. I stood and turned to face away from him. “Sure, of course. How are you?”

“I'm great. Listen, I'll cut right to the chase. The applicants have all been considered, and I'm afraid the River City Playhouse decided to go with someone else for the new teaching position. I wanted you to hear it from me.”

My body felt like it was suddenly in a free-fall, weightless and heavy at the same time.

Lisa *was* the River City Playhouse. The applicants had been reviewed by *her* and she had chosen the teacher. She never thought I was good enough for Mrs. Cratchitt, so I should have known she wouldn't think I was good enough to teach at her theater, either.

Even with that solid logic, this still stung.

I heard Max retreat down the hall and close his door, and I was never so glad to be allowed to wallow in my own self-pity.

“Rachael, you there?”

“Oh, yes.” I cleared my throat. “Thanks for letting me know, Lisa.”

“It's not personal.”

“That's good to know,” I said numbly. I was suddenly overcome by my monstrously ridiculous failure to get a job that could turn into a career I loved. “Was the other applicant someone I know?”

Lisa cleared her throat. “No, I don't think so. He just finished his degree, and he's been working at the Sactown

Theater for the last few years. You'll meet him at the *Seven Brides* auditions. He's going to take on more responsibility than the original posting described."

"I see." So she wanted someone to devote their life to the theater and probably make more money than she'd originally advertised, too. I would have loved that. I would have lived for that.

But I didn't have a degree, so how could I compete with him? If my own acting wasn't enough to prove myself, then what did it even matter?

"I can't wait to meet him," I lied brightly, smiling to cover the overwhelming urge to cry.

"Okay, great," Lisa said, just as fake as the tree we had propped up in our living room. "Have a nice Christmas."

"Thank you. Merry Christmas, Lisa."

We hung up and I dropped my face in my hands, rubbing away the exhaustion and desperation that skittered through my veins and made me want to scream. It was unfair. I was qualified to teach kids how to act—I'd been doing it myself and learning from pros for a decade. High school theater, college theater, community theater. Over the years I'd learned so much. But I couldn't apply that knowledge unless someone was willing to give me a chance, or unless I finished my degree. I wasn't entirely against college, exactly . . . it was more an issue of whether I could afford it and if I would fail again. Either way, it wasn't even a possibility unless someone dropped a truck full of cash on my front lawn.

Maybe Santa would put a scholarship in my stocking.

"Ready to go caroling?" Mom asked, popping her head through the door. I hadn't realized until that moment Max had closed it when he'd left.

He'd probably sensed the conversation was important. Great, did that mean he'd ask me about it later? I'd rather pretend it never happened and continue to live in denial about my situation.

"Rach?" Mom asked, coming into the room. "You okay?"

I had the split second temptation to tell her the whole of it: how unhappy I was dealing with all the parents at the job that I now needed to keep on top of whatever other job I could get in order to make enough money to pay the rent and have enough money left over for groceries and a bus pass. I'd been passed up for an opportunity doing something I'd like because I didn't have the experience or the degree—and I couldn't get the experience without a degree. I couldn't go back to school because I didn't have time or money, and I was terrified that if I got a huge student loan to make it possible I'd end up failing again and drown in debt. History had proven that failure was a possibility. To top it all off, I was just as in love with Max as I have been since we were teenagers, and now he was acting all weird and breaking down my carefully erected boundaries and making me think things I shouldn't be—like how it would feel to drag him under the mistletoe.

She blinked at me, and I shook the melancholy away, pasting a bright smile on my face. “Yeah, of course. Let's go sing some carols!”

Mom didn't look entirely like she believed my false enthusiasm, but she let it pass.

I grabbed my hat, pulled on my boots, and followed her out.

It was Christmas Eve. I would worry about my future later.



Two of the three of the families we went to visit were home and stood at their door while we sang *Silent Night* and *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*. They politely accepted their plate of horribly decorated Grinch cookies and returned the season's greetings. It was an old tradition, and we'd been singing to the same three neighbors on Christmas Eve for most of our lives. I always enjoyed seeing them, but this year felt off. It was weird, missing Max and Josh. I didn't mind having Savannah's soprano to help carry us nicely, but the whole activity just felt empty.

Let's face it. That was probably on me. It was hard to keep a bright Christmas cheer-level smile on my face throughout the whole ordeal. The truth was I felt more like the Grinch deciding if he should attend the Whoville celebration. I'd rather fill my calendar with self-loathing and staring into the abyss than be around my happy family right now.

Even on Christmas Eve.

It was dark when we got back to the cabin, the stars making an appearance in the inky blue expanse of sky above the tall aspens and pines. It was peaceful, and I was tempted to grab a camp chair and take myself out to the dock for some alone time while my family got on with all the traditions awaiting us inside.

Sharon opened the front door of the house and the smell of her lasagna drifted out, making my decision for me.

I wouldn't ditch my family. It just wasn't me.

Also, *lasagna*.

The long dining table had been set with Mom's holly-printed dishes. Two long candle tapers were lit in the center, surrounded by a small centerpiece made up of pine branches and cranberries. It was festive.

Max stood in the kitchen, a hand towel draped over his shoulder, drying stemware.

"Maxwell," Sharon said, dragging out his name with extra affection. "This is beautiful."

Josh looked up from his recliner in front of the TV. "I helped," he called.

"Yeah, if helping is telling me I needed more cranberries in the centerpiece."

Josh shrugged like that was a total given. "It looks better, doesn't it?"

I toed off my boots near the door and slid them into a cubby, unwinding my scarf and hanging my coat on the rack. It was cozy in the cabin, despite the vaulted ceiling. The lights were off in the loft and dimmed in the living room.

“We should have a fire,” Rob said.

Dad nodded. “I’ll help you bring in some wood.”

They disappeared into the garage and the moms got to work assembling the salad and slicing a baguette. I leaned against the wall, watching my family—both the Harveys and Dawsons—work together to put Christmas Eve dinner on the table. Johnny’s portrait sat undisturbed on the wall, as if he was overlooking everything, and my heart gave a pang for our other missing companion. Buddy would be following Dad from the garage now, if he was here, wagging his tail in anticipation of the warm fire they would soon be laying in the hearth.

I liked to think Johnny was watching over Buddy now, and maybe also watching over us.

I went to my room and changed into my Grinch onesie. The caroling had left a lasting chill, and it was the warmest thing I’d brought—especially when it was paired with extra socks and a layer of long-johns underneath it. When I came back to the living room, I hovered near the mouth of the hallway, observing the people I loved most in the world.

Max approached, giving my onesie a once-over that sent me straight back to junior year and getting caught under the mistletoe with him. It was a little tighter now, but I hadn’t gotten any taller, so the thing still fit like a charm. Too bad I hadn’t brought any green face paint.

Max nudged my shoulder with his. “You okay?”

Was he asking about the phone call he’d overheard earlier or just in general?

How did I say that I felt a little like I was drowning under the weight of disappointment and debt and failure?

Max leaned into me. “I’m here, you know. If you need to talk.”

“I know.”

He nodded, which I noticed in my peripheral vision, but I didn’t face him.

“Sometimes talking makes it better. I’m always willing to listen.”

I lowered my voice. “I’ll talk to you after you talk to your parents.”

“I can’t yet. You know that. I want to wait until Christmas is over.”

“Wait until Christmas is over for what?” Rob asked, standing just behind us. The garage door shut, punctuating his presence. How much had he overheard?

A wave of shame swept over my body, prickling me with guilt.

Max tensed beside me.

“Max?” his dad asked, stepping around him. “What’s wrong?”

So, he’d heard enough.

“Nothing. I promise. It’s not—” Max shook his head before sending me a hard look. “It can wait.”

Rob looked uncertain.

“I promise, Dad. It’s not the right time.”

There was a tense moment of silence before Rob nodded and moved away slowly to carry his logs to the hearth.

“Max,” I whispered, reaching for his arm. “I’m so sorr—”

He stepped out of reach and walked away.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTEEN**



## RACHAEL

**D**inner tasted just as superb as it smelled. Sharon's lasagna recipe was the right amount of saucy and cheesy, but even with that Italian explosion in my mouth, it was hard not to feel the sting and bitterness of screwing up. Royally.

Max hadn't even looked at me since the moment his dad overheard us talking. I'd been *whispering*, for heaven's sake. But that meant nothing when Rob had super hearing and was standing in the right place at just the right time. Luckily for Max, his dad was extremely respectful of boundaries. If Max wasn't ready to talk, his dad wouldn't push him.

But Rob just *knowing* Max needed to tell him something was enough to ruin both of their Christmases, I guessed. The mood was totally off now.

Hi, have we met? I'm the idiot who ruined Christmas for everyone. I guessed my Grinch onesie really was fitting.

"That was delicious, Sharon," Dad said, wiping his mouth.

"Should we do stockings now?" Josh asked.

There was a general consensus, and everyone got up from the table to clear dishes. Rob stood at the sink, loading the dishwasher. Savannah helped Josh get situated on the recliner again while Mom fetched his meds to administer his nightly dosage. Sharon put the leftovers away, and Dad went to the garage to fetch the box of stockings.

Waiting to hang the stockings until Christmas Eve was part of our cabin traditions and I loved it. When the stockings were

hung, Christmas was *just* around the corner. We put them up, sang *O, Holy Night* together, and read from Luke in the Bible. Then someone turned on *The Muppet Christmas Carol* before we went to sleep. It was fun, and sweet, and usually my favorite part of our entire week here.

Right now, I didn't want gooey, festive warmth. I wanted to curl up in a ball on my cold top bunk and cry.

Everyone finished their chores and gathered in the living room. Sharon passed Johnny's portrait on the wall and pressed her fingers to it gently before moving on. She did that a lot, and I wasn't sure if she knew I always watched her, my heart squeezing. In this moment, it was especially bittersweet.

I never knew Johnny well—I was too young when he got his diagnosis. I only had vague memories of visiting him in the hospital and having Max stay with us for weeks while his parents stayed with Johnny. Max was at our house often after that while his parents dealt with funeral arrangements and mourned. It had been a blow to lose an eight-year-old, but they still had a six-year-old to care for and help through the grieving process. The Dawsons did everything they could to keep Johnny part of our lives. He was in pictures on the walls in both of our houses and the cabin. We still put his stocking up every year—and every Christmas morning it had the same gift inside.

They mourned, but they didn't stop living.

Rob stood near the fireplace, pulling out stockings one at a time and calling out names. The old golden hooks in the mantelpiece were dull and worn with age, all except for the last one, a new addition I'd only just noticed. Savannah's.

Rob called Max's name, and he got up to hang his stocking.

"What's with the funeral march?" Josh asked, looking between Max and his dad. "Aren't we supposed to be happy? Christmas is tomorrow."

Not the best joke, but okay.

If Josh was picking up on the mood in the room, was everyone else feeling it as well?

“Not now,” Max said, hanging his stocking and sitting down again.

Rob watched his son, then shared a look with Sharon. “Maybe we should finish this later.”

Max’s jaw tensed.

“I just don’t want our discomfort to affect the Harveys’ holiday,” Rob said gently.

“Yeah?” Max asked, sitting up. “Is my mood wrecking everything? I can fix that.”

Oh, no. The Boy Scout was going rogue. His snippy attitude was so unlike him that it shocked everyone into silence.

“I wanted to wait until Christmas was over so I *didn’t* ruin your holiday, but I guess that option was taken away from me.” He shot me a look full of blame. Ouch. He drew in a shaky breath. “So, let’s do this. I’m moving. I got a job in San Francisco, start date January fourth, and I’m moving shortly after we get home.”

Rob looked appropriately surprised, but Sharon only grew deathly still.

The more he talked, the more his voice gentled. He faced his mom. “I know this will be hard on you, but it’s a good opportunity for me, and I’m excited for this new prospect.”

“Will you live in the city?” she asked.

He nodded. “Not too far from Oracle Park.”

Sharon’s eyes sought the portrait of Johnny on the wall, and Max must have tracked her gaze, because he tensed. “Is this a temporary position?” she asked.

Max shook his head. “I’m moving, Mom,” he said slowly, as if she would absorb it better. “I don’t know if it’ll be forever, but it’s not that far. Less than two hours if the traffic isn’t bad.”

Which wasn't the reassurance he was going for, because when was the traffic *ever* not bad between Sacramento and San Francisco?

"And the position?" Rob asked.

"It's a promotion. A great opportunity."

You could have heard a pine needle drop, it was so quiet. Rob and Sharon had become a little too clingy with Max after they'd lost Johnny, not that anyone blamed them, and neither of them had really ever learned how to let go. Now their hands were being pried free, and their fingers were likely cracking from their prolonged grip.

Sharon stood, her eyes glassy. "I'm happy for you, honey. I just . . . I think I need a minute."

She left the room and Rob got up to follow her, squeezing Max's shoulder on his way out.

We all listened to them walk upstairs and close the door to their bedroom. Max stood. "I'm sorry."

"No, Max, don't worry," Mom started to say, but he was already leaving.

Only, he didn't go to his room. He walked outside.

Josh swore, earning him a sharp look from my dad.

"It's all my fault." I cringed. "I said the wrong thing at the wrong time, and I forced that conversation before they were ready for it."

"I don't think anyone's ever ready for hard conversations," Dad said.

"Still my fault."

"Then go fix it," Josh said.

His meds made him a little snarkier than usual, but he wasn't totally out of line. My body itched to follow Max outside, but I felt underqualified for the job. Just like in everything else.

"What can I even do?" I asked.

“Fix it,” Josh repeated.

Mom and Dad didn’t argue with him. I didn’t know if I had the ability to fix anything, but I could be there for Max. I could support him. Especially now that Josh couldn’t. I got up and ran to the cubbies by the door, pulling on my boots and coat as quickly as I could.

“Be careful, Rach,” Dad said. “Take a flashlight.”

I patted my pocket to make sure I had my phone, then left my family in the living room and ran out the door.



*Max*

I started pulling out of the driveway when a hand slapped against my driver’s window and made me slam on my brakes. I swore, rolling down my window. “What the heck, Rach? I could have hit you.”

“Don’t leave! I’m coming with you,” she said, out of breath. It wasn’t that far from the house to the driveway. She must have been sprinting. “Actually, question: *can* I come with you? Pleeese?” The flood light came on above the garage, making her look golden and highlighting her concerned brow.

“I don’t even know where I’m going.”

She shrugged. “That’s fine with me.”

My intention in leaving was to be alone so I could wallow in my own self-pity. I couldn’t do that with Rachael in my passenger seat.

She must have seen my resolve to reject her, because she stepped up on my running board and leaned into the window, bringing her brown eyes far too close for comfort. “Please let me come.”

I had to say something. I had to get her pomegranate shampoo out of my nose before I did something stupid like

kiss her little Grinch face again. I mean, she was inches from my face. *Inches*. “Okay, fine. Get in.”

Rachael hopped down and ran around the front of the 4Runner before letting herself in the passenger seat. I hit the seat warmer button for her while she buckled in, then started backing out.

She shivered. “What are you, crazy? That window is still open.”

“Yeah, because of you.” I hit the auto-roll up button and pulled onto the street, driving toward Tahoe City.

“I wouldn’t have had to bang on your window if you hadn’t torn out of there so fast.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have followed me at all,” I muttered. I definitely wasn’t fun to be around right now. I knew she’d probably chased me just because she was worried, but I wouldn’t have even needed to have that conversation with my parents if Dad hadn’t overheard Rachael. Logically, I knew it wasn’t really her fault. I wasn’t angry at *her*. But my feelings were hot and red, and it was better to channel them into anger where she was concerned.

Otherwise, they would turn in a different direction, and that wasn’t something I could face right now.

I cut her a glance to find her scowling at me. “Why are *you* mad?” I asked.

“Because Christmas is ruined. I really did it. I really Grinched it all up.”

“Maybe next time you want to openly talk about someone else’s secret, you shouldn’t do it in a room their entire family is in.”

Rachael’s scowl deepened.

I looked away so I wouldn’t be tempted to smooth out her wrinkled forehead, putting my attention back on the road. I followed the winding lane until we reached the outskirts of Tahoe.

Rachael let out a frustrated huff.

I could totally relate. My stomach was unsettled, my hands shaky. I didn't like being in this position, upset with her or running from my parents. It was Christmas Eve, but we were all disjointed and out of whack. It was the exact opposite of the Christmas spirit. It was a Christmas mess.

If there was one thing a bunch of left-brained people didn't like, it was a mess.

I pulled into the gas station, right up to a gas dispenser, putting my car into park in the darkened lot. The building was closed, the lights off.

Rachael looked up. "What are we doing?"

"The roads are too slick to drive around aimlessly." I dropped my head into my hands and rubbed the exhaustion from my eyes. When I lifted my face again, I met her gaze. "I just need a minute."

"To stop being angry with me?" she asked.

*To stop being angry with myself.* "This isn't how I planned things to go."

I lifted my gaze toward the gas station and saw a light had come on inside. The door opened and a woman stepped out of the Shell station, holding the door open. She was older, with short white hair and round glasses. I leaned closer to the windshield and squinted. She was waving now, and I was pretty sure she was gesturing for us to come inside.

"What is it?" Rachael asked.

"It looks like that woman is waving us over."

She looked toward the gas station. "Wasn't it closed? I could swear I saw a closed sign in the window when we pulled up."

"I thought so too," I muttered. "But I guess not."

"Do we trust her?"

"We should probably see what she needs." I unbuckled my seatbelt. She could be stranded or in trouble and need our help.

There was no way I was leaving an older woman alone in this weather. “You stay here.”

“Nope,” Rachael said, hurrying to unbuckle her seatbelt. “We don’t know this lady. She could be an ax murderer or a collector of fingernails.”

I paused with my door open and looked back at her. “You think I’d let her trim my nails?”

“Who knows what you’d do for a woman in distress?” She hopped out of the car and speared me with a look. “Which is why I’m coming to protect you.”



CHAPTER  
**FOURTEEN**

## RACHAEL

**M**ax chuckled, but he turned off the ignition and got out of the car. We met in front of the 4Runner and walked between the empty gas pumps together. The woman appeared harmless, with spiky white hair and a charming smile, but you never did know.

“Good evening,” Max called as we approached. “Is there something we can do for you?”

The woman smiled, making the wrinkles groove on either side of her face. She wore a red cable knit sweater that didn’t appear warm enough for this weather, but her cheeks were rosy. “I have fresh hot chocolate. Would you like some? You both look so cold.”

I *was* cold now that we were out of the truck. But was it a good idea to accept hot chocolate from a total stranger?

Max reached for one of the takeout cups she held out. “Thank you.”

I took the other one, but I didn’t drink it.

The sound of tiny, wimpy barking caught my attention, and I peeked through the glass door to see a box inside lined with red velvet and holding one little ball of fur.

“He’s cute, isn’t he?” the woman asked. She sounded like a grandma would, her voice warm and velvety.

I straightened, realizing I’d been nosy. Kind of. It was a gas station, so it wasn’t really like I was staring into her house. “Super cute.”

The woman held the door open. “Would you like to meet him?”

“Who?” Max asked, alarmed.

“The puppy.” I was already walking inside, all previous danger forgotten. Well, maybe not *forgotten*, but shoved to the backburner. I had Max, so he would protect me. And I didn’t see any nail clippers in sight.

The white sign hanging from the box said *FREE* in scrolling red letters, and inside, the puppy was chasing his tail. He was copper, with longer, wavy fur. “A doodle of some type?” I asked.

“Goldendoodle, I believe,” she said. “But I’m not entirely sure. I’m just babysitting until someone wants to take him home.”

There were bits of glossy paper on the floor and a few littering the box. I picked one up to see part of a gingerbread man printed on it. Wrapping paper.

The woman cleared her throat, her cheeks growing rosier. “I attempted to wrap him. He didn’t like the idea.”

I chuckled.

“He’s really free?” Max asked.

“Free and lonely,” she said, tilting her head to the side. “He just wants to be loved.”

My heart panged. “Does he have his shots?”

“He’s up to date,” she said slowly, “on everything he needs. Except for a family.”

I handed Max my drink and knelt on the floor, putting my hands out to the little dog. He came to me willingly, sniffing my green fuzzy sleeves. He tried to climb up my chest, but I lowered him to my lap again, stroking his back while he curled into a tiny ball that filled me with complete and utter joy.

I looked up, holding Max’s serious gray eyes. “I think my heart just grew a size.”

He gave a strangled laugh. “We can’t take him home, Rach.”

“Why not? We have all of Buddy’s things at the cabin. The only thing we’re missing is puppy food.”

“I have a small bag to send home with him,” the woman said. “It will get you through about a week.”

I turned pleading eyes on Max.

He put his hands in the air. “Fine, but he’s your problem. You have to get up with him all night.”

“Deal.” I reached for Max’s hand, wrapping my fingers around it. His skin was warm and soft.

He looked slightly alarmed. “What?”

“Just come here, you oaf.”

Max rolled his eyes but fought a smile while he knelt by me and set the takeout cups on the floor. I guided his hand onto the puppy’s back, gently stroking the downy fur. Or was it hair? Doodles didn’t shed, right?

“He’s softer than I would have expected for a stray.”

“Oh, he’s no stray,” the woman said, a smile in her voice. “Just in need of a home. He’s a special Christmas dog, straight from the North Pole.”

Max and I shared a look. The woman was a little kooky, but I liked her.

After a minute, I could see Max’s shoulders softening. I transferred the puppy onto his lap, and he tried to fight me at first, but accepted the inevitability and held the puppy. They looked sweet together, and the puppy magic worked on Max, too. I’m pretty sure there is actual scientific research to back this up. Holding a puppy gives you endorphins or a shot of dopamine or something, and I was feeling it right now.

“So, we’re taking him,” Max said, resignation in his voice.

I let out a happy yelp, throwing my arms around his neck.

The woman pulled a bell from off the nearby counter and rang it happily. “Just what I wanted to hear.”

Max put the puppy in my arms, then gathered the box and puppy food from the woman. He left the hot chocolate behind, which was probably safer anyway. She held the door for us to leave the gas station, and we stepped out into a dark night with the bright overhead lights highlighting the fat, freshly falling snowflakes.

“Snow!” I said, careful not to disturb the now sleeping puppy.

“Merry Christmas,” the woman called from the door.

“Merry Christmas,” Max and I returned. We crossed the parking lot, making dark footprints in the tiny layer of fresh snow. I waited at my door for Max to load the dog box in the back. When he circled around to me, I couldn’t help but grin at him.

“Have you smelled the puppy?” I asked. “I think she must have just given him a bath. He smells like peppermint.”

“I believe it,” he muttered.



*Max*

Rachael held the puppy in the passenger seat while I pulled on the road to head back to the cabin. I could feel her eyes on me.

I shot her a glance. She looked so cozy with the puppy curled up on her lap.

A weight had lifted from my chest, but in retrospect, I couldn’t tell when it had happened. Was it when we got out of the truck? When the lady offered us the puppy? When I watched Rachael hold it? When she took my hand? When she put the dog in my arms?

Whenever it was, it was like something had taken the fuel out of my anger, neutralizing it. Maybe the puppy really was from the North Pole and had brought a bit of Christmas magic with him.

“Max, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything, and then I wouldn’t have been overheard. It’s my fault you had to have that conversation when you did.” She drew in a breath. “Can you forgive me?”

“Yeah, Rach. Of course.”

She slipped a little lower in her seat, as if she was as relieved of her burdens as I was relieved of mine. “Is it just a little bit nice that you told your parents?” she asked. “It doesn’t have to hang over your Christmas anymore.”

“I’m not sure it was the right time.”

“My dad believes there’s never a right time for hard conversations.”

“Yeah?” I glanced at her. Given how long I’d been putting off having the conversation about my move, waiting for a good moment to break the news, I thought maybe Harry was onto something. If I’d waited for the perfect moment, maybe I wouldn’t have ever brought it up on my own. “Do you agree with him?”

“I can see what he means. If you wait until it’ll be easier, you’ll probably be waiting forever.”

“You want to have it out, then?” I asked. “Tell me what’s weighing on you?”

She went really still. “It’s nothing.”

Ah, my assumptions were correct. She’d been weird for hours, and it had started well before our awkward family conversation about my new job. “Something is bothering you,” I countered. “I wouldn’t call that nothing.”

“It’s nothing like yours.”

“Practice what you preach, Rachy Rach.”

She glared at me playfully. “Fine. I just . . . I heard back from the River City Playhouse director, Lisa, and she decided to give the job to someone else.”

“Oh, gosh, I’m sorry.” I pulled off the main road onto a smaller, winding lane. Snow continued to fall, the fluffy white flakes coming at us like the intro to *Star Wars*.

“It is what it is, you know? Can’t change her mind. Can’t magically get a degree. Can’t go back in time and not fail at school.”

“You didn’t fail,” I said carefully. “You just didn’t finish.”

“Because I couldn’t. I was literally incapable, Max.” She shook her head. “I hated the classes. I’m awful at taking tests. The only thing I enjoyed were my theater classes, but even then it was hard for me to get there on time and do well. I’m just not a good student. I’m nothing like the rest of you.”

There she went, comparing herself to everyone else in our families like it was completely natural and not a totally unfair thing to do. Headlights glared from a car coming toward us and I slowed, pulling onto the side of the road while they passed.

I let the car idle there for a minute and turned in the seat to face Rachael, waiting for her to look at me. “You’re comparing apples to oranges. No—*bananas* to oranges. They aren’t even close to the same.”

Her nose wrinkled adorably. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re a banana, Rach. You’re bright and sweet and delicious when slathered in peanut butter.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Like melted peanut butter from someone else’s s’more?”

I laughed. “That wasn’t where I was going with that, but sure. You’re versatile and fantastic, a great addition to ice cream sundaes or a great snack when sliced and dried. But you wouldn’t be good in a juice.”

“Come again?”

“Stay with me, here. I have a point to this.”

She looked unconvinced but nodded.

I checked my rearview mirror, but no one was coming yet. We were safe to stay on the side of the road for a minute longer—at least long enough for me to make my point. “Bananas wouldn’t make a good breakfast juice. Sure, they’re good in a smoothie, but I’m talking all natural, freshly squeezed juice.”

Her full lips turned up in a little smile. “Like orange juice?”

“Yes, exactly. While bananas are totally a valid fruit, you can’t squeeze one and get a breakfast juice out of it.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“Our parents set you up for perceived failure by all being doctors. They’re geniuses, all four of them, and very logical. But most importantly, their talents are different from yours, Rach. They’re all oranges, and you’re a banana. You need to stop comparing yourself to them and getting mad that you can’t make amazing orange juice when you’re not an orange.”

She was really silent, searching my face. “You’re an orange.”

I nodded. “I am. So is Josh. Or maybe he’s a lemon, I don’t know. School wasn’t hard for us like that, and we like numbers and logic and all those left-brained things you complain about. But we could never get on a stage and do the things you do. I couldn’t put on a British accent and talk to elementary school kids or dance in the grocery store when they play a song I like. We’re different, Rach, but that doesn’t make you any worse or any better.”

“Huh.” She sat back. “No one has ever made me see it that way before.”

“I just want you to understand how incredible you are. I can’t let you continue believing you’re a failure when you’re one of the most amazing people I know.”



And the thing was, I meant it. I cared about her so much I hadn't been able to get her out of my head since she'd first started giving me hints about how she was feeling. Josh had only heightened it by letting me know that Rachael had had feelings for me in the past. If she could have felt that way then, was it possible she felt that way now?

I pulled back onto the road so we could make it to the cabin before the snow built and got us stuck. Rachael's words pecked at me while I drove home.

It physically hurt my chest to think she might be miserable, and even though it wasn't my place, all I wanted was to swoop in and save her. But she was strong and capable, even if she couldn't see that yet, and she could fix this herself. She just needed someone to point it out to her.

And that someone was me.

CHAPTER  
**FIFTEEN**

## RACHAEL

If there was one truth I would absolutely admit to after this little front seat therapy session, it was that Max believed he saw an injustice in the world and he wanted to right it. I agreed with him that I shouldn't compare my right brain to my parents' left, but it didn't change the fact that I was still a failure with no foreseeable path to happiness.

Max must have picked up on my feelings. "If you need me to, I'll list all the things that make you amazing." His voice was low, driving warmth down my spine.

"Sure. I've got all night."

He lifted his hand to count off using his fingers. "You're funny. You're clever. You're witty—"

"Aren't those all the same things?"

"Not exactly. You can be funny without being smart about your humor."

"True."

"You're beautiful."

"You *have* to say that." My stomach fizzed with emotion, bubbling up into my chest. I looked down at the sleeping puppy, dragging my fingers softly over his back.

"Trust me, I don't." He continued as if I hadn't interrupted, his attention on the road while he drove. "You're great with dogs and old people. You smooth over arguments easily. Apparently, you're *fantastic* at putting together flat-pack furniture. You make the room brighter when you step into it.

You make me relax when you sit by me. You make me feel like I could reach up and pluck the moon from the sky. Your smile is the best thing I've seen all week."

My heart raced. I tightened my hold on the puppy so I wouldn't be tempted to reach for Max. He'd never talked to me like this before—no, okay, so he'd only ever talked to me like this *once*, and it ended in an almost kiss at the end of the dock. Me telling him I was sorry for my part in the Grinch kiss, him telling me it was all on him and Josh—mostly my brother, though—and both of us standing out there, fighting the magnetic pull. I'd stepped back that night and broken the spell between us. I still wasn't sure if the feeling had been mutual then or not, but there had been *something* or Max wouldn't have asked me to forget it ever happened.

We'd made a pact never to talk about the dock night again, but he'd broken that when he brought it up. The way I saw it now, it was fair game.

"Do you ever think about that night down by the dock?"

He was silent for a minute. "I haven't for a long time, but right after it happened, I had to put it out of my head because I couldn't think about anything else."

"Except Annabelle."

He gave me a side-eye. "It wasn't exactly like that. She wore me down when we got home, and I thought dating her would get you out of my head. You didn't like me, so what else was I supposed to do?"

I couldn't breathe. Max sounded like he wasn't totally disgusted by my kiss back when we were in high school. Like he wouldn't have been disturbed if I'd done it again. But I had ended things on the dock because of his disgust and the fact that I'd thought he had a girlfriend back in Sacramento. "You dated her for two years."

"Probably longer than I should have."

My hands tightened on the puppy and he woke up, wiggling in my lap. "Max, you're not making sense."

“That’s how I feel when you try to say you’re stuck—like you don’t make any sense at all. Why can’t you finish your degree? You don’t have to go back to UC Davis. There are schools that are completely online so you’ll never have to step foot in a classroom again. I have a friend who got his MBA entirely at home because it was the only way he could keep working full time to support his family and go to school at the same time, and his program let him go at his own pace.”

“How would I afford it?”

“It’s not expensive if you don’t take twenty years to do it.” Max shook his head. “I don’t know, Rach. But you could keep working and do online school and chip away at it. I’ll help you find a cheaper place. I’m really good at apartment hunting.”

I shut my eyes. “You’re making it all sound so doable.”

“Maybe because it is,” he said gently, pulling into the driveway. The cabin loomed over us, dark outside, the windows glowing yellow while snow fell quickly. “You don’t have to feel stuck. You just need a better plan.”

A better plan? I would take *any* plan at this point. The puppy jumped down to the footwell, crawling around restlessly.

I felt Max’s finger brush lightly under my chin, tipping my face to look at him. He was serious. “Josh said something earlier that made me wonder if I might have misinterpreted the way you feel about me, Rachael.”

I was going to kill my brother. If he’d somehow guessed at my feelings for Max and given them away, he was utter toast.

I eyed him. “Is that relevant? You were the one who looked like you’d sucked on a lemon once you realized who you were kissing.”

The dog barked up at me from the footwell, startling me.

Max’s hand dropped. “Back in high school? Okay, first off, you can’t blame the stupidity of a teenager. In my defense, I was surprised it was *you*. And also by the green paint. But I wasn’t disgusted.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“Apparently, I did. That was the best kiss I’d ever had. I just couldn’t believe it was with you.”

“Because I was your best friend’s little—”

“Because you were *Rachael*. I wasn’t supposed to see you that way. So I shoved you out of my head and haven’t let myself even go there, not since that night on the dock.” He shifted again, facing me entirely. “I don’t know what’s gotten into me, Rach. I’ve always cared about you. But this is different.” He tipped his face down but looked up at me. “No matter what I do, I can’t get you out of my head.”

“Then don’t,” I whispered, making him look at me sharply.

He held my gaze before looking away. “Josh warned me not to break your heart.”

I laughed. “We’re a little old for the protective brother thing.”

The dog barked again.

“Do you think he needs to go outside?” Max asked.

Yikes. Thanks, puppy, for ruining the moment. I opened the car door and cold air rushed in while the puppy jumped out. He took off toward the lake and I hopped out to follow him.

I heard Max’s door close behind me, his footsteps not far behind. The puppy led us around the side of the house and down the pathway, playing in the snow while he tumbled down toward the glassy black lake.

It wasn’t until we reached the edge of our dock that I realized where we were heading. The dog hadn’t relieved himself of anything. Apparently, he just wanted to play. Little stinker.

I stepped out onto the dock and turned around to look back up at the house, situated higher on the hill. The snowfall had slowed, but it still dropped lazy flakes around us. Max approached slowly, his hands in his pockets, his gaze glued to me, settling my nerves. Up until now I’d felt like a complete

loser, ruining everyone's Christmas by forcing the Dawsons into a family discussion Max wasn't ready for. He might have forgiven me, but that didn't fix everything that had happened. Then, on top of that, I hadn't gotten the job I wanted, my rent was going up, and I was *stuck*.

But, somehow, standing on this dock beside Max and looking up at our family cabin, the puppy jumping around in the snow like he'd been given a shot of sugar and free rein with the Diet Coke, I had the settling feeling that everything would end up all right. Maybe I could look into the online school Max's friend had gone to. I didn't hate being a secretary, and I could probably leverage the letter of rent increase to get out of my rental contract. I could find somewhere cheaper to live. I could create the future I wanted.

He was right. I was a banana. Have you ever eaten one with Nutella? They were dang good. Maybe I couldn't make freshly squeezed orange juice, but I could amp up breakfast pancakes like nobody's business.

I gazed up at Max, glad I'd followed him out of the house and made him let me come on this journey. I got a *puppy* out of it. Clearly, I'd made the right choice.

It felt good to be honest with Max, like the stack of burdens on my shoulders were made hollow by his advice. They were still there, plaguing me with the reality I needed to face, but their power had lessened, their weight reduced. They felt manageable now.

His gray eyes beat down at me, dark and shadowed but steady. "You mean a lot to me, Rach." His gaze dropped to my lips and I almost swooned like a nineteenth century heroine.

Instead, I swallowed. "I don't know what Josh told you, but you don't need to worry. I've never let anything come in the way of our friendship, and I don't plan on changing that anytime soon."

"What if I wanted it to change, though?"

My pulse quickened. I stopped feeling the chill of the snow landing on my cheeks and bleeding through my coat. "How?"

“I don’t know the details. We’ve only been in Tahoe for a few days, but each minute since I went back to pick you up, you’ve been living in my head.”

“Sounds cramped.”

His mouth broke into a smile. “I mean it.”

My brain snagged on something he’d said. “What do you mean *went back* to pick me up?”

Max rubbed the nape of his neck. “When you called, I might have been exaggerating when I said I hadn’t left Sacramento yet.”

I was a duck. Super chill on the surface, my body going wild underneath. It was impressive how calm I sounded. “Exaggerating by how much?”

“By almost an hour?”

Heavy silence pressed in around us. “You turned around for me?”

“I would always turn around for you, Rachael. I would do anything for you. That hasn’t changed.” He looked over at the dog sniffing at a tree trunk near the bank as though it would reiterate his point. “If you’d asked me to pick you up anytime in the last ten years, I would have dropped everything and done it, because you’re important to me.”

But *how* important, and in what way? It was the question that kept me rooted in place.

He stepped a little closer. “In the last few days, though, I’ve realized that while I still care about you as a friend, I’m also starting to value you in a different way.” His voice was low, gravelly, his gaze intense. “Please tell me I’m not ruining our friendship right now?”

“Not at all,” I croaked, my throat dry. “I’ve long been a believer in friends-to-lovers storylines.”

“What’s that?” he asked, amused.

“It’s in books and movies when they start out as friends and then fall in love.”



“Well, I can’t promise a happy ending yet, but I’d kind of like to see where this goes.” He blew out a breath and looked away before his eyes landed on me again. “If you want, I mean.”

“For someone who always has a serious girlfriend, you’re a little clumsier at this than I expected.”

“It’s never mattered this much to me before,” he murmured.

Snowflakes fell all around us while Max leaned forward, sliding his hands around my exposed neck—they were warm, obviously—and leaning close. The last time he’d been in this position, he’d changed my entire teenage world. Now my heart thrummed wildly, because I knew if he closed this distance, it would be just as earth-shattering. This was *Max*.

He hesitated slightly, hovering close to my mouth, his eyes deepening to a dark gray that matched the inky sky. His lips brushed over mine softly before returning, shooting my body straight through with warmth like he’d just tossed me into a hot tub or a fireplace or even just surrounded me with personal space heaters. He was my space heater, and his kiss cranked it up to the maximum setting.

He brushed his lips over mine again, nipping at my bottom lip in a question that I was ready to answer.

Tilting my head to the side, Max kissed me more fully, showing me exactly how he felt about my friends-to-lovers idea. His lips were just as gentle as I’d remembered, and he handled me tenderly. His hand slid down to my waist, pulling me closer, deepening the kiss.

I pressed softly against his chest and leaned back, searching his face for any sign that he was freaked out.

His gentle gaze was soft, content. He squeezed my waist once before pulling me close and wrapping his arms around me like he couldn’t get enough. “We need to figure out what we’re going to tell everyone.”

“About the dog?”

“That too.” He tilted my head back and kissed me again. “About us. Josh didn’t want me crossing any lines with you, and I think we just sprinted over them.”

I looked up at him while the dog trotted onto the dock and circled our feet. “Well, *we* need to figure out what we are, so let’s worry about that first.” And the fact that he was about to move to San Francisco. “As far as Peppermint goes, I have an idea.”

“Peppermint?” he asked, amused.

“It’s fitting. He smells like a candy cane.”

He nodded. “What’s your idea?”

“He can be a Christmas present for your parents.” I reached down to pick up the puppy, holding him close to my chest. “Then they won’t miss you so much when you leave.”

CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

## MAX

Rachael's idea wasn't too bad. I put my arm around her and the puppy and navigated them toward the path that led up to the cabin. She listed all the reasons Peppermint would be a good gift for my parents, but all I could really think about was that I'd just *kissed* Rachael.

Honestly, I loved it.

No, edit that. I loved *her*.

In a way, I had for a long time. But while that had been a different kind of love, it had obviously laid the foundation for what I was feeling now. I suspected I'd been feeling this way for a while, but maybe hadn't let myself realize it.

It definitely explained why watching the carrot-headed theater geek ask her out after her play had sent me into a sickeningly jealous rage. It had been extremely difficult to subdue, only assuaged later that night by texting her.

Maybe I'd even mentioned the Grinch onesie in that text conversation just to send her back to the memory of our kiss, because the teenage boy inside me couldn't stand the thought of her going out with anyone else but me.

But now . . . now that I'd admitted my feelings to myself and to her, I was opening my heart to possibilities.

Except I was also moving away.

We climbed the path around the side of the cabin toward the front door.

“I think this Christmas snow isn’t going to stop anytime soon,” Rachael said.

I had to agree. It fell steadily in thick flakes that gathered quickly. If Josh hadn’t put himself out of commission, I would say it was prime sledding snow.

“Are we going to talk about the fact that we just kissed and I’m moving to San Francisco?” Maybe Josh had been right and I shouldn’t have crossed any lines, but I couldn’t think that way. I couldn’t let myself believe that not telling Rachael how I felt was ever the right move.

She frowned at the puppy, halting in front of the garage. The overhead light clicked on from our movement, creating a halo of light around Rachael and the puppy in her arms. “Maybe we should cross that road when we reach it?”

“In two weeks?”

She closed her eyes and let out a frustrated breath. “I don’t know. I like you, Max. But you’re leaving, and no matter what you want to tell your parents, it’s kind of a difficult distance for a relationship.”

Was it strange that I didn’t realize how badly I wanted to be in a relationship with her until she said that? “It’s not impossible, though.”

“Would it be setting us up for failure?”

I puffed up my cheeks and blew out a breath. “Will we know until we try?”

She looked away. “It’s just . . . how do we know this isn’t another rebound thing?”

That made my blood stop pumping for a second. I stared at her. “You’re not a rebound.”

She tilted her head a little to the side, her eyes on me. “How do you know?” she asked gently.

It was valid. I’d only broken up with Gabriela a few months ago, and I never did have long breaks between girlfriends. Looking at Rachael now, my body yearning to pull her close and my heart urging me to follow that impulse, I

knew she was different. She wasn't new to my life. She wasn't a brand-new Camaro that I was eager to get on the road and test the limits with; she was my trusty 4Runner—familiar, dependable, safe. She was the feeling of slipping on an old worn-in sweatshirt. She was the comfort of a hot plate of Mom's lasagna.

I cupped her cheek with one hand, leaving the other hanging at my side and willing her to hold my gaze. “I *know*. I've been in and out of relationships my entire adult life, but I've never known anyone as well as I know you. I've never been as good of friends with them, or cared about them as much as I care about you. This,” I said, sliding my fingers back into her hairline, “this feels different.”

Rachael nodded, wide eyes glued to my face.

I leaned down and sealed my promise with a kiss. I probably wouldn't ever get tired of doing this.

When I leaned back, she smiled. “So, maybe I'm not a rebound, but you're still moving.”

My hand dropped. Man, sometimes I really hated reality. “Okay, so maybe let's take it a day at a time. We need to deal with the dog and Christmas. We can revisit this.” I looked down at her soft pink lips while they curled into a smile.

“So act normal while we figure it out? I can do that. I've had years of practice pretending I don't have a crush on you.”

*Years?* My blood started humming. “Saying things like that isn't going to help, Rach.”

“Sorry.”

She didn't sound the least bit apologetic. Why couldn't I take my eyes off her lips?

She lifted her arms a little. “Do you want to carry Peppermint inside? Give him to your parents now?”

I looked at her. “It might be better received if it comes from you.”

“*He*,” she corrected. “Not *it*. I think this is the perfect gift to come from you. Not only will he be a good distraction, but

he'll also give them something to funnel their attention into to give you a little break.”

“We should’ve thought of this whole puppy scheme back when I was trying to finish school. It would have made it a whole lot easier.”

“I understand that,” she muttered.

“Rach,” I said, reaching for her hand. It was around the dog, and I curled my fingers over it. Her hand was soft and small in my own, but fit well. Touching her felt familiar and right, even though I knew I’d never held her hand before. I would have remembered this feeling. “You have options. Don’t give in to the panic or the overwhelm, okay? We’ll figure this out.”

“Mmhmm.” She squeezed my fingers before pulling hers free and moving toward the front door.

When we walked in, it was to find both of our parents seated on the couches before the fireplace. Buddy’s dog bed still sat off to the side of the hearth, untouched, as if no one had the heart to remove it fully. That would work to our benefit tonight.

Peppermint moved in Rachael’s arms before appearing to fall back asleep. His dancing in the snow must have tuckered him out.

“Max,” Mom said, sitting up on her seat.

Andrea started to get up. “We’ll leave you—”

“Actually, I’d like for you to stay,” I said, leading the way to the parents.

She sat back down slowly, her wrinkled eyes heavy with suspicion.

I stepped forward, trying to block Rachael a little. We hadn’t come up with a plan for the puppy reveal, but I knew I needed to say this first. “Mom. Dad.” I looked at each of them, trying not to cringe at my mom’s red-rimmed eyes. “This is something I’ve wanted for a long time, so when the opportunity presented itself, I jumped on it. But I love you

both, and I'm not going to stop seeing you all the time. We have FaceTime and family dinners to look forward to starting next month."

Mom's eyes went glassy again, and I swallowed the temptation to cease this conversation, to say I'd been making the whole thing up and walk away.

I would see it through. Rachael was right; I should have told them weeks ago. "Back when I was applying to schools and told you I'd wanted to go to UCLA . . . do you remember when I got that rejection?"

"Yes." Dad nodded.

"It wasn't real. I was never rejected. I just did that so you wouldn't think I'd chosen UC Davis because you wanted me to stay close."

"Max," Mom admonished. "You lied to us?"

"I did. And I don't regret staying here or the school I chose or any of that, but I would regret it if I never left Sacramento. I don't think you want that for me, either."

Dad's brow furrowed. "No, of course we don't."

"So I'm asking you to be supportive, even if it's not your first choice."

"We're just going to miss you, honey," Mom said.

"It's only San Francisco," I said, trying to subdue my humor. "It's not *that* far."

"I know," came Mom's watery reply. "I just get so worried when I haven't seen you for a few days." She put up a hand to stop Dad from saying whatever he was about to say. "I *know* they're unhealthy, lingering, unresolved feelings from losing Johnny. I don't need you to tell me that again. That doesn't make them less real."

"Of course it doesn't," Dad agreed, taking her hand. "Maybe it's time you saw someone specifically about this. You know I could recommend a good handful of people who would be happy to help you."



Mom let out a shaky breath. “That’s probably a good idea.”

“In the meantime,” I said, drawing out the word. The poor Harveys were probably wondering why I had asked them to stay and witness our little family discussion, but this part was why they were here. I heard Rachael take a breath behind me, like she realized it was her moment to shine.

She stepped out from behind me. “Max got you a puppy so you wouldn’t miss him so much.”

Dad’s eyes rounded like a snow globe, and Mom’s mouth dropped open, horrified.

Harry and Andrea looked delighted. Probably because their daughter wasn’t trying to pawn a puppy off on *them*. They could hold and pet and love it and not have to potty train.

“She’s kidding,” I said. “Mostly.”

Rachael passed me in a flurry of peppermint oil and pomegranate shampoo. She sat on the couch beside my mom and tipped the puppy into her lap. He woke up and started sniffing at Mom’s sweater, blinking up at her with sleepy eyes. I moved to Josh’s abandoned armchair and sat, watching the change come over my mom. Her smile was real, spreading into the crow’s feet at her eyes.

I guess puppies really did have some sort of magic of their own. It was probably some scientific babyish thing that made us immediately love them. Some sort of inherent biological code that protected them from abandonment.

Well, whatever it was, it was working on my mom. Dad, too, if the way he was bending over her and scratching Peppermint’s ears was any indication.

“He’s precious,” Andrea said.

Mom looked up and held her friend’s gaze. “He kind of reminds me of Buddy.”

Andrea nodded. “I thought the same thing.”

“He *is* half golden retriever,” Rachael said.

Andrea studied her daughter. “So, care to explain? Or do you expect us to believe you left in a fit and *intended* to go pick up a dog?”

Rachael glanced at me, something passing between us that felt like a buzzing current. When she faced her parents, she shrugged. “Just an old woman trying to get rid of a puppy she couldn’t sell.”

. . . at an abandoned gas station that was probably closed for business. I was glad she didn’t add that part.

“I kind of thought it was Christmas magic,” I added quietly.

Rachael grinned. “Yeah, it felt a little like that. Either way, if you don’t want to accept him, Sharon, I take full responsibility—”

“Oh, you aren’t getting him back now.” Mom looked at Dad for confirmation before her shoulders relaxed. “Maybe we’ll hire you to be his nanny. I won’t have him chewing up my Manolos.”

The idea was so utterly brilliant I wondered why I hadn’t thought of it before. “That’s perfect.”

“What is?” Dad asked.

“Rachael can live with you while she goes back to school.”

Everyone in the room went quiet, except Rachael, who seemed to turn the color of a Santa hat, her breath wheezing.

“You’re going back to school?” Harry asked, the hope in his face too elating to be mistaken for anything else.

Rachael looked like she was going to murder me. Oh, crap. Foot: meet mouth.

“Um, I hadn’t decided yet,” she said, her voice strangled.

“I thought you liked your job?” Andrea said.

“I do. It’s fine. It’s not what I want to do . . . I *wanted* to teach theater, but I applied and was passed over for someone with higher education.” The more she talked, the faster she went. “Honestly, it’s probably for the best since my rent is

going up again and my job doesn't cover it *now*, let alone if I took that job and the pay cut that would have come with it."

"Okay, slow down," Harry said. "Your rent is going up? Since when?"

"I got notified a few weeks ago," she said meekly. "I was going to figure it out. I just need a second job. An evening job. It's not the end of the world."

"Then when will you go to school?" Harry pressed.

"At night? I was going to look into one of those schools that lets you go at your own pace and is entirely online. Get my teaching credentials, maybe. If the state of California will allow me to teach impressionable young things."

"Rachael, that's a great idea," Andrea said.

"It is?" Rachael sounded so unsure. "I thought you'd be mad that I wasn't going to finish at Davis."

"We don't care what school you go to," Harry said. "We just want you to be happy. If it makes sense to go to school online, then do that."

She was nodding along, as if the idea was building steam for her.

Andrea leaned forward, shaking her head. "You know you can always move home, Rach. If you want to stay with us while you go to school, you can."

Rachael sank into the sofa, covering her face with her hands. "I'm too old to move back in with my parents."

"Or too prideful?" Andrea asked.

She peeked out behind one hand, and it was so cute I wanted to throw her over my shoulder and carry her upstairs where we could be alone. I told my hormones to calm down. There was a time and a place for that.

Like later tonight, under the soft glow of the Christmas tree lights. Maybe I'd snag the mistletoe so it was a sure thing.

"I guess it would help a lot," Rachael said, drawing me back to the present conversation. "I could put that rent money

toward my stupid student loans.”

There was a squeal somewhere above our heads, and the door slammed up in the loft.

“What the—”

Savannah ran to the railing and bent over it so fast I was afraid for a half-second she was going to topple over. Instead, it appeared she was just holding out her hand to show us. “We’re engaged!” she hollered.

Josh came slowly up behind her, a grin so wide he could fit an entire sugar cookie in his mouth. “She said yes!”

He’d proposed *now*? I guessed if he couldn’t do the whole romantic ridge thing, then the back deck overlooking the lake was nice, too. Either way, he’d gotten the Christmas Eve proposal he’d planned on.

“That’s it,” Harry said, clapping. “We don’t even need to have Christmas now. Tonight has been perfect enough.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself there, Dad,” Rachael said. “I still want to open those.” She pointed to the gifts wrapped and stuffed beneath the tree.

Peppermint jumped down from Mom’s lap and started sniffing around the rug.

“Is that a dog?” Josh asked, appropriately surprised. “What the—”

“Trust me,” I said. “You don’t want to know.”

CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**

## RACHAEL

I was seriously reconsidering this whole puppy business when Peppermint woke me up at six, whining by the front door to go outside for the fourth time tonight. *Today*, now that it was almost morning.

I pushed up from my makeshift bed on the downstairs couch and padded to the front door. “You and your microscopic bladder,” I grumbled, opening the door to a gust of frigid air. I let him outside and shut the door, watching through the window while he pattered around in the snow for a minute before relieving himself.

“This is early for you,” Max said behind me, his voice heavy from the early morning.

I turned around, leaning my back against the door and crossing my arms over my chest. “I could say the same to you.”

“Couldn’t sleep. Pepper’s barking woke me up.”

“Sorry. It took me a minute to roll out of bed.” I paused, considering. “I like that. Pepper.”

“It can still be short for Peppermint.”

“Agreed, and not quite as much of a mouthful.”

A slow smile spread over his lips. “You don’t think his actual owners are going to want a say in what his name is?”

“I think we’ll always be his real mom and dad, and you know it. Your parents are just long-term babysitters.”

“Funny,” Max said, tilting his head to the side. “I thought that’s what they agreed to let you do.”

It was true. After we had toasted Savannah and Josh’s engagement and heard the whole proposal story—not at the dock, to my relief, since I liked to think of it as mine and Max’s place—Dad got out his computer and started researching schools. We found a great accredited online university that was affordable and really was a go-at-your-own-pace situation, which meant I could start anytime I wanted and only had to pay for as many semesters as it took me to finish. I could take one class a semester or twenty classes and the price wouldn’t change. It was the best scenario for my situation, and for the first time in years, I was looking forward to the prospect of finishing school and taking charge of my own future.

Sharon and Rob decided to keep Pepper—I had to try the name out and yes, I loved it—and offered to let me move in with them. It made sense, what with them living close to the elementary school I worked at, and I could help with the dog. Then I could work at paying off my debt while finishing my degree. It was the smart move to make, even if it was a little hard accepting that I was moving in with parental figures. I’d still pay them some rent, but it was so microscopic it hardly counted.

Either way, my heart was blooming with something like hope, and it was so much nicer than the dread I’d carried into the cabin with me a few days ago.

“I still can’t believe your parents want to keep him.”

“Maybe it’ll be good for my mom. He can be her therapy dog.”

“That’s actually a valid point.”

“Is it?” Max asked, stepping closer and crowding me beside the door. He tilted his jaw up to nod at something above us without taking his eyes off me. “I think we’re under the mistletoe, Miss Harvey.”

“Oh, look at that. I think we might be.” I grinned while he leaned toward me, his hands sliding over my waist and around my back. Max kissed me like he wasn’t going anywhere, like we could stay right here forever. He tasted like mint toothpaste—thank heavens, it was strong and fresh enough to cover both of us—and didn’t hold back. I was weirdly jealous of all the girls who’d gotten to experience this version of Max before I did, but a small part of me whispered that I’d be the last.

“When I told you not to cross any lines,” a deep voice said, “this isn’t what I had in mind.”

Max broke away, sharing a look with me before turning around to face my brother.

Josh stood in the hallway, watching us with a frown.

“We’re adults, Josh,” I said.

“What happens when you guys break up? How is that going to affect the rest of us?”

“Don’t be selfish,” I said. “It’s Christmas. Can’t you just be happy for us?”

“Is this a fling, or are you going to date long-distance? If you break up, will you both still come to the cabin every year? My birthday dinners? Rach, you’re going to be *living* with his parents.”

“Not forever,” I defended.

There was a high-pitched whining bark on the other side of the door, and I opened it to let Pepper in. He trotted through the doorway and shook off, sending a spray of snow everywhere.

“I understand your hesitation,” Max said calmly, stepping back until he was flush with my side, “and I don’t know what our future looks like. I just got Rachael and I’m not about to let her go.” His attention shifted to me, though he still spoke like he was talking to Josh. “I’ve loved her my entire life—maybe not romantically, but I have *loved* her, and that isn’t just going to disappear one day. While this whole thing might be new, it’s also not, and I don’t think you need to worry about her getting her heart broken.”



Okay, that was the most romantic thing anyone had ever said about me.

“Can you just be happy for us?” I asked Josh.

He took a step closer, gingerly walking because of his collarbone, and searched my face. Finally, he let out a breath, shaking his head. “Yeah, I’m happy for you. It just scares me. I wanted to make sure this was real.”

Max took my hand. “It’s definitely real, man.”

Josh shook his head. “About time, then. You know she’s been crushing on you for, like, *ever*.”

“Okay, thanks, that’s enough,” I said.

Max’s smile grew. “No, I think I need to hear more of this.”

“Or explain why you’ve been so blind.” Josh rubbed his eyes. “Now you both owe me, so we’re playing Clue later, and I don’t want to hear any complaints when I win.”

“No promises,” Max said.

Josh laughed. “I’m going back to bed. Can you make the dog stop barking? He woke me up.”

“I’ll try.”

Josh turned around and shuffled back to his bedroom. When the door closed behind him, Max had me in his arms almost immediately. He walked me backwards, kissing me until my legs hit the sofa where I’d slept all night. It took a few more minutes before he leaned away. “Hang on.”

“Okay,” I said weakly.

He plugged in the Christmas tree lights and laid a fire in the hearth, lighting it so we had the full Christmas morning experience. “Hot chocolate?” he asked.

“You know the way to my heart.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Pepper found Buddy’s old dog bed right beside the hearth and climbed into it, curling into a tiny ball and chewing on

something. I knelt in front of him and fished the small piece of cardboard out of his mouth. Holding it up, I shot Max a wry smile. “Looks like we’re one puzzle piece down now, no matter what.”

He shook his head.

Pepper was annoyed I had taken his cardboard treat, but he quickly forgot, falling back asleep. Max brought me a steaming cup of hot chocolate with extra marshmallows floating on top. We sat next to each other on the couch, covered ourselves in my weighted blanket, and watched the snow continue to fall outside.

“Is this perfection?” I asked.

“Perfection would be me still kissing you, but I’ll take this, too.” He took a sip of hot chocolate. “You know you’ll have to let down that theater boy, now.”

“Tristan?” My stomach sank. “Oh gosh. You’re right.”

He cringed. “Poor, sad theater nerd.”

“Watch it. I’m a theater nerd.”

“You’re a cute one, though.”

I nudged him with my elbow. “Hey, thanks for the whole school idea.”

“And for revealing your problems to your parents accidentally?” he asked, cringing.

“Well, I did the same thing to you, so I think we’re even.”

“Maybe in the future, instead of putting off difficult conversations, we’ll just have them,” he suggested. “I think your dad may be on to something. I don’t think there’s ever a good time for a hard conversation.”

“I also think it’s okay to accept help. If you ever need help having a tough conversation, I’m your girl.”

“Unless it’s with you?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What will you need to say to me?”

“I don’t know. But relationships thrive on good communication. That’s something *my* dad says.”

“Wise man. We should probably listen to his advice.”

“Then allow me to communicate to you how happy I am right now,” he said, leaning in again.

I kissed him back before taking another sip of hot chocolate. “And when you move? What’s our actual plan?”

“We’ll figure it out.” He drew in a breath. “Why couldn’t you make me see what was right in front of me like a year ago?”

“Because you were with Gabriela.”

“Right. Guess your mom was right.” He pulled a face. “I can’t be single for long.”

This time I turned to face him. “How about you never be single again?”

He smiled, his gray eyes boring into my soul. “I like that.”

Pepper barked in agreement before falling right back asleep.

“So do I. Merry Christmas, Max.”

He didn’t bother responding. He just kissed me senseless instead.

But hey, I’ll take it.

# EPILOGUE

## MAX

### Two Years Later

**E**verything had to be perfect, but since we were up at the cabin for Christmas, I was pretty sure it was going to be. We'd already had breakfast and exchanged some gifts. Dad pulled the same gift out of Johnny's stocking that was there every year: a big check written out to a foundation to aid in leukemia research. Pepper—the monstrous, horse-sized dog that he'd become—had gotten on the counter and eaten half of Mom's fruitcake, much to no one's dismay. Today just couldn't get any better.

Rachael closed the dishwasher after loading the final bowl and came to perch on the edge of my chair.

Okay, so it just got a little better.

“Foosball competition?” she asked.

Harry put down the book he was reading. “Count me in.”

“Sounds fun.” My hand started to shake, evidence of my nerves. I had something to take care of. I'd already done the whole ask-her-father-for-permission part. Now it was time to offer Rachael the ring that had been burning a hole in my pocket all week. “Can I see you outside first, Rach?”

She gave me a questioning look, her little blonde eyebrows pulling together. “Yeah, of course. Everything okay?”

“Your gift is out there.” Well, technically it was in my pocket. Details, schmetails.

Her brown eyes lit up. “In that case, what are we waiting for?”

I looked up to see Mom press her fingers to Johnny’s picture on the wall where it resided next to the watercolor of Buddy. She must have overheard me, because she turned to give me an excited glance as she walked back to the kitchen. My mom and Andrea never once tried to hide their excitement about me and Rachael getting together. Turned out they’d been plotting this since our births, but never wanted to push us away from each other, so they’d kept it to themselves.

Sneaky little moms.

Not that they’d had anything to do with us getting together, but it was nice to have a family who supported our relationship. Now that Rachael had finished school and accepted a job to teach second grade at a private school in San Francisco, we were making our home in the city a semi-permanent thing. At least for now.

I kind of wondered how long Rachael was going to last in the city before she was job-hunting for both of us in Sacramento, just so she could be closer to Pepper. By the time we were ready to have kids, I would probably want the yard and the extended family that lived here, too. But we weren’t there. Yet.

“I’ll grab my coat,” Rachael said. She hopped up, and I watched her little Grinchy rear-end as it disappeared down the hallway. She was never getting rid of that onesie. As long as it fit her and didn’t have holes, it would be a regular staple in our lives.

“It’s time?” Harry whispered to me.

I grinned. “But hold that thought, because I’ll happily whoop you at foosball later.”

“We’ll see.”

Rachael returned and I took her hand, leading her outside. When we circled around the freshly shoveled path leading to the dock, her steps grew sluggish and she became quiet. If she knew what was going on, she didn’t give it away.

I pulled her all the way out to the end of the dock. The water reflected the blue sky, crisp and clear, the white puffy clouds floating above us a far cry from the storm we'd endured the last few days that had covered us in a blanket of snow.

She looked around a little, from one end of the dock to the other, her eyebrows bunching. "Not to be annoying, but you *did* say my gift was out here, right?"

Facing Rachael, I fought a smile. I took her hand in mine and held her gaze while I bent down on one knee and pulled out the ring. "Rachael, you're the kindest, goofiest, most beautiful little Grinch I know. I would happily live in an overheated and under air-conditioned house if it meant you were living there with me."

Her eyes grew glassy, rivaling the lake on water content.

"I don't want to spend another day without you at my side. You are pure sunshine, and I love you. You've always been a source of goodness in my life, but my entire world became brighter when you agreed to be my girlfriend. I can't imagine how great it will be when we commit to honor, love, and care for one another for eternity. Please say you'll be my wife?"

"Oh my gosh, Max!" Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed. She plucked at the green Grinch onesie. "You could have at least told me to put on something cute!"

"I tried tying on some antlers so we'd be a matching set, but they wouldn't stay on."

"Really?"

"No." I grinned. "So that's a yes?"

She put her hand out so I could slide the ring on, nodding. "Yes, it's a yes. Of course I'll marry you."

I stood, taking her in my arms and kissing her like it was the first time. *Literally*. Sans green face paint, she was wearing the same thing.

"You sneaky man," she said, pulling back. "I had no idea you were even looking at rings."

“I’ve had it since July. I just wanted to propose on the dock.”

“We came here in July,” she said.

“Yeah, but there was no snow then. It wasn’t quite right.”

“You’re a romantic.” She leaned into me, kissing me deeply. “Or you’re just trying to save me some rent when I move to the city.”

“You caught me.” I grinned. “I figured you wouldn’t want to live with my coworker longer than you had to.”

“I like Heather.”

“I do, too. But I’d still rather you lived with me.”

She kissed me again. “Then we better plan this wedding quickly.”

“Don’t act like you don’t already have the whole thing organized.”

“I might. But in my defense, it’s like *all* your mom wants to talk about these days.”

My heart soared clear to the sun and back. “Good. A quick engagement—that’s what I want.”

“Me too.”

“I love you, fiancé,” she said.

“I love you, too. Merry Christmas, you adorable little Grinch.”



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kasey Stockton is a staunch lover of all things romantic. She doesn't discriminate between genres and enjoys a wide variety of happily ever afters. Drawn to the Regency period at a young age when gifted a copy of *Sense and Sensibility* by her grandmother, Kasey initially began writing Regency romances. She has since published in a variety of genres, but all of her titles fall under clean romance. She is an equal opportunity addict when it comes to Coke, Dr. Pepper, chocolate, and period dramas. A native of northern California, she now resides in Texas with her own prince charming, their three children, and a sassy goldendoodle.