

A man with a dark beard and mustache, wearing a dark plaid shirt, is looking thoughtfully to the side. He has his hand near his chin. The background is a blurred Christmas tree with lights and ornaments.

HEART OF
*Harmony
Grove*

CARSON'S

Comfort & Joy

QUINN WARD

CARSON'S COMFORT AND JOY

HEART OF HARMONY GROVE

BOOK 4

QUINN WARD

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Edited by Ever After Edits

Proofreading by Abbie Nicole

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CARSON

THE METALLIC SCENT OF MOTOR OIL AND THE SHARP BITE OF ANTIFREEZE battled for dominance as I tinkered with the engine of an old Chevrolet. The car was far from a classic, but try telling that to old Mr. Graham. He was a frequent flier at the shop, fixing the latest thing to break down on the beast nearly every month. But try as we might, there was no convincing him he'd be better off investing that money in a car payment for something built this century.

The garage's cozy ambiance was punctuated by the occasional clink of tools and the hum of the radio, its upbeat melody announcing the advent of yet another holiday season. It sucked that, even on the classic rock channel Rodney preferred, we couldn't escape the Christmas tunes. Outside the grimy windows of the shop, the world was dressed in festive lights and gaudy tinsel-outlined figures, the snow gently falling and covering the town in a blanket of white. But while the rest of Harmony Grove seemed to be caught up in the spirit of Christmas, I found my gaze narrowing with annoyance every time I caught sight of the garish decorations.

"Carson!" Rodney's voice echoed from his corner office, the walls of which were a testament to his love for automobiles, plastered from end to end with car calendars. "You ever notice how these holiday songs keep getting worse every year?"

I rolled my eyes, choosing not to indulge him. It wasn't that I disagreed with him, but once Rodney got going, he'd rant about it for the rest of the freaking day. It was worse than sucking it up and dealing with the stupid carols. Just as I pulled the first plug wire, the bell above the garage's side door chimed, signaling the arrival of a new customer.

The door creaked open, allowing the chill of winter to enter. A familiar voice boomed through the room, and I immediately looked up.

“Carson! Just the man I wanted to see. Got a minute?” Anson’s voice was filled with purpose and a hint of mischief. It was clear this wasn’t a social visit. Anson was up to something.

Brushing grease off my hands, I smirked. “For the town’s potential next mayor? Always. What’s up?”

We’d been giving him a hard time about blurting that he was going to run against our bigoted mayor when the two had a confrontation at the Harmony Grove Harvest Festival last month. I hoped like hell he succeeded because someone needed to put Mayor Thompson in his place, and Anson was the sort of fresh blood we needed in city hall.

Anson waved a brightly colored flyer in front of me, the image of a Christmas tree prominently displayed. “Got something big in the works. You remember Kevin, right? He thought we could put together a Christmas event for the kids at Harmony House.”

Raising an eyebrow, I replied, “And you went along with it? What’s the catch?” I knew it wasn’t Anson’s style to dive headfirst into anything remotely holiday-themed. In fact, our matching cynical takes on Christmas had earned us the nicknames Grinch and Scrooge from our family.

With a twinkle in his eyes, Anson began to paint a vivid picture of the proposed event. His words were so descriptive I could almost hear the carolers, the laughter of children, and the rustle of gift wrappers. This was more than a simple Christmas party in the main hall at Harmony House—it was a full-blown extravaganza.

For a brief moment, I was tempted to buy into his infectious enthusiasm. But then, Rodney interrupted with a bucket of ice water.

“Another politician trying to woo voters with festivities? Spare me,” he drawled sarcastically from his office doorway.

Anson met Rodney’s gaze without flinching. “It’s not about the politics, Rodney. It’s about bringing a community together and doing some genuine good. Kevin wasn’t wrong to say I need to do a better job putting my money where my mouth is. Isn’t that what most people want politicians to do?”

“Fair, but if you’re being forced to do it, you need to ask why you’re doing it,” Rodney challenged. He set the parts for my next job on the roof of the car as he ambled toward us. “And you have to admit it reeks of desperation that you’re here trying to rope Carson into helping you.”

“Rodney, put a sock in it.” I wiped my hands on a ratty red shop rag. “If they’re doing something for Harmony House, they’re obviously going to rope me in. It’s part of what I agreed to when I put my money into the place. We all knew there’d be times when we’d have to chip in to help.”

Despite the skepticism around me, I found myself slowly being pulled in. Anson’s face softened, showing a rare vulnerability. “This isn’t just a fleeting idea, Carson. It might not have been my idea, but it’s a good one. Kevin’s right about there not being much that’s designed with kids in mind, and some of these kids will have a shit Christmas if someone doesn’t step up to the plate.”

He handed me the flyer, its glossy surface cold against the warmth of my grease-streaked hands. After a moment’s contemplation, I said, “Look, I’m not big on Christmas. But... I promised you guys I’d help when you asked, so I’ll do it. Just don’t expect me to wear a Santa hat.”

Anson beamed, his usual reserved demeanor momentarily forgotten. “Deal. I knew I could count on you. So what I need from you is help with the food. You like food, and that’s not strictly Christmas, so I figured it would be the least offensive to your sensibilities. We’re not doing anything super fancy, not even a full meal. Kevin mentioned mostly desserts with some finger foods and such.”

“If Kevin’s got it all figured out, why not have him do it?” I figured that was a better question than asking him when he and the newest cop at Harmony Grove PD had gotten close enough that they were planning parties together. If and when Anson was ready to talk about it, he would. But there wasn’t a chance in hell that it was just friendship if he was falling over himself to follow another man’s lead.

“Because he’s busy too. The only way for us to pull this off is if everyone works together,” Anson explained. “So, can I count on you?”

“I already said I’d do it, didn’t I?” All things considered, it was one of the easier tasks. Shiloh was a master at his job, and he’d recently expanded his catering menu. One phone call to Shiloh’s Sweets might allow me to hand over the reins to someone who actually knew about parties and shit. “Shoot me over the details on how many people you’re expecting, budget, all that. I’ll take it from there.”

“Thanks, man.” Anson gave me a quick one-armed hug. “I’ll send you a text this afternoon so you know what you’re working with. We’re having a planning meeting on Thursday night. Can you make that?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there.” It wasn’t as if I had a bustling social life. My days were spent under the hoods of cars that, more often than not, weren’t worth fixing, and my nights were spent in the spare bedroom at my apartment, which I’d turned into a little workshop of sorts.

I watched as Anson shuffled down the snow-covered sidewalk, wondering what in the hell I’d just gotten myself into. Planning a Christmas party sounded about as fun as a root canal. He was lucky I’d do just about anything for my brothers.

Rodney cleared his throat, snapping me out of my reverie. “You really think he’s genuine about this? It’s not just some political gimmick?”

I looked at Rodney, whose age-worn features betrayed a hint of hope. “Honestly? I think Anson wants to do something good. You give him shit, but he’s not really a politician. It shocked the hell out of all of us when he made that crack about running. To be honest, I figured it was just him blowing off some steam because Mayor Thompson’s a Grade-A dick who needed to be put in place. Now, we’ll have to see what happens come spring. But if he’s planning a Christmas event, he’s truly doing it for the kids. I know I’m not as active as Billy and Anson, but that place is a labor of love for all of us, so I get it in a way.”

Rodney’s lips twitched in a semblance of a smile. “Well then, if the Langsford brothers are about to bring Christmas to town, who am I to stand in the way?”

A chuckle escaped me. “You? Standing in the way? You practically have tinsel in your hair already. Oh wait, that’s just the gray in your beard.”

Rodney flipped me off and scowled. Yeah, him getting into the holiday spirit was about as likely as Santa cramming his big ol’ gut down the crumbling chimney on the shop’s roof without sending bricks crashing to the street below.

“Not much to celebrate when you’re on your own. You should think about that before you’re too old to find someone to share your life with.” Rodney was a complicated man. He spent most of his time trying to hide how lonely and miserable he was, but every once in a while, he let his gooey center ooze out in the form of trying to save me from myself.

“Nah, coupled-up life might be working well for Billy and Danny, but it’s not for me,” I scoffed. I’d dated plenty in my twenties and early thirties before I’d simply thrown in the towel. After enough failed relationships and first dates that never led to a second, I had no problem admitting that I was

likely the problem. I simply was okay with focusing on my own needs, even if that meant I was alone.

Anson's visit and Rodney's meddling had me in a mood. I tossed my shop rag onto the frame of the Chevy and headed to the sinks. "I'm going to head up to the diner for a bite. Want me to bring anything back?"

My tone was curt enough that Rodney knew better than to push me. Just because he was miserable since his divorce didn't mean the rest of us needed to swim with him in his pit of despair.

"I'm good. My sister brought over a big-ass pan of lasagna last night. I keep telling her I'm a full-grown adult who can take care of himself, but she's certain I'll waste away to nothing if she stops feeding me." He tried to sound put off by his sister's concern, but I got the feeling he enjoyed Stella's brand of pushy.

"Cool. I'll be back to finish Mr. Graham's plugs and get to work on that starter in a bit." I waved to him over my shoulder on my way through the garage.

I kept my head down, partly to shield my exposed skin from the biting wind on my way up Main Street but mostly so my eyes weren't assaulted by the decorations that had exploded onto the landscape sometime over Thanksgiving weekend. I couldn't wait for spring. Too bad for me, it was bound to be a long, cold, miserable winter.

EZRA

THE HEAT INSIDE THE KITCHEN AT SHILOH'S SWEETS WAS A STARK CONTRAST to the uncharacteristically cold weather outside. That wouldn't have been so bad, but the blast of freezing air every time the delivery driver pushed another stack of boxes through the back door wasn't doing anything to help me. Just as my hands started to thaw, he'd come back in with the next load, and I'd be cold again. That made it hard to work with a steady hand, which was, unfortunately, necessary if I wanted the cookies I was working on to look good.

I didn't want good. I wanted them to look camera-ready by the time I was done. I'd baked and iced three batches at my apartment before bringing my newest cutters into the kitchen at work because I didn't want even Shiloh to see my latest designs until I felt confident in the results of my work.

The warmth of the holiday season permeated every nook and cranny of the bakery, even in the employee-only areas. Fairy lights, draped like strands of gold, shimmered softly, reflecting off crimson and green baubles. The fact that Shiloh loved the holidays as much as I did made it easy to come to work every morning.

Lost in detailed brushwork, I almost didn't notice Lacey, who had quietly walked up to my side. Her eyes, filled with amusement, roved over my creations, and she quirked an eyebrow playfully.

"You're really in the zone today," she observed with a light chuckle. "Working on a special order?"

I paused momentarily, setting the brush down and casting her a side glance. "Just trying to make these perfect," I replied, not looking up from my work. Though my words were casual, there was an undercurrent of

seriousness that Lacey picked up on.

She tilted her head, examining one of the snowflake cookies up close. “Is there something special about this batch? Or are you just setting the bar even higher for yourself?”

Chuckling, I swiped a smudge of icing off my cheek with the back of my hand. “You know me too well. But yes, these are special. I’ve been working on these designs for weeks. Wanted them to be just right. I haven’t done a whole lot of painting on the cookies, but I saw a video where someone was doing it. I thought Christmas cookies would be the perfect time to bring them out.”

Lacey’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “Ah, the secret project you’ve been hoarding in your apartment! I was wondering when we’d get a peek. They look incredible, Ezra.”

I grinned, basking in the compliment. “Thanks.”

She was constantly praising me for how pretty my cookies were, and I never knew how I was supposed to respond. Nobody knew this was something I’d picked up as a way to quiet my brain. If I was focused on getting my designs just right, the lines even and steady and the finished product looking just like the online courses I was taking, I didn’t have time to second-guess everything else about my life.

I swished the brush in my cup of water and put it in its place on my workstation. Everything was neatly arranged from largest to smallest, and even the icing bags were in rainbow order. Whether I was on my first or last cookie, I liked my work area to be precise.

For a moment, we both simply stood there, admiring the array of cookies before us. The quiet hum of the bakery in the background, the scent of warm spices in the air, and the soft ambient glow of the fairy lights made the scene almost magical.

Lacey broke the silence. “You know, there’s a saying in art: perfection is the enemy of done. Don’t lose yourself too much in making them perfect. They already look amazing.”

I considered her words, realizing the truth behind them. “You’re right, but perfect feels really good too. Thanks, Lace.”

She winked, playfully nudging me with her elbow. “Just looking out for you. Now, save me one of those reindeer cookies, okay? They’re too cute to resist.”

Chuckling, I promised, “It’s all yours.”

The bells on the front door jingled, and Lacey excused herself to the counter. I breathed a relieved sigh. She loved watching me work, oblivious to how much I hated anyone standing over me. But I was the new guy, lucky to even get a job where I was paid to do something I'd be spending my money doing otherwise, and I didn't want to rock the boat.

Once alone, I decided to keep going rather than leave the rest of the cookies for tomorrow. Business had been picking up lately, and Shiloh was constantly assuring me I wasn't capable of icing as many cookies as he could sell within a few days. As I meticulously detailed the last of the snowperson cookies, the door to the kitchen swung open, bringing with it a flurry of movement and a brief rush of colder air from the storefront. Shiloh strode in, balancing an impressive stack of empty trays, each a testament to the lunchtime crowd.

Setting them on the counter with a clatter, he brushed a stray lock of hair from his face, his eyes immediately settling on the cookies in progress. The mischievous glint in his eyes was unmistakable, a clear sign Shiloh was up to something.

"Those look amazing, Ezra! It's good to see you're in the groove today," he remarked, beaming. Then, with a sly smirk, he added, "Carson Langsford might drop by later to discuss a big order for an event."

I shivered at the mention of his name. Carson was a frequent customer at the shop, and he was drop-dead gorgeous. There was something endearing about seeing a man as burly as Carson melt at the sight of a display case filled with cookies and other pastries. I silently squealed every time he picked one of my creations, watching him carefully to see how he reacted when he took the first bite.

My brush slipped, creating a slight smear on the cookie. Quickly correcting it, I glanced up at Shiloh, attempting to conceal the surprise his words had elicited. "Carson? He doesn't strike me as the Christmas party type."

Shiloh leaned against the counter, his amusement evident. "Well, it seems our dear Carson is full of surprises. From what I've gathered, Anson had the idea of hosting a special event for the kids at Harmony House. He wants it to be memorable, and Carson is apparently in charge of handling the menu for the party."

I frowned slightly, still trying to piece together the information. "But why would Carson be involved? I can think of a million things better suited to his

personality.”

Shiloh shrugged, his lips twitching into a playful grin. “Probably, but all the Langsford men have a soft spot for the kids who hang out at Harmony House. Did you know the three oldest boys started it after Danny moved away? They were worried he hadn’t felt like he could be himself here, and they wanted to make sure no one else ever felt that way. And really, can you think of anyone better to help create a dessert table filled with Christmas magic than you? It’s a no-brainer, really. He gets to put on a great event, and you’ll have free rein to create a story with your desserts.”

My cheeks warmed, and I busied myself with organizing the icing bags to avoid Shiloh’s teasing gaze. It was surreal how Shiloh was constantly urging me to explore my baking creativity in *his* bakery. I’d expected him to scoff the day I casually mentioned learning about icing cookies, as if it were no big deal to someone like him. But apparently, that had been right about the time he’d been desperately trying to find someone else to come in and take a bit of the load off his shoulders.

And the thought of Carson Langsford coming into the bakery, especially to see me, sent a flurry of butterflies through my stomach. The two of us had only exchanged a few words in the past, and he always seemed so...serious. The idea that he might be interested in my ideas was hard to fathom.

Lacey, who had been arranging a display at the front, returned to the kitchen, a smirk on her lips. She had clearly caught the tail end of our conversation and was thoroughly enjoying the newfound tension in the room.

“Well, looks like it’s going to be an interesting day at the bakery,” she quipped, shooting me a knowing look.

I shot her a mock glare. “Don’t you start,” I muttered, but there was no real bite to my words. Lacey didn’t miss a thing, including the way my brain shut off any time Carson was around. It wasn’t my fault, not really. He was gorgeous, and I was...me. It wasn’t easy to think straight when he came in all lumberjacky, like he’d been pulled straight out of the porn I’d watch if watching porn wasn’t embarrassing to me.

She simply laughed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I just find it fascinating how the universe works. All these coincidences are lining up. But don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me.” She winked conspiratorially.

“There’s no secret,” I huffed, though I could feel my cheeks burning even more.

Shiloh chuckled, patting my shoulder gently. “Relax, Ez. Whether it’s a

secret or not, just be yourself. Carson might be coming for the cookies, but he'll stay for the company."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't suppress the grin that tugged at the corner of my mouth. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Lacey leaned in, her voice dropping to a dramatic whisper. "The tall, dark, and brooding Carson Langsford, making a special trip just for our little bakery? There's more to that story, I bet."

Shiloh laughed, joining in on the teasing. "Oh, definitely, and we have front-row seats to the unfolding drama."

The two of them were impossible. Before Lacey had met her boyfriend, her playful teasing had been about my lack of social life. But for the past month, she'd been walking around with hearts in her eyes, and she and Shiloh were determined to find me a man.

I sighed dramatically, feigning exasperation. "You two are impossible. Is he even gay? There's nothing more pathetic than pining after someone you don't stand a chance of being with. Seriously, what are the odds three of the four brothers are interested in men? Not good, I'll tell you that."

Lacey winked, stepping back and motioning to the door leading to the storefront. "Just remember, if he does come in, try not to drop any cookies in surprise."

I mock-gasped. "I would never! These are my masterpieces."

The three of us shared a good-natured laugh, the momentary tension from earlier dissipating into the warm atmosphere of the bakery. As I returned to my work, I couldn't help but feel a strange mix of anticipation and nerves. The idea of Carson, of all people, coming to see my work was both exciting and nerve-wracking.

The hours seemed to blur together as the bakery continued its daily hustle and bustle. Lacey and Shiloh moved between the kitchen and the storefront, managing orders and assisting customers. Meanwhile, I remained engrossed in my work, meticulously finishing each cookie.

Every chime of the front door's bell made my heart race a little more, half-expecting to see Carson walk in. But as the afternoon waned, there was still no sign of him.

Lacey popped her head into the kitchen, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "No sign of Mr. Tall Dark and Broody yet," she teased, earning an exaggerated groan from me.

But as the minutes turned into hours and the old clock crept closer to

closing time, I slowly let go of the anticipation. Maybe he'd changed his mind, or perhaps I was right, and he'd chosen someone else to plan the menu for their event. Regardless, I found solace in my work, taking pride in the beautiful creations that lay before me.

Shiloh approached, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. "It's been a long day, Ezra. Why don't you call it a night? You've done more than enough, and these cookies look phenomenal."

I nodded, appreciating his kind words. "Thanks, Shiloh. I just got carried away, I guess."

He gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "There's always tomorrow. And who knows, maybe Carson will make an appearance then. He sounded excited about setting something up, so I'm sure he just had a work emergency or something."

"You don't have to try to make me feel better, Shiloh," I said as I stashed my tools in the cabinet designated mine. "Is it a bummer he didn't come in? Sure, but it was just a planning session."

"Yeah, for your first big catering event. Do you even realize what something like this could turn into for you?" Shiloh was hard at work stretching the sourdough for tomorrow's loaves. Like me, he knew what he most enjoyed doing. For him, it was anything with dough, while I preferred sugar. We were a good team. As if he'd heard my thoughts, he added, "I've always known there was more I could do with the bakery, like my grandparents did with theirs, but I'm also smart enough to realize it would've never happened while I was a one-man show. Now I'm not."

"I guess you're right." I shrugged. "I just don't want to get my hopes up when we don't even know for sure it'll happen."

"It'll happen."

I shrugged into my puffy winter coat before heading into the crisp evening air. The day's events played in my mind as I made my way home, the promise of tomorrow filling me with hope and curiosity.

CARSON

THE MOMENT I STEPPED INTO SHILOH'S SWEETS, THE WORLD FELT A BIT warmer, a little brighter. Though the bakery was buzzing with chatter and the sweet aroma of pastries, it was Ezra who held my attention. He was a picture of focus, hands deftly maneuvering an icing tool over a fresh batch of cookies.

Teddy had been a genius to recommend creating an area where people could watch the decorators from the other side of a plate-glass window when Shiloh had hired him to expand his bakery. It had seemed corny at the time, but today, I was grateful for the view.

And yeah, I realized how weird that probably made me. I wasn't the type who spent days watching the food channel on cable, but that wasn't me. There was just...*something* about watching Ezra work that I could appreciate. He focused on his frosting the way I did when I was working on the old Chevelle I had stored in my dad's garage.

Our eyes met, and in that split second, a surge of warmth coursed through me. It was as if the entire world had condensed into that one shared gaze. I shook those thoughts out of my head.

Maybe I was coming down with something. I wasn't the moony type, and I could count on one hand the number of times I'd been drawn to a man. I'd have five fingers left over.

Before I could even process it, Shiloh motioned me right into the heart of their operation, the kitchen. It was quaint, filled with the hum of ovens and soft music—blessedly not Christmas carols. Pushing my way through the swinging doors felt like being invited into a sacred space where they didn't allow just anyone.

Ezra looked up, and I saw a slight tremor in his hand. I wanted to say something—anything—to ease the sudden tension. But before words could form, disaster struck. He turned to face me, and a wayward squirt of bright-red icing shot from his bag, splattering right onto my jacket.

His eyes went wide, a flush creeping up his neck. “Oh God, I’m so sorry,” he stammered, clearly mortified.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “It’s okay. I guess this means I’ve been officially christened by Shiloh’s Sweets.” I offered him a reassuring smile. “Really, don’t worry about it. I should have watched where I was walking.”

I could feel the heat rising from Ezra’s cheeks before I saw it as he frantically tried to wipe off the errant icing from my jacket. “Oh, I’m so, so sorry!” His eyes, wide and apologetic, were captivating even in his embarrassment. “If the gel coloring doesn’t come out of your jacket, let me know, and I’ll buy you a new one.”

Before his attempt at damage control could escalate into a bigger fiasco, I gently stilled his hand with mine. “Hey, don’t worry about it. Look, now I’m in theme with the festivities, right?” I tried to jest, lifting my jacket slightly to showcase the inadvertent “decoration.” We both laughed, a genuine shared moment that dispelled the awkward tension hanging between us.

As the conversation naturally flowed to the topic of the Christmas event, Ezra’s entire demeanor transformed. His eyes sparkled with an intensity and passion I hadn’t noticed before. He began painting a vivid picture with his hands, illustrating his ideas about the cookie designs and other desserts he could make for the event. The sheer enthusiasm radiating from him was infectious, and I found myself not just listening but genuinely engrossed.

At one point, his fingers stilled, and a shadow of self-doubt crossed his face. “Sorry,” he said, breaking eye contact. “I tend to...ramble. I just get so lost in the ideas sometimes.”

The earnestness in his voice struck a chord. I tried to convey as much sincerity as I could muster. “Honestly, Ezra, you should take the lead on this. Your passion, your ideas, they’re what this event needs. Me? I’m just trying to find my way around Christmas. I’d probably end up serving burned cookies if left to my own devices.”

His astonishment was palpable. “Really? You—you think so? I was just...” He hesitated, searching for the right words, rubbing the back of his neck in a nervous gesture I was quickly growing fond of. “...thinking out loud.” The delicate tug of a smile at the corner of his lips told me he wasn’t

used to such direct praise.

“I don’t say shit I don’t mean. And you have great ideas.” I wasn’t sure why, but I reached across the stainless table, resting my hand on this forearm. “I’ll be the money guy and get you the information you need, but I’m officially giving you carte blanche to do whatever you want within the budget.”

With the designs and ideas shared and our laughter fading into a comfortable silence, I glanced at the wall clock. The realization of time passing faster than anticipated made me reluctantly draw our meeting to a close.

“I should probably get going. I’ve got a car in the garage that’s probably wondering where I disappeared to,” I started, brushing my fingers along the edge of the table. But deep down, I didn’t want the moment to end. I could feel the pull, a whisper of a connection I hadn’t anticipated when I walked into the bakery.

This undercurrent would pull me down if I wasn’t careful, and I needed to get away before I did or said something stupid.

Ezra looked up, a hint of the same reluctance mirrored in his eyes. “Of course, I understand. It was nice, really nice, talking about the event and all.” He paused, seeming to gather his thoughts. “I’m looking forward to seeing how everything comes together. And working closely with you.”

I nodded, absorbing his words. There was a warmth in his tone, a genuineness that resonated with me. “Absolutely. I’ll be back soon to tie up the final details. Maybe we can grab a coffee when I’m here next?” It wouldn’t be a date, but it felt like a step in that direction. One I wasn’t sure I was ready to take, yet the words had spilled out naturally.

His eyes widened a fraction at my suggestion, but then a small smile played on his lips, betraying his thoughts. “I’d like that,” he replied, a hint of shyness evident.

I slowly got up, acutely aware of the space between us. The distance felt both too much and too little at the same time. As I pushed through the swinging door into the dining area of the bakery, my ears were filled with the annoying drone of conversations, but everything faded into the background when Ezra followed me.

Taking a step toward the exit, I could feel Ezra’s gaze on me. Every instinct screamed at me to turn back, to seal the promise of our next meeting with something more concrete. My hand lingered on the door handle, the cold

metal grounding me for a moment.

“Hey.” I turned back to him. “Maybe you should come to the planning session on Thursday. I’d like the rest of the team to hear your plans.”

“Oh...of course.” Ezra shifted nervously.

I mentally kicked myself. I should have realized by how nervous he’d been in the kitchen that this was a huge ask. But it was a way for me to see him again without any pressure. “If you’d rather not, you can just email me the menu, and I’ll tell them about it. I’m sure everyone’s going to think you’re a genius.”

“No. No, I can... I’ll be there.” He stood a bit straighter, and it took everything in me to not tell him I was proud of his courage. His gaze wandered around the room, looking everywhere but at me. When he spoke again, I was certain the words were for himself rather than me. “Yes. I can do that. It’s not a big deal.”

This time, I couldn’t stop myself from placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry. It’ll mostly be just me, my brothers, and their partners. There might be a few other people there, but no one scary.”

Ezra scoffed. “No big, bad wolves?”

I pretended to think for a moment. I liked the way his eyes were now on me. The tip of his tongue slipped between his lips as I scratched my beard. “Hmm, not that I can think of. But damn, wouldn’t that be something?”

Shit, I had to get out of there. I felt my heart pounding as I stared into Ezra’s hypnotic eyes, framed by black-rimmed glasses that kept sliding down his nose, and I knew that if I didn’t leave, I would be completely lost in his spell. This was craziness. I wasn’t the type to get flustered around anyone, but Ezra had knocked me off-kilter.

The familiar chime of the door rang out as I opened it, the brisk winter air greeting me. Just as I was about to step out, I couldn’t resist the urge to look back. Our eyes met, and in that split second, everything else blurred. The weight of that gaze, charged and full of unspoken words, held me captive.

It wasn’t just a glance—it was a promise, a suggestion of all the possibilities that lay ahead. The intense feeling in that split second was unmistakable, quickening my heart in a way it hadn’t experienced for many years.

Stepping out into the cold, I took a deep breath, trying to calm the whirlwind of emotions within. The promise of something new, something unknown, loomed ahead. And as the door slowly closed behind me, the last

strains of the bakery's warm, welcoming atmosphere followed me, merging seamlessly with the chilly embrace of the winter air.

There was no denying it. Something had shifted today. The walls I'd meticulously built over the years seemed to have developed a crack, and a tiny sliver of hope had found its way in, all thanks to an adorably shy baker.

EZRA

THE GENTLE HUM OF CONVERSATION SURROUNDED ME AS I STEPPED INTO THE main hall at Harmony House, the golden hue of the late afternoon sun painting the room in a soft glow. Everywhere I looked, there was evidence of the upcoming Christmas event. Bags and boxes overflowing with decorations littered the floor. The weight of the trays in my hands seemed to be pulling me down, both physically and mentally.

When Carson told me to do whatever I thought was best, I'd run to Shiloh, asking for his input. Unfortunately, he'd simply smirked and told me to have fun with my first event. And I had, at least once my freak-out over the stress of being the decision-maker abated.

I'd spent the past two days alternating between Shiloh's grandma's binder of recipes and the ovens. As much as I loved trying out new recipes, this was a time for tried-and-true. As I worked, I got the bright idea to create a Christmas tale for the senses, which sent me down a rabbit hole of recipe blogs because savory finger foods were necessary to create a balance, but out of my wheelhouse.

Once I got everything into the main hall, it was time to bring my vision to life. It looked good on paper, and I knew every offering tasted good, but what would the planning group think? Was it too much? Not fancy enough? I tried to shake off the doubts but found them stubbornly persistent.

My strategy had been clear in my mind. Get in, lay out the samples, and then discreetly exit. Especially since Carson was there and had the list of foods I was considering. With each dish carefully labeled, he'd certainly be able to help the group decide which dishes made the final cut. And, bonus, I wouldn't have to make a fool of myself in front of the man who'd contributed

to my current state of exhaustion.

Sleep had been elusive the past couple of nights, filled with vivid dreams of him. Dreams that made my cheeks burn in mortification, even in recollection. Being in the same room with him after such dreams felt like trying to walk a tightrope.

The universe, however, had its own plans.

“Hey, Ezra.” Carson’s voice rang out, carrying an unexpected warmth that caused an involuntary shiver to run down my spine. “Stay a bit. Your insights on the food are invaluable. Everything looks incredible, and I can’t wait until the others get here so we can dig in. You deserve to see how much people love your work.”

I halted in my tracks, my heart skipping a beat. It felt like the room had fallen silent, every eye turning toward me. My heart quickened as Carson’s gaze met mine.

His eyes were the color of the black cocoa powder Shiloh kept a small tin of on the top shelf of the pantry, his irises an intricate pattern of the darkest browns with flecks of gold. They held me captive with a gaze that was both alluring and terrifying.

My face began to heat as his dark eyes studied me. I felt exposed, as if every thought and emotion I kept locked away was written in my expression. My throat felt suddenly parched as I tried to muster a response.

“I—I just thought I’d set these up and...” My voice trailed off, sounding feeble and uncertain even to my ears. I motioned toward the door.

Carson’s gaze softened, yet the intensity remained. “We value your work, Ezra. But it’s not just about the food. We value you. I told my brothers about your ideas, and I think they’d like to hear what you have to say too.”

Flustered, I struggled to comprehend the flood of emotions those words evoked. Here was a man whose family was a pillar of the community, showing genuine interest in me. And not just as a baker but as an individual. The realization was both overwhelming and deeply touching. Trying to collect myself, I took a deep breath, my fingers lightly brushing over the smooth surface of the pastries.

Carson’s older brother approached, along with Kevin Mickelson, who’d moved back to Harmony Grove almost a year ago. We’d grown up together, and both of us couldn’t wait to escape the scrutiny and judgment of our uber-conservative families. The way he glanced at Anson when he thought no one was looking, I wondered if the similarities between us ran deeper.

Anson held out his hand. His grip was strong, bordering on too tight, as he greeted me. “Ezra, I’ve heard a lot about the menu options you sent to Carson. I’m not sure how we’re going to choose from all this food. It looks and smells amazing.”

I rubbed the nape of my neck, struggling to look anywhere other than the floor. I took a deep breath, remembering that Shiloh was counting on me. This wasn’t only an opportunity for me but for Shiloh’s Sweets as well. I’d heard people chattering about the event, and it sounded as though it had the potential to become the next big thing.

“Thank you. Carson suggested I should let my imagination go wild. I’m not sure he knew what he was getting himself into.” Someone chuckled, and I bit my bottom lip to keep from rambling even more.

I jolted as someone squeezed my shoulder. When I glanced to my left, Carson stood beside me, offering me a reassuring grin. “I knew. You might not be in the spotlight, but that doesn’t mean word hasn’t spread about the magic you whip up in the kitchen. You’re the perfect man for the job.”

Anson announced that everyone had arrived and the meeting was starting. I watched as everyone took their seats around the room, surprised by the lack of formality.

“Why don’t we start with the food?” Carson suggested. “I’m not sure about anyone else, but there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell I’m going to be able to focus on the rest of the meeting if we don’t get to sample what Ezra so kindly put together for us.”

I could see the audience’s eyes light up, their anticipation palpable. As I finished presenting the sweets, my initial anxiety melted away. This was my world, and I was in control.

Summoning a shaky smile, I replied, “Thank you, Carson. Let’s start with the desserts. Everyone knows that’s the best part of any meal.” As I began sharing my vision, my passion for baking overshadowed the initial anxiety. Whenever my voice faltered, I only had to look to Carson, who was quick with a nod or wink, encouraging me to continue.

Shiloh and I had spent hours experimenting in the kitchen, honing my ideas into the ideal combination of flavors to make the event memorable. The initial dishes I presented to the committee consisted of classic homey recipes with an elegant twist. They weren’t merely the centerpieces. They narrated the heart of Harmony Grove through every bite.

The soft hums and moans of delight were a huge boost to my confidence.

Everyone's attention was split between my words and the food. That was fine by me. The less I had to say, the better.

The cranberry cheesecake bites were my first showstopper. "These," I began with a flourish, lifting one for everyone to see, "are bite-sized delights. The rich, creamy cheesecake is complemented perfectly with a tart cranberry topping, and the buttery graham crust offers a touch of sweetness. It's a burst of the holiday spirit in every mouthful."

This was the sort of presentation I'd hoped to give but had thought impossible. It helped that the men and women in this room were friendly. None of them were my friends, but they weren't strangers. And given the mission of Harmony House, they wouldn't shun me for being the awkward gay man.

I moved on to the next item, the white Christmas pavlovas. "Pavlovas are a classic dessert. We've sized them down to a bite-sized portion and adorned them with fresh white cream and seasonal berries, hinting at a snow-covered winter landscape. They're light, airy, and melt in your mouth."

Finally, I brought forward my personal favorite. "Now, this," I said with pride, pointing to a beautiful glass showcasing layers of decadence, "is our chocolate mousse and brownie trifle. It begins with a layer of moist, fudgy brownie, followed by a velvety chocolate mousse. Topped off with whipped cream and chocolate shavings, it's a symphony of textures and flavors, promising indulgence in every bite."

I glanced around the room, gauging the committee members' reactions. They leaned in, eager, and I felt my confidence swell. "Of course," I added with a modest shrug, "there will be an assortment of iced cookies as well—simple yet festive."

Their eyes were on me, some filled with wonder, others with curiosity. The room was buzzing with anticipation, and I felt like I'd truly captured the spirit of Harmony Grove in my creations.

I turned my back to the room and pulled out the index cards I'd created for the savory foods. While I could talk about desserts until their eyes glazed over, savory was newer for me. I should have started there so the presentation didn't fall flat. After giving them a few minutes to finish their dessert samples, I drew in a deep breath.

"Now," I said, false bravado in my voice, "for the savory items. Shiloh and I spent a lot of time brainstorming and experimenting in the kitchen. We wanted something that would be both traditional and innovative."

“Imagine mini pot pies, their crusts golden and flaky, filled to the brim with a sumptuous turkey and vegetable medley. Then there are the small skewers, each holding a bite of honey-glazed ham, offset by the tangy burst of a pineapple chunk.

“As this is an event for the kids, we wanted to make sure there was plenty they’d enjoy as well,” I continued. Carson and Anson wandered around the room, offering samples to the others before sitting with their plates piled high. “We’ll have creamy mac and cheese bites, breaded and lightly fried, pigs in a blanket, and meatball skewers with a cranberry dipping sauce.”

The group seemed enraptured, nodding and whispering, surely imagining the delightful spread. However, I couldn’t help but notice Carson. He was usually the epitome of focus, but today, his attention was solely on me. Every gesture I made, every word I uttered, seemed to pull him in further.

As I continued describing the dishes—the puff pastry bites filled with cranberry and brie, the mini sliders with tender roast beef and horseradish cream—I felt a weight in the pit of my stomach. It wasn’t anxiety or apprehension, but rather an awareness of Carson’s gaze. It was as if there was an invisible thread connecting us, growing tauter with each passing second.

Amidst my descriptions, our eyes met. The clamor of the room seemed to fade away, leaving just the two of us in a silent world of our own. Those few seconds felt like an eternity, loaded with unsaid words and emotions. The intensity of his gaze mirrored my own tumultuous feelings: surprise, confusion, and a hint of something more.

The spell was broken as someone cleared their throat, pulling me back to the present. With a slight shake of my head, I continued with my presentation. Yet, that moment with Carson lingered, casting a subtle hue over the rest of the evening.

After the savory descriptions, a few attendees raised their hands with questions.

A woman I knew frequented the bakery spoke first. “Are there vegetarian options for some of these delicacies?”

I nodded. “Of course. Both our savory and sweet items have vegetarian variants. We’ve ensured there’s something for everyone. Maybe Carson can send you the complete list of options I sent him so you can choose. I wasn’t able to make samples of everything and bring them with me tonight.”

Another gentleman, dressed in a sharp suit, asked, “Any chance for some gluten-free pastries?”

“Absolutely,” I responded. “Of course, there’s not a way for Shiloh to guarantee zero cross-contamination because flour tends to get everywhere no matter how much we clean. We’ve already discussed coming in the Monday before the event so we can clean the equipment, make treats that are as safe as possible for those who need gluten-free, and individually package them.”

Not only did that appease the man, but he seemed impressed by the detailed explanation of how we hoped to make sure no one was left out. A lot of people thought gluten-free was as simple as changing out the ingredients, but Shiloh was always honest with his customers about the fact it would be impossible to guarantee zero-risk without a completely separate kitchen.

I busied myself through the next part of the meeting, gathering my empty trays, stashing them in the warming box. I neatly arranged the leftovers on the table, hoping someone would take them home.

It wasn’t long before Anson stood, his voice breaking through the chatter. “We’ve worked hard! Let’s toast to our success at Towne Tap tonight!”

Cheers and claps followed his proposal. The room echoed with excitement, but amid the noise, my voice was almost a whisper. “I might head home early...”

Before I could even register what was happening, Carson was by my side, his presence as alluring as reassuring. “Come on, Ezra,” he said gently, his voice carrying a warmth and earnestness I hadn’t heard before. “You’re part of this now, whether you like it or not. I’m pretty sure my brother’s not going to let you go.”

I was taken aback. While I understood Anson’s appreciation in a business sense, the undertone in Carson’s voice suggested his own interest was something more personal. Our eyes locked, and for a split second, everything else faded into the background. The weight of his gaze, the intensity of the moment—it was both daunting and exhilarating.

Surprise, doubt, and a budding happiness swirled within me. It took me a moment to find my voice, but when I did, it was with a timid smile. “Alright, just one drink.”

CARSON

THE BUZZ INSIDE THE COMMUNITY ROOM SLOWLY BEGAN TO DIE DOWN. Around me, chairs were being stacked and the scrawled mess of sticky notes on the whiteboard was wiped away. My brother and Kevin basked in a post-meeting glow, their laughter and conversations forming a comforting hum in the background.

I watched them, trying to figure out what in the hell was going on. Anson had been tight-lipped, but the more I watched them interact, the more certain I was there was something between them.

I was debating joining them when my attention was pulled to Ezra. He looked slightly out of place, like a songbird amidst crows. Gone was the outgoing, confident man who'd commanded the attention of everyone in the room. In his place was the Ezra I'd seen glimpses of at the bakery.

It bothered me that he was retreating into himself. Sure, he was packing, but his body language made it abundantly clear that he didn't want anyone trying to engage with him. Unfortunately for him, at some point between our first meeting and now, I'd decided it was time for him to come out of his shell.

I made my way over, finding a voice I hoped sounded casual. "Hey, Ezra."

He looked up, surprise flashing across his eyes before they settled into a soft warmth. "Hey, Carson."

A pause stretched between us, and I scrambled to fill the silence. "Need a hand getting that into your car?" I gestured to the awkwardly bulky warming box I'd seen him struggle with on the way in.

Ezra looked at the box and then back to me, eyebrows raised. "It's not

that heavy, but thanks.”

Not wanting to let the opportunity slip away, I pressed on. “Come on, it’s not like I’m doing anything useful. Please, let me help you before Billy hands me a broom.”

The corner of Ezra’s mouth tipped up in an adorable smirk, alerting me to the fact that he’d seen through my bullshit excuse. He seemed to contemplate for a moment, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips. “I really should head back to the bakery. Lots to clean,” he admitted, a hint of vulnerability peeking through. “I suppose you’d be doing me a favor.”

“Why don’t I help?” I offered, trying not to sound too eager. “We’ll get it done faster. Then we can head down to Towne Tap to meet with the rest of the guys. I love my brothers and my buddies, but sometimes seeing them all coupled up is rough.”

That was, apparently, the wrong thing to say. Ezra tucked his chin to his chest. Eventually, Ezra’s eyes lifted and searched mine, perhaps for some hidden motive. But then, with a nod, he agreed. “Alright, but only if you’re sure.”

We quickly loaded all the stuff in the hatch of his SUV, and I followed him through the alleys behind the buildings on Main Street. When we reached the bakery entrance, I took the initiative, holding the door open for him.

The bakery’s familiar scents enveloped us as we entered. The warm aroma of fresh-baked goods lingered, providing a stark contrast to the cold outside. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end as Ezra led me through the pitch-black hallway. I had no idea how he didn’t trip over anything.

With the flick of a switch, the kitchen was flooded with glaringly bright light. Setting the tote down, I began unpacking, stacking the empty containers on the counter.

“Why don’t you get the sinks filling while I bring in the rest,” I offered. There was no point in both of us freezing our asses off.

“You really don’t have to,” he protested. “I know your brothers and friends are waiting. You can take off. I’ll be fine.”

“No, we’re going to get this cleaned up and put away, and then you’re joining me.” Reaching around him, I turned on the hot water. “You already told Anson you’d be there. If you don’t show up, he’ll track you down and drag you out. Shit. That probably sounded worse than I meant.”

Ezra chuckled. It was a melodic sound I wanted to hear often. His hazel

eyes shimmered when I spun around. He used his shoulder to push his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “I know what you meant. If he was a creepy kidnapper, he probably wouldn’t be hanging out with one of the cops or running for mayor.”

“True, but it could also be a great cover,” I teased as he slid the empty pans into the soapy water. “As you pointed out, no one would suspect him.”

“Then maybe I need to find a big, muscly guy to keep me safe.”

Was he flirting with me?

Batter question: did I want him to flirt with me?

Yeah, I think I did.

Fuck. I was going to have to talk to Billy and Danny to figure out what in the fuck was going on with me.

Before heading back to the parking lot to grab the tote with the desserts, I rested my hand on the nape of Ezra’s neck. He shivered when I leaned closer, and I was almost certain I heard him whimper. My dick twitched, realizing how much I liked these little signs that I was affecting him.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” I whispered. “I’ll make sure no one hurts you.”

A lump formed in my throat, and I stepped away. I was too fucking weak to tell Ezra I might just be the biggest threat to him. I’d never do anything on purpose, but history told me I wasn’t worthy of someone as kind and pure as him.

We made quick work inside the bakery, cleaning up and putting things away. After a while, Ezra glanced at the clock. “It’s not too late. Do you still want to head out for that drink?” he asked, a hint of anxiety in his voice.

I nodded. “For sure. I’m not going to have Anson beating down my door either.”

“Don’t worry. I’d protect you.” Ezra placed his hand on my arm, immediately yanking it back as if he’d been burned. I wished I could have found a way to tell him to put it back because I liked that split second of him feeling comfortable enough to touch me.

As we made our way to the bar, the cold seemed even more biting. The wind gusted, the tall buildings along Main Street creating a wind tunnel effect. The pale moonlight illuminated the streets, casting long, eerie shadows. The snow beneath our shoes muffled our steps, adding to the silence of the night.

I couldn’t help but notice the way Ezra shivered slightly, wrapping his

arms around himself. Taking off my scarf, I said, “You should wear this. Don’t want you catching a cold.”

He smirked. “You know, that’s just an old wives’ tale.”

Grinning, I replied, “Then wear it so you aren’t cold. Practicality over myths, right?”

Ezra chuckled, taking the scarf and wrapping it around his neck. “Thanks,” he murmured, his cheeks turning a light shade of pink.

The soft murmur of conversations and the warmth of the fire at the front of the room greeted us as we entered. Anson stood and waved us over as though we wouldn’t have noticed the loud-mouthed group of men in the corner. He raised an eyebrow at Ezra, noting my scarf wrapped snugly around him.

Anson commented, “Nice scarf, Ezra. Looks familiar, Carson.”

Rolling my eyes, I shot back, “Just being a decent human, Anson. Nothing more to it.”

But Anson’s knowing smirk said it all. Laughter and playful banter filled the room as the evening progressed. The weight of the day seemed to melt away, replaced by the lightness of the moment. Every shared glance between Ezra and me hinted at the possibility of something more, something unspoken yet profoundly felt.

Ezra seemed to blossom as the hours passed. One drink turned to two, followed by a tall glass of water I asked for at the bar. He didn’t strike me as much of a drinker, and he needed to be able to get himself home at the end of the night.

He captivated the group with a hilarious story from the bakery. “So there I was,” he started, making exaggerated hand gestures, “trying this new bread recipe when I added a bit too much yeast. Before I knew it, the dough expanded exponentially and”—he paused for dramatic effect—“POOF! It proofed up so much that it looked like a monster trying to take over the kitchen. That was the last time Shiloh asked me to help him with the bread.”

“Oh, Ezra,” I chuckled. “I would’ve paid good money to see that.” From what little I’d seen and gleaned so far, he was the type of man who didn’t deal with mess. It wouldn’t surprise me if his shirts were arranged by style, fabric, and color just to keep them in order. His underwear were probably all the same simple white briefs, neatly folded and tucked in perfect stacks in his dresser.

And hell, there went my mind again. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t not

picture his slender backside covered in white cotton. I sucked in a slow, steady breath to calm myself. When that didn't work, I tried a long draw of the ice-cold beer my buddy, Waylon, had just put down in front of me.

He grinned, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "It was a sight. I'll give you that."

As the clock neared midnight, the pub's atmosphere mellowed. The music on the jukebox shifted from wailing guitars with heavy beats to classic rock tunes, filling the gaps in our conversations. Ezra and I found ourselves nestled in a quiet corner, our chairs slightly closer than before.

Ezra played with the fringes of the scarf I'd given him earlier. "You know," he began, his voice soft and contemplative, "this scarf has been around you so much, it carries your scent."

I chuckled, a little embarrassed. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

He looked up, the dim light catching the deep pools of his eyes. "Definitely a good thing," he replied with a hint of shyness.

When the bartender announced the last call, we were both reluctant to leave. The cold had intensified, but the warmth between us made it bearable.

As we stepped outside, snow began to fall in huge, fluffy flakes that danced in the moonlight. It was like someone had just shaken one of the snow globes my mom collected.

Ezra looked up, letting the snowflakes settle on his eyelashes. "I've always loved seeing late-night snowfalls," he whispered. "There's something peaceful about the white flakes falling through the streetlights."

Standing close, I brushed a snowflake off his cheek. "I'm starting to see the allure," I murmured, feeling an overwhelming urge to close the gap between us. But I hesitated, unsure of his reaction.

Ezra looked at me, his gaze searching mine. Slowly, he leaned in, our breaths mingling, the space between us closing.

Just as our lips were about to touch, a loud group shoved through the front door, their laughter breaking the intimate moment. We both jumped back, startled.

Offering him my arm, we began our walk back to the bakery. The snow crunched under our feet, the world silent except for our soft conversation and the distant chattering as the rest of the patrons left the bar.

Ezra turned to me, his eyes serious. "Carson, tonight was great. Thank you."

Feeling a warmth spread through me, I replied, "No, thank you. My

brothers are always giving me shit about being a recluse. I wouldn't be opposed to hanging out again."

He gave me a genuine, heartwarming smile. "Me either."

The cold had set in deeper, sending a chill down my spine. We continued to the bakery, the soft glow from the streetlights illuminating our path. The silence between us was thick, charged with the weight of unspoken emotions and thoughts.

Ezra pulled out his key fob, unlocking his car. I hurried past, opening the door for him. When he turned the key in the ignition, it groaned and sputtered but refused to roar to life.

"Come on, not now," he muttered under his breath. I pressed my lips together to keep from asking how long he'd been having issues. I didn't like the thought of him having to offer up a prayer every time he sat behind the wheel.

"Pop the hood," I told him. There wasn't much I'd be able to do, but maybe it was something as simple as a loose battery cable.

"You don't have to get frostbite for me," he protested. "It does this when it's cold."

"Would you let me go hungry?"

"Huh?" The furrow between his brows made him seem even younger and more innocent.

I crouched down so I was on his level, playing with the fringe on my scarf, which was apparently his now. "If I was hungry, you would try to feed me, yeah?" Ezra nodded. "Well, I'm hopeless in the kitchen, but I know cars. Let me help you."

Not giving him a choice, I reached below the dash and pulled the lever for the hood. The battery cables definitely needed attention, but the more pressing issue was the age of the battery. It was no surprise it was reluctant to start.

Since I was parked next to him, I lifted my hood and grabbed the jumper cables out of my trunk. "We should be able to get it started, but you have to get that replaced, Ez."

"I know, I know." He rubbed his hands together before cupping them in front of his face to keep them warm. "I've been meaning to, but I forget things like that sometimes."

"Get in and try it now," I instructed him after the battery had been charging for a minute. Since it had only been a few hours since he last drove

it, I hoped the little charge plus the draw from my battery would be enough for the engine to start. Ezra let out a whoop when his car spluttered to life. I wasn't nearly as excited.

Ezra buckled while I disconnected the cables. I returned to his still-open door. "I'm serious, Ezra. If you want that taken care of and don't have the time, come and see me."

He chuckled softly. "I'll keep that in mind. Goodnight, Carson."

I watched Ezra's taillights disappear down Main Street and around the corner. If it wouldn't put me in the creeper category, I would have followed him home. Just to make sure his car didn't die again.

And if I spent thirty minutes driving the streets in the direction he turned just to give myself peace of mind, I wouldn't admit it.

CARSON

I COULDN'T GET THAT ALMOST-KISS OUT OF MY HEAD. AS I'D FLIPPED AND flopped in my bed last night, my mind had conjured images of what would have happened if Keith and his buddies hadn't stumbled onto Main Street when my lips were inches from Ezra's. The images continued this morning as I drank my coffee and picked a three-day-old muffin into crumbs.

There was no telling how today would go. I was supposed to head to Shiloh's this afternoon to finalize the menu for the event, which meant facing Ezra in the cold light of day. It wouldn't have surprised me if he found an excuse to make himself scarce, leaving Shiloh to go over the plans with me.

I spent enough time fretting over what hadn't happened last night that I jolted when the antique clock in my living room chimed eight. You know, the time I was supposed to be at the shop.

Shit. This was just the start I needed for my day.

I quickly tossed my coffee cup in the dishwasher, brushed the muffin crumbs onto a paper towel, and threw it away on my way out the door. And, of course, because things were going so spectacularly, there were at least three inches of fresh snow covering my truck. While it warmed up, I brushed off as much of the snow as I could, scraped what had frozen to the glass, and debated shoveling. I was already late, so it might be worth being later just so I didn't have to dick with tire-packed snow when I finally got around to it later tonight.

Nope. Breaking my back would be preferable to listening to Rodney bitch at me all day for being lazy. He wouldn't be serious about it because he knew I was the hardest-working mechanic he had, but that didn't mean I felt like listening to his bullshit.

“Nice of you to join us,” Rodney bellowed right on cue. “You just missed your family’s best friend. The mayor was in. Needs an oil change. The way that miserable prick went on about it, you’d think his engine’s going to blow because it’s fifty miles past the date on the sticker. He said he’ll be back in an hour to pick it up.”

My day just kept getting better and better. An hour was more than enough time, but there was no doubt Thompson would find something to bitch about when he picked up his car. The tightwad was always looking for a way to get something for free. Sucked for us that we were the only shop in town, and he was too much of a candy-ass to drive up to Pineville to the quick-change place.

I got to work on the mayor’s car, focused on getting through the job without any distractions. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. The oil draining from the car reminded me of the flecks in Ezra’s eyes. The annoying Christmas tunes on the radio overhead had me thinking about what type of music he listened to. There was no doubt in my mind he was the type who couldn’t help singing along with every overplayed carol.

He was my opposite. And with as much as I hated the holidays, I needed to keep my distance so I didn’t dull his shine.

Luckily, I could do oil changes in my sleep. More than once, I was pretty sure I had. Too bad for me, I wasn’t sleeping today. Before long, I started adding oil, only to hear it pouring out the bottom of the engine.

“Dammit, Carson, what in the hell’s gotten into you today?” Of course I made the rookie mistake at the exact moment Rodney walked past. I dove under the car, quickly replacing the plug. Luckily, the drain pan was still on the ground. Otherwise, I’d have spent the rest of the day cleaning up the slick. “First, you come waltzing in here twenty minutes late, and then you act like you’ve never even seen under the hood of a fucking car. What gives?”

“Just got shit on my mind,” I hedged, not wanting to tell him what an unholy mess my mind was. Rodney wasn’t the type to want to know how anyone’s day was going, much less listen to them bemoan an existential crisis that had them questioning everything they knew about themselves. “Slept for shit last night. I’ll get it together.”

“You’d fucking better. Otherwise, I’m giving the timing belt to Quentin.” That wasn’t as much of a threat as he made it seem. Sure, the money was good on it, but that job was going to be a pain in the ass. That said, I wasn’t stupid enough to voice my opinion. “And for fuck’s sake, once you get done

here, grab another cup of coffee. Or one of those disgusting energy shots I know you keep in your box.”

“You got it.” I gave him a mock salute and went back to what I was doing.

The rest of the day was slightly better, but still a clusterfuck. Everything that could go wrong did, and it wasn’t even because my mind kept wandering to Ezra. If anything, thinking about stopping by the bakery after work kept me from blowing my stack a time or two.

It felt like time was running backward the closer I got to the end of the day. I debated running over to Shiloh’s while waiting for a part to be delivered but decided to fill that time organizing the bays to get back on Rodney’s good side. By three o’clock, when he bailed for an appointment, he was finally able to look at me without muttering under his breath.

An hour and a half later, I’d finished replacing the starter, placed two parts orders for the following day, and scrubbed my hands as clean as they were going to get. I shrugged out of my overalls and pulled on a clean Henley.

“Got a hot date tonight, Langsford?” Quentin teased. He was staying late tonight, and he’d pulled his project car, a 1967 Mustang Coupe, into the bay. The car was in rough condition, but if he managed to get it even halfway to mint, he stood to make a pretty penny on resale. We’d spent plenty of nights together, tossing back beers as I helped him overhaul the engine. That was about the closest I got to having friends.

“Nah, just headed over to the bakery,” I explained. Not wanting to give any signs that I was anxious to get out of there, I leaned against the workbench. “I think Anson’s trying to impress someone, and he roped all of us into helping him put on a big bash for the kids down at Harmony House.”

“Is this the same someone who got him to do that Thanksgiving thing last month? Your brother had better look out, or this girl’s gonna turn him into Harmony Grove’s party planner.” Oh, how wrong my friend was, but it wasn’t my place to correct him.

I’d have been pissed if someone started talking about Ezra and me before I was ready. Well, I imagined I would be if there was an us to talk about. Just like me, there were no indications until recently that Anson was into dudes, so maybe he was just trying to tap into his softer side in preparation for his hopeful seat in the mayor’s office.

“Eh, it’s good for him. Gives him something to do.”

Quentin scoffed. “You’re one to talk. I swear, it’s like the two of you make an art out of being hermits. It’s weird to think you’re related to Billy and Danny.”

“Yeah, well, those two also have partners who force them to do shit,” I pointed out. Quentin didn’t need to know what Danny and his husband, Blake, were always heading to Pineville for. They’d been talking about trying to buy a place here in town so they didn’t have to go so far for their... interests, but I wasn’t sure something like that would fly in Harmony Grove. The assholes around town already like to scream that it was bad enough “the gays were trying to take over” simply by existing. If someone opened a kink club of any sort in town, their little minds would explode.

“Fair enough, but what I said stands. You do realize hanging out with me after hours doesn’t count as having a social life, right?”

“Then what’s your excuse?” If he wanted to call me out, I’d turn those tables right back on him.

“Ain’t found anyone worth giving up time with this beauty.” He slapped the front quarter panel a couple of times. “But trust you me, if there was someone, I’d happily pack away my wrenches at quitting time for them.”

Them. Not her. Interesting.

But that was enough bonding time for one day. I swiped my jacked off the top of my toolbox. “Well, you have fun with your girl. I’m going to head out.”

The jingle of the bell hanging above the entrance greeted me as I pushed open the door to Shiloh’s Sweets. The scent of fresh-baked pastries filled the air, teasing my senses with a delicate dance of vanilla, cinnamon, and a hint of something fruitier. As I inhaled deeply, it was like the whole outside world melted away.

Surprisingly, the ambiance didn’t rub me the wrong way as it usually did during this season. Maybe it was the rustic charm of the place or the thought that Ezra had a hand in the decorations. Speaking of Ezra, my eyes scanned the bakery, searching for that familiar face, the one that had begun to occupy my thoughts more than I cared to admit.

I found him, but not in his usual spot crafting cookies. Instead, he was deep in the kitchen, engrossed in what looked like a new pastry experiment. The overhead light cast a golden halo around him, making him look like a serene figure in a painting. As if sensing my gaze, he looked up, and our eyes met. An unspoken acknowledgment passed between us, bringing with it a

comforting familiarity.

Shaking off the moment, I made my way toward the recent addition to the bakery, trusting that he'd find me when he was done. This side, with its larger tables and plush seating areas, was evidently designed for longer stays and meetings. As expected, Christmas had taken over here as well. Garland draped the ceiling, twinkling lights adorned the walls, and rustic wooden Christmas trees stood proudly on every table, each hand-painted in festive colors. It was as if a winter wonderland had been crafted indoors, away from the actual snowy landscape outside.

"No cookies today?" I teased, nodding toward his new creations as he approached.

Ezra chuckled, brushing a stray lock of hair behind his ear. "Thought I'd try my hand at something different. Branch out a bit, you know? After how well last night's samples went over, I decided to play around a little bit once I got my work for the day done. Try some things that have been on my radar, but I wasn't sure about."

I smirked. "Branching out suits you. And I love that seeing how much people enjoy your food is helping you step outside your comfort zone."

He flushed, a light pink dusting his cheeks. He looked down at his shoes for a moment before lifting his gaze to mine. "Thank you. If you can grab this other tray, we can find a place to sit and chat."

"Lead the way." We settled into a small booth at the back of the dining area to pare down the menu for the Christmas event.

That wasn't easy when everything I tried was even better than the last sample he gave me. He might be a master at decorating cookies, but it seemed Ezra had mad skills at everything in the kitchen.

"You know what? Change of plans," I told him. Anson wouldn't care about what we served as long as there was enough food for everyone who showed up. "I want you to take complete creative control over the menu. It's obvious you know what you're doing, and I loved how you crafted this whole story with food last night. Do that, and we'll be golden."

"Are—are you sure? I don't think that's how it's supposed to work."

"Positive." If left to my own devices, I'd have told him to bring some of everything, and we'd be eating leftovers for a full week after the party. Plus, it got me off the hook for the food. I could sign my name on the contracts once they were drawn up.

"Oh, that reminds me. I have a couple more desserts I wanted you to try."

Ezra jumped out of his seat and was already pushing through the kitchen door before I could tell him I really didn't need anything else to eat.

And as I sat there waiting for him to return, I wasn't sure I wanted to say anything. The times I'd seen Ezra before last week, he'd kept to himself. When he wasn't in the kitchen frosting cookies, he'd been sitting at this very booth with his nose buried in a video or article on his laptop. I wasn't conceited enough to think I was the reason for his change in demeanor, but it was pretty fucking cool to see.

"This one here is a white-chocolate raspberry tart," he began as he sat, his voice filled with excitement. I watched as he took a bite, his eyes closing in bliss. "Mmm. And over here, we have a spiced pumpkin cheesecake bite. I know pumpkin is typically associated with Thanksgiving, but I tried this recipe and fell in love with it."

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Ezra, you've outdone yourself. Every one of these looks and sounds incredible." My gaze lingered on him for a moment longer than necessary, but he seemed too engrossed in his desserts to notice.

Wanting to change the dynamic a bit, I smirked at Ezra. "Alright, how about we add a bit of fun to this? A friendly wager? We try our hands at decorating a cookie. Loser buys dinner."

So much for being full. I'd pay the price later, but dinner was the only thing I could think of to do because I didn't want him to think I was a barfly. Unfortunately, there wasn't much to do in Harmony Grove other than eat and drink.

Ezra's eyebrows shot up in surprise, but amusement danced in his eyes. "Are you challenging me? The baker? To a cookie decorating contest?" He leaned in, a playful glint in his gaze. "Are you sure you're ready to lose?"

I winked at him. "I might surprise you. And besides, I'm always up for a challenge."

Ezra laughed heartily, the sound echoing warmly in the bakery. "Alright then, game on!"

We moved to the cookie decorating station that looked like Ezra had already cleaned up for the day. I stood there twiddling my thumbs while he pulled out everything we'd need. Judging by his sudden burst of enthusiasm, following my gut hadn't steered me wrong.

Before long, bowls of colorful icing, sprinkles, and other decorations were laid out in a carefully organized line. He'd set up two work areas, each with three cookies to decorate. It didn't escape me that he'd given me simple

shapes and bowls of icing while there was an array of decorating bags in front of him. There was no way I was winning, but that was fine by me.

It was hard not to get caught up in the excitement. As we started, our hands occasionally brushed against each other when we reached for the sprinkles and containers of sugar in the center of the stainless work table. Every touch, no matter how fleeting, sent a jolt of electricity through me.

I found myself getting more and more distracted, stealing glances at Ezra, watching the way his fingers expertly maneuvered the icing, creating intricate designs on his cookie. He decorated part of the first before moving on to the next, and then he came back and added something to each. Sometimes, the icing was clearly defined, while other colors blended together.

I gave it my best. Honest. After a while, I held up my creation. It was a rather lopsided Christmas tree with unevenly spread green icing and a star that looked more like a blob. I tried to hide my embarrassment behind a grin. It reminded me of the cookies my family used to decorate during the holidays. It was nothing like the artistic masterpieces he showed off, but something as simple as lumpy frosting patched another small hole in my heart.

Ezra, trying to contain his laughter, presented his cookie. It was a flawless snowflake with intricate patterns and shimmering edible glitter. “Well,” he said teasingly, “I guess dinner’s on you.”

I chuckled. “Fair enough. I knew what I was getting into by challenging a baker in his domain. Any place in mind?”

Ezra’s fingers drummed on the table, his gaze distant for a moment. “How about Stella’s? It’s just around the corner. They make a mean pot roast.”

I nodded. “Sounds perfect.”

We cleaned up our mess, the air between us thick with unspoken words. Every moment was punctuated by fleeting touches and lingering glances. Our laughter echoed in the room, light and carefree. As we prepared to leave, Ezra handed me a box.

“For you,” he said with a shy smile. “Some of the samples and a few extra treats. I figured you might like them. Or maybe you could take them to the garage and share with your coworkers.”

I accepted the box, feeling a warmth spread through me. “Thank you, Ezra. You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to,” he replied, a soft sincerity in his voice. “I offered to pay

Shiloh for the ingredients, but he blew me off. Said that if we wound up expanding the catering menu, it was a worthwhile investment.”

The cold winter air greeted us as we stepped outside. The snow had started falling again, blanketing the world in a shimmering white layer. We walked side by side, the space between us gradually shrinking. By the time we reached Stella’s, our fingers were intertwined, the connection undeniable.

When Ezra tried to pull away, I squeezed his fingers, urging him to close. “This okay with you?”

He swallowed hard, his steps faltering when he looked down at our joined hands. “Yeah. I think so.”

“Damn, you really know the way to burst a man’s ego, don’t you?” I teased, immediately regretting it when his expression fell. I reached up with my free hand, brushing a finger over his cheek. I had no fucking clue what was going on with me, but I couldn’t stop whatever it was. “Hey now, that was a joke.”

“Oh. Of course.” He worried the corner of his lip between his teeth. “Sorry, you probably think I’m weird. It’s just —”

I cut him off before he could say anything else by pressing my finger to his lips. “Nope. Didn’t think that at all.”

“I’ve never done this before,” Ezra admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. If the bitter wind hadn’t been battering his face, I was certain his face would have been equally red, but from embarrassment.

Luckily, this was one scenario where I could put his mind at ease. I turned to face him and reached for his other hand. “Neither have I. And it scares the shit out of me.”

Ezra gaped at me, his eyes wide and his mouth opening and closing as if he couldn’t figure out what he wanted to say. I wasn’t expecting his shoulders to slump as he curled in on himself. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

“Oh, sweetheart, I promise you I’m not.” I pulled him between two buildings, hoping for a bit of shelter from the weather. “I’ve never been interested in a guy before you, Ezra. Obviously, I was missing out. Or maybe it just took a special kind of guy to make me realize I’ve been barking up all the wrong trees.”

I thought laying my cards on the table would make him feel more at ease, but if anything, he tensed even more. I could practically see him erecting a wall between us. “I don’t know if this is a good idea.”

He took a step away from me, then another. I'd have given my left nut if he'd just looked at me with those shimmering hazel eyes. But I didn't want to push him. He was obviously spooked.

"Is it okay with you if I take a raincheck on tonight?" he asked as the silence grew unbearable.

"Whatever you need." It felt important that he understood I would never pressure him. Maybe he was freaked about the idea of being with a man too. But that didn't seem right. I'd heard through the rumor mill that he was openly gay.

Maybe I was the problem. Fuck. That was probably it. He'd never been with a guy like me before. A dude who'd only been with women. Because yeah, my reputation wasn't exactly a secret in town either.

Sometimes, living in a small town sucked big, hairy ones. "Let me walk you back to your car."

"You don't have to," he hedged, already turning back toward the street.

"Well, I sort of do because my car's in front of the bakery. I figured it'd be more comfortable walking together instead of me following you like some sort of creepy stalker," I explained.

"Yeah, okay."

We walked back to the bakery in painful silence. Somehow, I'd managed to completely botch what would have been our first date-like thing. And he was skittish enough that I wasn't certain I'd get a second chance.

EZRA

WELL, THAT WAS SPECTACULARLY AWFUL. I SANK INTO THE DRIVER'S SEAT but didn't start the car right away. When Carson didn't leave immediately, I feared I'd have to go back inside and start baking more just to wait him out. He was probably trying to be nice, but I couldn't face him. Not after I'd screwed everything up.

Finally, he pulled out of his parking spot, leaving me to wallow in peace. I should have gone home, but the thought of my empty apartment was too depressing to face on the heels of ruining my first shot at a date in a long time. I wasn't surprised. That was how every attempt at dating went for me. I always did or said something to scare off guys before we made it to the end of the first date. That said, making a fool of myself before we even walked into the restaurant was a new low, even for me.

There weren't many places open this time of night, so I carefully backed out of my stall and headed in the opposite direction Carson had gone. At least I knew I wouldn't have to relive my mortification. The neon sign in the front window of Hearth & Foam flashed *Open* as I pulled into the parking lot. It was busier than expected for early evening, but the cold night was perfect for a cup of hot cocoa or one of Mara's special coffee confections.

"Hey, sweetie. You want your usual?" Mara called out as soon as I stepped through the front door. My cousin was busy making drinks while her teenage employee rang up the next customer.

"Yeah, that'd be great." I took a seat on one of the stools at the end of the bar.

As soon as Mara finished her current order, she made me a hot cocoa heaped with whipped cream, drizzled with caramel, and topped off with

chocolate shavings. Great. She knew something was up. This wasn't my usual drink. It was what she gave me when she planned on forcing me to tell her what was going on.

I had a brief reprieve as a group of high schoolers came in, each ordering something complicated. Or so I thought. She didn't miss a beat as she grabbed the next cup and started pulling espresso shots. "So, what brings you in tonight? I heard about you making an appearance at the Harmony House meeting last night. I figured you'd be on top of the world today."

That made two of us. And for a while, I had been. My stomach churned as I mentally recounted how I'd messed up this time, wondering if telling Mara would be a colossal mistake. I loved her to death, but telling her my personal business was about the same as if I'd gone into the salon and poured my heart out to Jasper while he had one of the little old ladies in his chair. Or if I'd gone to Towne Tap and spilled my guts to the bartender. At least he didn't know me, so he wouldn't judge me or chalk this up to me being completely inept in social situations.

"It can't be as bad as whatever you're brewing up in your head," Mara urged when I didn't start talking.

"You don't know that." I slurped some of the whipped cream concoction off the top of my mug to get to the cocoa without wearing the toppings. "What's wrong with me, Mara?"

She leaned against the counter after handing over the drink she'd been working on. "You're going to have to be a bit more specific. Are we talking in general, the ways you've disappointed your asshole parents by trying to live your own life, or something else?"

"Something else." God, she really did get me. I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing.

She waved her hand in the air, urging me to continue. When I didn't say anything, she rolled her eyes. "Listen, I love you, but I don't have time to play twenty questions tonight. Did you come down here to talk or not?"

Was not actually an option? Because not talking seemed so much safer than talking. I was beating myself up enough without anyone else telling me I was never going to find someone if I didn't learn how to keep my fool mouth shut.

"Oh shit, did you meet someone?" Mara blinked slowly, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence," I scoffed.

“Hey, you’re the one who keeps getting in your own way.” She grabbed a rag and wiped down the counters as we kept talking. “I don’t get it if I’m being brutally honest. You’re a good guy, Ez. You have this huge heart, and you’d be a great boyfriend to someone. Hell, you need someone in your life at this point. You’re happiest when taking care of other people, and the right guy would love that about you.”

“Yeah, but at this point, I’m pretty sure I’m the problem,” I whined. “I don’t know how I screwed up this time. No, I do. It’s stupid, really.”

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that,” she suggested. Another drink order came in, this time a cold drink, so she stayed right in front of me as she worked. “What did you do that has you thinking this is the end of the world as you know it?”

“I freaked when he tried holding my hand,” I blurted out. “I don’t know why, but I thought it would be a good idea to let him know right then and there that I’ve never been in a relationship before because he doesn’t strike me as the type to screw around. Then again, I’m probably not a good judge of that since, until today, I didn’t think he was into guys either.”

“Oh, Ez.” Mara sighed heavily. “Are you sure it was a date? I know you’re ready to pop that moldy old cherry of yours, but straight guys aren’t the way to go.”

“First of all, that’s disgusting.” I made gagging noises as I heaved dramatically. “And second, I’ll have you know that he’s the one who asked me out. Sort of.”

“What in the hell does sort of mean? I feel like you’re holding the details about what happened captive in that pretty little head of yours.” She called out to her employee that she was taking a break and motioned for me to follow her back to the office. “There. Now that we have some privacy, tell me what’s going on. For real this time.”

“Okay, so he came in to talk about the details for the Christmas party, and I’d spent the afternoon playing around with some recipes I found online,” I started, not thinking about the landmine I was about to walk into. “He was about to leave, so I grabbed some of the desserts I’d made this morning. Shiloh wasn’t feeling well, so he asked me to help him out so he wasn’t getting people sick by working around food. And you’re right. I was riding high because of the meeting last night and then having Shiloh tell me how good my work was. I might have girl-bossed a little too close to the sun.”

“You seriously need to quit watching TikTok, my friend. Talking in

memes and viral sounds doesn't suit someone with a master's in English lit." I scowled at her, and she held up her hands in surrender. "Sorry. Sorry. Please continue. So you got this mystery man of yours all fat and happy. Sounds like a good start so far."

"It's not like I fed him a five-course dinner or anything," I protested. She cocked her head to the side, giving me a look I knew meant she wouldn't let me get away with trying to change the subject. "So everything was going great. I thought it was silly when he said we should have a cookie decorating contest with the winner paying for dinner."

"Oooh, I like this guy. Forget what I said as long as he's not actually a straight dude and you're hallucinating something. Keep going because so far, I'm failing to see the problem." While I talked, she started slipping a knife under the flaps of a stack of envelopes on her desk.

"It didn't make any sense because, obviously, I was going to win." The words sounded conceited when I said them, but it was the truth. "There was no way he would have won that contest against me. And that realization was what gave me the first hint that he might be interested in me like that. Because if he wasn't, he wouldn't have invited me to dinner, right?"

"Obviously," she agreed. "So what happened between then and now that has you planning to go home and have a pity party in the dark?"

She made me sound pathetic, but her assumption wasn't wrong. That was exactly what I was going to do if I hadn't come here. Because that's what one did when they had zero social skills, no friends because they were the rainbow sheep of the church flock, and hadn't been smart enough to stay away after graduation because housing was dirt cheap in a tiny town like this.

"I let Lacey know I was leaving for the day. She gave me a hard time about having a hot date." I'd wished for a hole to open in the floor and suck me into the depths of hell when she'd said that. I'd looked to Carson, expecting him to be upset that she'd said something like that aloud, but he'd looked more flustered than anything. "While we were walking, the wind picked up. The gusts kept pushing us closer together."

"Uh-huh, sounds like someone's got game," she teased. "Seriously, Ezra? The wind forced you closer to him?"

"It did!" I insisted. "Before I knew what was happening, he started holding my hand. Right there on Main Street where anyone could see!"

"Good! It shows that you don't have to worry about crushing on the straight dude," she said matter-of-factly. "So, again, what's the issue here?"

“I told him I’d never done this before, and he tried to make me feel better by saying he hasn’t either.” That was the moment my heart sank. I might not be experienced, but even I knew that being someone’s experiment was the only thing worse than falling for a guy who wasn’t into men. It wasn’t until we were already on our way back to the cars that I realized I didn’t know his story. Plenty of guys weren’t out, and I certainly wasn’t one to judge anyone on never having been with a man. According to my parents, I couldn’t know if I was really gay because it was all a theory at this point. While that hurt, the academic side of my brain understood what they were saying.

“Oh, how cute! You can be each other’s firsts!” She practically squealed, and if I had to guess, she was probably already planning our wedding in the park. When she realized I didn’t share her excitement, she sat back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest. “Tell me you didn’t do something stupid when he made himself vulnerable.”

“I wish I could.” I cringed, her words having hit the mark a little too closely. I’d hurt him. He’d tried being honest with me, and I messed up. Instead of being happy that I could be myself without having to worry about my lack of experience driving a wedge between us, I’d let the things I’d heard about him fooling around with women and going on dates but never settling down paint a very unflattering picture of him in my mind.

“Oh, Ezra,” she sighed again. “What did you do? Tell me so we can figure out how to fix this.”

“I told him I couldn’t have dinner with him and started walking back to my car. And because it’s the type of guy he is, Carson walked back with me after I’d rejected him.”

“Hold the fucking phone!” She smacked her hands on the desk. “Carson? As in Carson Langsford?”

Crap. So first, I assumed he wanted me to be part of some sort of sexuality exploration, and now I’d outed him to my cousin with the big mouth and a captive audience ten hours a day. This was a nightmare. “You can’t say anything to anyone, Mara. I’m serious.”

She mimed a locking motion in front of her lips. “Give me a little credit, would you? I know you think I’m one of the biggest gossips of our generation, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to out anyone. Hell, do you know how many of the couples in town have sat in my little coffee shop while they were trying to sort out their shit?”

“Uh, no?” That was news to me. She loved telling me about everything

that went down at the shop whenever she brought me food, certain I'd waste away without her, and she'd never mentioned anything about any gay couples hanging out there.

“Exactly. Because I know when to keep my damned mouth shut.” She pursed her lips. When I studied her expression, she seemed genuinely hurt. “Even I know there’s a difference between talking about Shelly and Cory getting back together for the nth time even though they’re toxic to one another and giving the assholes like your parents fodder for their weekly prayer circles. Now, don’t take this the wrong way, but are you sure this is a good idea? He’s so...not you. Like, he’s everything you despise. I’m pretty sure grunt is his first language, he likes hanging out at the Tap playing pool and darts, probably hasn’t seen a movie that wasn’t funded by Marvel in the past decade, and —”

I knew all these things. And yet, I was starting to think there was a stark contrast between the Carson he showed the world and the man he truly was on the inside. He came from a family of animated personalities, and when you were a middle child, you got used to your voice not being heard. Or at least that’s what I’d been told. My parents stopped after my sister and me, saying they had all they needed after having a boy and a girl. Too bad for them only one of us would live up to their expectations.

“I’m still not sure there’s anything to be a good or bad idea. For all I know, tonight was a fluke, and I’m making a mountain out of a molehill.” That would be for the best, really. With the way things were looking at the bakery, I was in for a long month taking on more of the kitchen work now that I’d proved myself so Shiloh could focus on other things when we weren’t in an all-hands-on-deck situation for Christmas parties. If there was any question about the gossip mill’s power, just today, we’d had three calls from people who heard about the meeting at Harmony House and wanted us to come up with something for their private functions.

It was about the worst possible time to think about getting involved with someone, even if he was interested in me. And maybe Mara was right. We were way too different to make anything work.

Mara reached across the counter and squeezed my shoulder. “Oh, Ez. The look on your face says otherwise. I’d suggest you figure out how you’re going to fix this so you can find out.”

“Aren’t you the one who just listed off the reasons Carson’s a bad bet for me?”

“Yep. But what do I know? It’s not like I’m the queen of successful, healthy relationships.” Also true. Mara was well-known for choosing the worst possible men. “So here’s what you’re going to do...”

I listened intently as she put together a plan for apologizing to Carson and asking him to give me another shot without coming right out and begging him to take pity on me. There was no telling if it’d work, but I’d try anything. Carson was the first person to show interest in me since I’d moved back to Harmony Grove. He was lumberjack-sexy from head to toe, and for some reason, me being awkward hadn’t pushed him away.

I finished off my cocoa, sucked in a breath deep enough that it expanded my chest, and squared my shoulders. “Okay. I’m going to do this. But if it fails miserably, you’d better put the good stuff in my next cocoa.”

Mara pulled me into a tight hug. “You’re going to be just fine. The biggest thing you need to do is be yourself. Except, maybe don’t try to sell him on the reasons he should stay away from you. If Carson’s truly interested in you, that’s probably a big change for him too. Go easy on the guy because I have a feeling he’s going to fall hard when he finally goes down.”

EZRA

SLEEP HAD BEEN ELUSIVE LAST NIGHT. EVERY TIME I CLOSED MY EYES, I thought about the catastrophe from the night before. *You have to find a way to make it up to him.* As if Mara's lecture when I'd been at the coffee shop hadn't been enough, she'd texted me after she closed up and got home.

By the time I drifted off, I'd figured out how I would implement the plan Mara had laid out for me. The first step was calling Shiloh to let him know I wasn't going to be in today. The nice thing about the nature of my job was I didn't have to be there every day. Of course, if I kept it up the way I was going, that could easily change. I wouldn't complain. I loved my job, even if it was a complete waste of my degree, as my parents claimed.

If I wanted a job in my field, I'd have to go back to school, and as much as I loved learning, I was burned out on it. I could always get a teaching certificate pretty easily, but the thought of having to stand in front of kids every day was enough to send me spiraling into my hidey hole. Coming home caked in powdered sugar and flour was preferable to that. Besides, had I realized how baking would soothe me, I might have gone to culinary school instead, not that that would have been acceptable to them either.

"Ezra? You there?"

Oh crud! I'd gotten lost in thought and didn't even remember hitting the call button. "Sorry, Shiloh. I, uh, I mean..." Lovely. I'd lost the ability to speak like an intelligent human being.

"Is everything okay?" I heard the mixer running in the background and kicked myself for interrupting him. He didn't need to bother himself with my relationship woes and was probably counting on me being there today.

"Um, yeah. Sorry." I closed my eyes, constructing the sentence in my

head before I spoke. “I was just wondering, would it be possible for me to take today off? You see, my car’s been acting up, and if we’re going to be doing all these parties, I want to make sure I don’t get stranded on my way to a delivery.”

It was as good an excuse as any, and Carson had told me to swing by the shop at some point so he could take a look at my car to figure out what was going on. If I happened to come bearing gifts of food, all the better.

“Yeah, of course. You should have said something sooner,” he scolded me. “You know I don’t expect you in every day, right? You know what you need to get done.”

“I know, but you’ve been saying how much you’re able to get done when I’m there, and I really appreciate you giving me a shot,” I explained. He hadn’t even been actively hiring when I took a chance and asked him to keep me in mind if he ever had an opening. I still had some savings I’d been planning to live on until I found a job, but then he’d shocked me by hiring me on the spot.

“And I mean it. You’ve been a lifesaver. But you need to take care of your business too.” It was hard to believe he was only a year older than me. He wasn’t a native to Harmony Grove, but you’d never know that judging by how much he’d gotten involved in lately. “Take the day, and if your car needs to stay overnight, give me a call. If I’m busy, I’ll have Teddy or Lacey come and get you. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it.” I almost hung up before I remembered my manners. My Grammy would have whooped my backside if she was still here. “And thanks, Shiloh. For everything.”

As soon as I hung up the phone, I grabbed a scratch pad and started writing a grocery list. If Carson was busy at work, he wouldn’t have time for a sit-down meal, so I planned on taking him an assortment of foods he could grab and pop into his mouth as he rushed past. Hopefully, the guys he worked with wouldn’t think it was too weird as long as I took enough for them too.

The grocery store was deserted at this time of the morning. There were only about a dozen cars in the parking lot, and I’d have bet more than half of those belonged to employees. I grabbed a cart out of the corral to help them out since there was no reason for an employee to bundle up and come out in the cold if I was already heading in.

As I browsed the bakery section, I noted what they offered and critiqued everything. I wondered if they’d had less business since Shiloh’s had opened.

I sort of hoped not because it was probably hard to keep a grocery store open in a town like Harmony Grove when people could easily drive up to Pineville or over to Birch Lake, where there were more choices at lower prices.

“Hey, Ezra.” I spun around at the sound of someone calling my name. I panicked for a few seconds. The guy’s face was familiar, but I couldn’t place who he was. Luckily, the other man must have noticed my confusion and helped me out of an embarrassing situation. “Blake.” Nope. That didn’t help me a bit. “Danny Langsford is my husband. We met at the meeting the other night.”

“Oh, right. Sorry, it was a hectic night, and I was trying to make sure I didn’t throw up all over the food.” My heartbeat sped up as I realized what I’d just said. No one wanted to hear about someone vomiting when they were talking about food. Especially when I was the one who made the food. “Sorry, I meant —”

“You’re good,” Blake reassured me. “I know what you mean. People here can be overwhelming on the best of days. And I hope this doesn’t come off as condescending, but I was proud of how well you pulled yourself together. It was obvious you were uncomfortable speaking in front of people, but you did a great job. The guys were telling Eleanor about the menu you pulled together for the tasting, and even she’s talking about asking you to help out for Christmas dinner. It can’t be easy cooking for all of us guys, so that’s probably a good idea. In fact, would I be able to set something up with you directly, or do I need to call Shiloh’s?”

“Um, probably call Shiloh’s.” That was the right answer, right? After all, it was his business, not mine. And I didn’t want him to think I was going behind his back if I offered to do the cooking at home so I didn’t stress him out. “But let him know you talked to me. If he charges you for the ingredients and stuff, I’d be happy to help out. The brothers do so much for this city, and they obviously got that work ethic from somewhere.”

“You don’t have to do that.” Blake’s phone buzzed, and he silenced it. “I’ll give him a call right back. He’s probably trying to make sure I don’t forget anything.”

“Danny?” Blake’s husband and I had been in the same graduating class. He was the youngest Langsford, the “oops baby” as I’d heard him referred to when he was younger. Oddly enough, I couldn’t remember much about him. Like me, he’d kept to himself, but we’d both been in our own orbits.

“Yeah. He’s not feeling well, so I’m going to do my best to make

Eleanor's famous chicken noodle soup," Blake explained. "He told me to just call her, but I don't want to do that. She deserves a break from her boys once they grow up and get married, and I like taking care of him."

That was so sweet a dull ache formed in my chest. I wanted a love like that. I wanted a Langsford of my own to take care of. I chuckled as Blake and I said our goodbyes, and I debated whether I could ask Santa for Carson wrapped up under the tree for me on Christmas morning. That would definitely be a shock to my parents. Their heads might just explode.

Grocery shopping was as boring as it ever was and frustrating to boot when they didn't have a bunch of the ingredients I needed. I might have to drive up to Pineville after all. I purchased the items I was able to find and offered the cashier a weak smile when she asked if I'd found everything I needed rather than telling her I hadn't because the selection was subpar. It wasn't her fault.

After loading the groceries into the car and returning the cart to the store, I started planning what needed to get done so I could have food ready for Carson by lunchtime.

Maybe I should call to make sure he could actually look at my car today. That was probably a good idea. I made a note—on paper, not even just mental—to do so as soon as I got home.

When I turned the key in the ignition, nothing happened. The lights came on, but the engine was painfully silent. I thumped my head on the steering wheel a few times and offered a prayer of sorts if only the dang thing would start.

"Come on, you can do it. I'll even go to the garage first if you just start so I don't freeze to death in the grocery store parking lot," I bargained with my old Toyota. My dad would say this is what I got for not buying American, but that was bull. This old thing had served me well through college and beyond. It was steady and reliable, which is why I hadn't considered getting rid of it.

I rubbed the dashboard as if giving my car a nice little massage would help. "Come on, come on."

I tried the key again. Nothing.

I jumped when there was a knock on my window. When I pushed the button to roll it down, the window lowered super slowly.

"Hey, you need a jump?" Blake offered, his arms filled with the bags he needed to go home and make soup for his sick husband.

I considered telling him I'd be fine simply because he shouldn't have to

take care of me when Danny needed him. But then I'd be stuck here. "Yeah, I'm not sure what's going on, but maybe that would work?"

It had the other night, so maybe it was something as simple as getting a new battery. I hoped. I really didn't want it to be anything major. I popped the hood and stood in front of the car as if I had the slightest clue what to do next. Yes, I knew how to attach jumper cables, but I really hoped Blake had a set in his car because I didn't. Mine had been a crummy set I got as a thank-you gift from my insurance company years ago, and the first time I'd needed to use them, I realized they were little more than a decoration.

Blake parked his truck in front of mine and lifted his hood. "Here, let's get these hooked up, and we'll see if we can't get you back on the road. But then, you might want to head over to Hot Rod's and have the guys check things out just to make sure there's nothing serious going on."

Gee, that was a great idea. If only I'd thought of it before I needed to be rescued for the second time in a week by members of the same family. "I actually took the day off to do exactly that. Stupidly, I figured I'd swing by here first and run groceries home just in case I'm stuck without a car while they fix whatever's going on."

A minor fib, but so much better than saying I wanted to cook for Blake's hunky brother-in-law, and that was the reason I found myself in this position.

"If you'd like, I could follow you to the shop and then run you home. You live in the apartments on Evanston, right?" It would have been creepy that he knew where I lived, except this was Harmony Grove, where everyone knew your business, and there was only one big apartment complex within city limits.

"Yeah, but you don't have to. Danny's waiting on you, and Shiloh already said he'd give me a ride if I need it." The way things were going, I didn't need anyone else witnessing my potential humiliation when I walked into the shop. Maybe I'd get lucky and Carson wouldn't even notice my arrival. Now that I had no choice but to take my car in, I wasn't so sure I was ready to see him.

This time, it took longer for my battery to charge enough that the engine would turn over, but it did. Begrudgingly. I thanked Blake for his assistance and got behind the wheel. I'd long ago given up on religion, but that didn't stop me from praying the entire drive to the shop. I let out a sigh of relief and slumped back in my seat when I pulled into one of the parking stalls in the lot. I hoped that was okay. I hadn't parked on the street because I figured this

would be better for them if my stupid car wouldn't start again.

"Ezra?" For the second time that morning, I jumped at the sound of my name. I really needed to get myself under control. This time, it was Carson trudging through the lot toward me.

My gaze darted around the parking lot to see if we were alone. I didn't want any witnesses, but I had to clear the air before I asked him for another favor. "I'm sorry about last night. I didn't mean to make you feel bad or anything. I just...well, let's say that I haven't been on many dates, and the ones I have been on were pretty awful. But last night took the cake for worst of all time."

"Ouch. I didn't think I was that bad of company." Carson pressed a hand to his chest, jerking back as if he'd been wounded. When my breaths started coming in shallow pants, Carson placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. His fingers slipped around to the back of my neck, gently kneading the tense muscles. "Hey, I'm joking. I think I know what you're saying."

"You do?" I blinked rapidly, finding myself at a loss for words.

"Yeah, it's scary to put yourself out there, especially if you've had bad experiences in the past." Carson was doing a better job explaining the spiral my mind had gone down than I could. "And for what it's worth, I'm not upset with you about what happened last night. I think we both could have done things differently. Would it be possible to cash in that raincheck? Maybe I could pick you up after work tonight and take you on a proper date?"

"I'm actually not working today," I told him. "I had this whole thing planned out. I was going to go to the store and do some cooking so I could get my thoughts together, and then I was going to bring you lunch and ask you to look at my car. The food wasn't going to be a bribe or anything to have you fix it or anything. I was just doing that because I wanted to apologize for last night, and you seem to like food."

Carson threw his head back as he laughed. "You're right. I do like food. But if you keep feeding me, none of my clothes are going to fit, and I really, really hate shopping."

"More than you don't like the holidays?" He cocked his head to the side, and I wondered if I'd read him wrong. It was strange to me how he looked like he'd sucked on a lemon when Christmas songs were playing through the speakers, and he'd muttered under his breath a few times when we were on our way from Harmony House to Towne Tap the other night, always as we passed some of the more elaborate Christmas displays along Main Street.

“Sorry, that was presumptuous of me. Sometimes, I have a tendency to let my internal monologue go public, and it gets me into trouble.”

“You’re fine,” Carson reassured me. “And you’re not far off. I don’t hate Christmas or anything, but it’s so overdone these days. I swear, the stores had Christmas shit on the shelves before Halloween. It just...it doesn’t mean what it used to anymore, you know?”

No, I didn’t know. I was one of those weirdos who loved walking into the stores, smelling the spicy cinnamon, and seeing the festive decor on the shelves, and I did a little happy dance when I heard the first carols of the season. It’d been a magical time for me since I’d learned to disassociate the holidays from my conservative upbringing.

But I didn’t want to get into a debate about the magic of the holidays with him. Some people just didn’t like this time of year. They were weird, but that was their prerogative. “I suppose. And I’m sorry if I’m overfeeding you. It’s sort of the way I show someone I’m thinking about them. It’s easy because food is a universal language. I don’t have to worry about boring anyone to tears when I go off on a tangent they’re not interested in.”

Sort of like right now. Except Carson’s eyes weren’t glazing over. Little lines formed at the corners as he smiled down at me. I liked the fact he was so much bigger than me. I imagined those broad shoulders and bulging biceps would give great hugs. I inhaled the scent of his smoky cologne or body wash mixed with the less pleasant odor of engine oil and gasoline. Somehow, the warring scents worked together to create something that would forever remind me of Carson.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” Carson asked. I must have drifted off into my own head again. When I kicked at the packed snow on the ground, Carson surprised me by curling a finger beneath my chin, urging me to look at him. “Hey. Have a little faith in me, Ezra. I’m totally fucking lost here. Talk to me.”

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, my voice thready and higher-pitched than normal.

“I’m not sure I get what you mean.”

“I don’t understand why you’re trying so hard. I’m not worth the trouble.” I swallowed hard, the words of every man who’d told me they weren’t interested in seeing me again screaming in my mind. I’d done Carson a favor, really. If we’d gone through with dinner, it would have been a disaster, but unlike the guys I’d dated in college, we’d still have to see one

another, which would be uncomfortable for both of us.

“You’re wrong about that,” Carson scolded me. “Maybe there’s nothing here but friendship. Maybe it could lead to something more. Maybe we’ll have that dinner, and you’ll realize you don’t want to spend more time with an antisocial neanderthal like me. But it’s always worth taking a chance to get to know someone better. At least, that’s what Rodney keeps telling me.”

“Huh?” This was so confusing. There really needed to be some sort of manual for getting to know a person better because Carson was making no sense at all.

“Never mind.” As if the mention of his name had conjured the man into existence, Rodney pulled around the back of the garage in his pickup, the plow blade scraping last night’s snowfall off the pavement. Carson grabbed my arm and led me to the side of the building. “Listen, I need to get back to work pretty quick. I should have time to look at your car later this afternoon. I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

“How?”

Yes, I was a master conversationalist. If Mara or Lacey were here, they’d never let me live it down. I couldn’t help it that Carson scrambled my brain.

“At least now I have a reason to get your number.” Carson pulled out his phone. “Go ahead and text me your address. That way, I can run you home so you don’t have to walk, and I’ll be able to get in touch with you later.”

“I can just go over to Shiloh’s. He said he’d give me a ride after the morning rush.” Rodney was scowling at us from behind the windshield of his truck. I didn’t want to take up more of Carson’s time.

“If you don’t want me to give you a ride, that’s fine. But if you’re only saying that because you’re afraid you’ll put me out, I have to take a car for a test drive anyway. You can ride with me,” he offered. “We’ll kill two birds with one stone.”

“Is that allowed? I wouldn’t want to get you in trouble.” I jerked my head toward Rodney, who hadn’t moved but seemed highly interested in our conversation.

“He’ll be fine,” Carson reassured me. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

While I waited for Carson to do whatever, I grabbed my reusable grocery bags from the back seat of my car. Rodney’s gaze tracked me across the parking lot and back to the building. I curled in on myself, wishing I could be invisible. The man scared the tar out of me.

“Ready?” Carson came back, holding a key fob. He pushed a button, and

the blue sedan next to mine came to life. “I’m going to let Rodney know what’s going on, and then I’ll be over. Go ahead and get in.”

“I don’t want to get you in any trouble. Really, it’ll be okay if I ask Shiloh to run me home.” I couldn’t imagine a customer would be okay with him giving someone a ride home in their vehicle. I know I wouldn’t like it, only because I didn’t like people I didn’t know in my space.

“It’s my brother-in-law’s car,” Carson explained. “If it makes you feel better, I can give Michael a call and double-check that it’s okay with him.”

Oh. Well, that changed things a bit. I shook my head. “No, if you’re sure it’s okay, I’ll trust you.”

Carson started to lift his hand, quickly lowering it to his side when Rodney revved the engine. “Let me go deal with him. I’ll be there in a second.”

I settled into the seat, buckled up, and let my head fall against the headrest. This wasn’t how today was supposed to go, but maybe it was better. With nothing else to do for the rest of the day, I’d make the food that was supposed to be Carson’s lunch and invite him over for dinner. At least that way, any calamities would take place behind closed doors.

CARSON

AFTER DROPPING OFF EZRA AT HIS PLACE AND TELLING HIM I'D BE BACK BY six for dinner, I grabbed my phone to call my brother. I was in over my head and seriously needed a voice of reason.

"Hey, what's up?" Billy answered. The house was quiet for a change. That made sense since the boys were at school and Michael, Billy's husband, was at work. But it was still weird.

It was also fortunate because I needed to talk to someone who might understand a quarter of the shit in my head. "Hey, I have Michael's car done. I was thinking about bringing it by the house as long as I'm out."

"Uh-huh." His tone said he didn't believe me. "Is this a cheesy eggs and bacon visit or a whisky visit?"

"Damn, Billy, it's not even noon. What in the hell do you do when you're working from home?" I was joking. Mostly. Sometimes, I did wonder what he did until it was time to go into Harmony House near the end of the school day, but he worked harder in five hours than most of us did all day. And if he needed a bit of fortification before going in to deal with a building full of teenage angst, I wasn't going to say anything.

Okay, so I would, but only because he worked too damned hard building that place to throw it all away. Which was why it was a good thing I knew him well enough to know that was something he'd never do. "So, eggs and bacon then?"

"Nah, not sure I'm in the mood to eat." My stomach had been in knots since the moment I'd intertwined my fingers with Ezra's last night. First, in confused excitement, and later because I was certain I'd fucked something up.

“Oh shit, that sounds serious,” Billy deadpanned. “The back door is unlocked whenever you get here. I’ll be in the basement.”

The drive to Billy and Michael’s didn’t take nearly long enough. They’d been working to renovate the farmette Billy had bought during a foreclosure auction, planning to make it a project home. It still was, but now with two men and two boys living in it instead of just him wandering the halls at night. I wasn’t jealous of him, necessarily. Not really. Maybe a little, only because he made everything this year had thrown his way look easy.

He didn’t freak out when he realized he was falling in love with a man. When we gave him a hard time about that man being our baby brother’s ex, he told us in no uncertain terms that we’d better get over our shit in a hurry because it was between the two of them and Danny. And because our youngest brother was one of the best men I knew, he’d given his blessing for the two of them to be together. He’d even admitted he wasn’t surprised by the revelation.

One thing was clear: Christmas this year was going to be interesting. It would be the first holiday with everyone in the same place. The last time Michael had sat on the living room floor with someone, it had been Danny. This year, he’d probably have Henry curled up on his lap, the little boy open his stocking presents.

I sure as fuck hoped Anson wasn’t planning on bringing anyone to Christmas at Mom and Dad’s. If he did, I’d be the odd man out. Literally. I wasn’t sure I wanted to deal with that. Maybe I could beg Rodney to stay open on Christmas and offer to work, just in case anyone had a car maintenance emergency. After all, not everyone celebrated, and someone might appreciate the offer.

“Honey, I’m home,” I bellowed as I toed off my shoes at the back door. The house smelled like Henry had dumped a huge canister of cinnamon all over the place and hadn’t been able to get it cleaned up. One look at the table showed I wasn’t too far off. It was covered in ornaments like Mom used to have us make to adorn the top of every tin of cookies we delivered to church members, the shut-ins she checked on every week, and the teachers at our school. That sight reminded me of everything that had made me eventually curl my lip at the sight of anything holiday-related, but remembering how Ezra listed the scent as one of the things he loved about the season, today, the corner of my mouth tipped up in a smirk.

I grabbed myself a cola out of the fridge on my way to the basement. It

was hard to believe the space had once been little more than a poured concrete shelter from storms. They'd busted ass turning it into a functional office with a small play area for Henry when he wanted to spend time with his Billy. The two were so cute together that it made me want to puke. The little boy wasn't aware just how much their lives had changed when his dad and Billy transitioned from friends to lovers and co-parents.

"Hey, putz. What's going on with you?" He finished typing something, then closed his laptop and turned to face me. "Shit. You're not coming down with the crap Danny's got, are you?"

"The what? No. Danny's sick?" I was so fucking confused. I'd just seen Danny a couple of days ago, and he'd seemed fine. Normally, Mom was all over calling to let us know when any of her guys were sick.

Billy crumpled a sheet of paper and whipped it at my head. I dodged, forgetting how bad his aim was, and managed to jerk to the right just in time for it to hit me in the nose. "So fucking mature."

"Yeah, but it got your attention, didn't it?" He pulled over one of Henry's little chairs, using it as a footrest. He rested his elbows on his knees and his chin against his palms. "So talk. You never bail on the garage in the middle of the day."

"I didn't bail," I protested. "Ezra dropped his car off so I could take a look at it, and he needed a ride home. Since I needed to take Michael's car out for a test drive before signing off on it, I decided I'd do both at the same time. And then I saw your truck parked outside city hall, so I decided to be a kind brother and drop it off so you didn't have to go out with Henry later. I believe thank you is the appropriate response right about now."

"Exactly why I'm worried about you," Billy teased. "You're not the go-out-of-your-way-to-do-nice-shit-for-people type. When the truck was down there and I asked you to drop it off, you told me to get off my ass and get my own shit."

"Yeah, well, maybe I'm getting soft in my old age." I tipped back my soda can, chugging it because my caffeine level was critically low.

I didn't say anything for a solid minute. If I opened this can of worms, my reality would be out there. Billy wouldn't let me hide from it the way Anson would. Maybe that was why he was the brother I'd chosen to approach about this. At least he'd understand why I was so fucking confused. Even if I suspected Anson might, I had no proof. It wasn't until Billy spun back to face his computer, muttering something about me being a stubborn ass, that I

found my courage.

Looking at his back was much easier than having to see his reaction when I dropped this bomb on him. “Did you always know you were into guys? Or was it something special about Michael? Is that even a thing?”

Billy spun back around so fast I was surprised he didn’t make himself dizzy. “You want to know how I realized I was in love with my best friend? Or is there something else you’re trying to figure out without coming right out and asking me?”

“Can it be both?” I tugged at the collar of my used-to-be-white T-shirt. I considered high-tailing it out of there before I stuck my foot firmly into my mouth.

Billy scooted his chair closer to me. “Talk to me, Carson. What’s going on?”

“I met someone,” I blurted out before my brain had a chance to catch up with my mouth.

“You’ve met a lot of people,” he responded sarcastically. When I didn’t immediately agree with him, Billy let out a bark of laughter. “Holy shit! This has to be good. What’s going on? Wait...you weren’t asking me about falling in love, you were asking me specifically about being with...are you saying...?”

“So what if I am?” I shot back, suddenly on the defensive.

Billy simply shrugged. “You’re right. So what if you are. Except, you’re here talking to me, which means something is obviously bothering you. So what is it you really want to ask?”

I looked around the basement, trying to put myself in Billy’s shoes. When he’d bought this place, he’d been certain he wasn’t going to fall in love. Said he just wanted a place of his own, and maybe he’d get a few chickens or some shit after the place was fixed up. Was it possible I’d find myself in the same position?

“How can someone go their whole fucking life thinking they’re straight, and then suddenly, someone walks in and tips their entire world on its axis?” I watched Billy carefully, waiting for any sort of reaction from him. He gave me nothing. He didn’t seem shocked or offended by my question. His expression gave nothing away. “Say something, would you? I’m sitting here freaking out. He’s got me ready to buy a fucking Christmas tree and some of those air freshener things you plug into an outlet just because he mentioned how much he likes them. That’s stupid, right?”

“I’m not so sure it is,” Billy responded, far more unhelpfully than I’d bet he thought he was being. He rolled his eyes at me. “Maybe this dude is exactly who you need in your life. Maybe it’s time for you to let go of whatever bullshit reason you have for pretending you hate the holidays.”

“That’s not pretending,” I argued. I really did hate all the pomp and circumstance that went into Christmas. It wasn’t like we were a super religious family, but for as long as I could remember, our mom lost her shit every December. First, there was the cookie-baking marathon. Then, it turned into family trips to the fucking mall to find the perfect gifts for one another. And when Christmas finally rolled around, we were the weird family who “Santa” visited a full day early every year because we were so busy rushing from one party to the next to make sure we had time with all the different factions of our family. Except, we were so busy running around we never had a chance to enjoy ourselves.

The holidays were fucking exhausting. And this year, it would be even harder to find a time that worked for everyone because we had to work around Danny and Blake wanting to make a trip back to the East Coast to spend time with their friends, Billy and Michael’s visit with Michael’s sister who also happened to be Henry’s bio-mom, and everything else. Just the thought made me want to crawl into a hole until the ball dropped, signaling the start of the new year.

“So tell me about what makes this guy so special.” There was no judgment in Billy’s request. He sounded as though he really wanted to hear more. The problem was I wasn’t sure how much I could say without giving away Ezra’s identity. After the way he’d reacted when I’d taken his hand in mine last night, I knew I needed to tread very carefully, or he’d run again.

I explained in as much detail as I could, which wasn’t much. Without using Ezra’s name, I confessed to Billy that there was just something about Ezra I couldn’t ignore. The way my stomach flipped when we first met and I saw the way his cheeks pinked when I praised his work. I had to skip over the meeting at Harmony House completely. Otherwise, he’d know who I was talking about. By the time I got to our failed first date, Billy was probably more confused than he’d been at the start.

“Sounds to me like you have a decision to make,” he said when I finally quit rambling. “If you like the guy, go for it. But if you’re just trying to find someone to fill some sort of void in your life, walk, don’t run. Whoever he is deserves better than being someone’s bisexual experiment. From the sounds

of things, he's had a rough go of it so far, so he doesn't need you toying with him."

"And what happens if I go for it, as you suggest, and realize this isn't for me?" The last thing I wanted was to hurt Ezra. It was the only thing I could think about, other than how his palm felt against mine or how badly I'd wanted to kiss him last night. That shit wasn't me, and it confused me more than the initial zing of attraction I felt.

"There are no guarantees in life." Billy cleared his throat, and his expression turned serious. Whatever came next, I was certain I wouldn't like it. "You've always been the guy who ducks out as soon as anyone tries getting to know you. It's confusing as hell, but you don't want to let people in."

I didn't think I'd done that. Sure, I wasn't known for being a serial monogamist like some, but that was because I didn't see the point in getting serious with someone if I didn't see things going anywhere.

"I see you trying to come up with an argument, but think about it." Oh hell, this was bound to be a nightmare of a trip down memory lane. But maybe that was exactly what I needed to hear, and that was why I'd come to Billy instead of one of my other brothers. "When you aren't trying to fuck your way through half of Pineville, you start hanging out with people you know aren't good for you. I'm not sure you even like them, but that serves your purpose. There's no risk involved because you know from the start it's all about getting your rocks off."

"You make me sound like a man-whore," I protested.

Billy cocked his head to the side. "If the shoe fits..."

"Fuck you, very much." There was no heat behind the words because, for once, I chose to really listen to what my brother was saying, and I considered the women I'd been with over the course of the past decade. It wasn't as if there was a long list, but he was right. Every woman I kept around for any length of time was someone I knew my family wouldn't get attached to. Because in the end, there was one hard truth about the Langsford family: if you didn't fit with us, we weren't going to hold on to you. That was part of why we got over the way shit went down with Billy and Michael. He fit and, really, I think we all knew he was part of us, even before he and Danny had gotten together.

"Sorry, I'm going to try being serious now. As your big brother, it's my job to give you advice when you ask and a swift kick in the ass when you

need to.” I flipped him off, and Billy simply smiled. “I meant what I said. If you’re serious about seeing where things might lead with this guy, go for it. Have dinner, go out for drinks, and if it’s not going to make you crawl into a hole, invite him to help bake and decorate this weekend. He might not want to since that’s what he does all day at work, but if he loves the holidays as much as you say he does, this might be right up his alley.”

My eyes widened, and my mouth opened and closed like a fish on land. How in the hell had he figured out who I was talking about?

“Oh, come on. This is a small town. People talk.” I swayed slightly in my chair, and for a brief second, I thought Billy would get up and offer me a hug. But that wasn’t how we rolled. “Relax, Carson. No one’s said anything specific, but anyone with eyes could see the way you were watching him the other night. And this morning, you had to give someone a ride home after they dropped their car off at the shop. That was shortly after Blake happened to give Ezra a jump at the grocery store, and when he swung by to pick up our stock pot, he told me he’d suggested Ezra go directly to the shop instead of trying to go home in case his car wouldn’t start again.”

“You don’t think it’s too soon to invite him to hang with the entire family?” We hadn’t gone on a single date. As much as I’d thought about kissing him, we weren’t anywhere near that point. And now, my brother was suggesting I introduce him to the entire family on a weekend that was always commemorated with way too many damned pictures. If he came, there’d be no hiding that something was going on between us.

“Might as well show him what he’s in for while he can still walk away,” Billy teased. He scrubbed the stubble on his chin. “You know, the more I think about it, the more I realize just how perfect the two of you are for one another. You’re polar opposites in a lot of ways, but that could work out for the best. Just remember what I said about walking away if this is just curiosity for you. He’s definitely not the one-night-stand sort of kid.”

“He’s not a kid,” I protested. Yes, he was younger than me—by a lot—but he was an adult who was more than capable of making his own decisions. And based on what I’d heard about his parents, that was a hill I was willing to die on. It was time someone stood up for him. Proved to him he was worth fighting for.

Billy held up his hands in surrender. “No need to go on the offensive, man. You know what I was saying. Now, get your ass out of here and fix your man’s car. Then, let him make you dinner and see what happens. Should

I tell Mom to expect an extra set of hands in the kitchen on Saturday morning?”

“Don’t. You. Dare.” The last thing I needed was Mom calling me to get the details about my possible love life. “If he says yes, you’ll know when we both walk through the door. Otherwise, I really need you to keep your damned mouth closed.”

He made a cross over his heart as if that had meant a damned thing for the past two decades. When I glared at him, his expression softened. “You have my word, Carson. I won’t tell anyone what’s going on. Except Michael, because the two of us don’t keep secrets and he’s scarily good at reading my expressions.”

That was really all I could expect. The two of them had been through enough already, and I didn’t want my confusing love life, or lack thereof, to cause any issues for them.

EZRA

EVERYTHING WAS ABOUT AS GOOD AS IT WAS GOING TO GET. I TOOK A LOOK at my apartment, trying to see it through Carson's eyes. It wasn't a luxury living space by any means, but it was comfortable. I'd been picky about anything I brought into the apartment because I was no longer in a place where I needed to settle. The sectional sofa covered in a buttery soft suede was positioned opposite an obscenely large TV that took up most of the living room space. It probably felt cluttered to most people, but to me, it was perfect.

I checked my phone both for the time and to see if Carson had an update on my car. When he'd called earlier this afternoon to ask what my budget was and tell me he'd found some other things that needed to be fixed, my heart sank. I fully expected him to tell me it was time to say goodbye to the first big purchase I'd made as an adult. Luckily, he'd assured me it was nothing that couldn't be fixed, but they were repairs that would make him feel more comfortable with me driving once they were done.

The bad news was I was looking at least a few more days without my car. I should have paid more attention before things got to this point.

I'm heading over in about 15. Need me to grab anything on my way?

It was kind of him to offer. I opened the fridge, wondering what he'd want to drink. I didn't have much selection. Would he want a beer after a long day at work? Soda to get him through the evening? Water? I could see him being the type of guy who wanted to stay well-hydrated because he looked like he tried to stay healthy.

If you want anything other than milk or juice, you might want to stop by the store.

I read the message back after hitting send, cringing at how unprepared that made me sound. I was the host. It was my job to have whatever he wanted on hand. Except, when I'd had access to a car, I hadn't planned on having anyone over. I never had guests other than Mara, and she didn't count. I quickly tapped out another message.

Sorry, it's bad form for me to ask you to bring something. I would have gotten whatever you wanted if I had my car.

Carson's response took almost no time.

Breathe, Ezra. I don't expect you to do anything special for me. Dinner is more than enough.

If I had any questions about whether I was making a huge mistake seeing where things were headed between us, he squashed them with that one response. Mara was right. Carson liked to come across as cold and unfeeling, but he was starting to show me glimpses of the teddy bear beneath.

To keep from obsessively checking my phone to watch every single minute pass, I made one final pass through the apartment. There was something sticky on the counter, so I wiped it down again. My shoes were in a pile next to the door, so I quickly stashed them at the bottom of my bedroom closet.

I'd just grabbed two sweatshirts and the winter coat off the back of the club chair in the living area when there was a knock on the front door. After so many years spent in the city with security-locked buildings, it was unsettling to know someone could walk right in and knock like that.

"Coming!" I set down the pile of clothes on my way back to the door. Hopefully, that wouldn't be enough for him to judge me on. My breath caught in my throat when I swung the door open. Carson's hair was still wet, and the flannel I was used to seeing him wearing had been replaced by a black leather jacket.

I really hoped he didn't notice me wetting my lips. Beneath the jacket, he wore a gleaming white T-shirt that stretched across his massive chest. It was thin enough that I could see the smattering of dark hair beneath, and my fingers tingled with the desire to comb them through it. I'd heard Mara and Lacey refer to guys they found attractive as sex on two legs, but I'd never understood the sentiment. Now I did. He was living, breathing temptation.

"Hi," I greeted him, complete with a little wave.

He smiled at me but didn't step into the apartment.

I hesitated, then realized I was blocking his way. I stepped to the side and

ushered him in. "I'm sorry. Come in."

"Thanks." As he passed, he handed me a plastic bag. "I grabbed a few different types of soda because I wasn't sure what you'd like."

"Oh, you didn't have to get me anything." I jumped when the timer buzzed from the stove. "Sorry, I need to get the food out of the oven. I was worried it would be ready before you got here, but I guess not. I swear I can make more than finger foods, but I've been testing new recipes ever since you came in the other day."

"So you're saying I'm your guinea pig now?" I almost dropped the sheet pan I was pulling out of the oven when Carson stripped out of his jacket.

What was it about men in white T-shirts that was so sexy? They were seriously the least sexy article of clothing, but there was just something about a man with bulging biceps wearing one that had always done it for me. And Carson absolutely didn't disappoint.

My breath caught when he joined me in the kitchen, his arm brushing against my back as he passed me. I paid careful attention to arranging the appetizers I'd made on a couple of plates. Because I didn't have guests often, I didn't have any fancy serving ware.

I regretted the decision to not buy the pieces that matched the rest of my dishes, even though I was certain Carson wouldn't judge me for it. "I know you probably eat healthier foods most of the time. If it's too much, you can tell me. It would probably be good for me to come up with some lighter options, now that I think of it."

My knees turned to Jell-O when Carson placed a hand on my shoulder, leaning close enough that I felt the heat of his body against my back. "Don't you dare. If there's something you want to try, I'll eat it, but don't feel like you need to change what you're already doing on my account."

"Are you sure?" Breathing became difficult when I turned and noticed just how close he was to me. I took a second to take in his physique. Compared to him, I felt downright scrawny. "You said earlier you'd have to buy new clothes if I kept feeding you."

His fingers ghosted down my arm, and I shivered at the jolt that zinged through my body. "That's only because I love seeing the way you react when someone enjoys your cooking. It would be easy to live a fat and happy life if you were in the kitchen for me. To be completely honest, I'm probably eating healthier now than I usually do. The Tap and Rosarios both know my order as soon as they see my number come up on their caller ID."

“Seriously?” I gaped at him. “It’s seriously unfair that you look like that on burgers and pizza.”

“I’m glad to know you approve.” My brain short-circuited when his hand slid around to the nape of my neck. He leaned in, and I freaked. I jerked away, making a weak excuse about needing to get the food served before it got cold. Carson backed away. I missed his closeness. “Sorry, that was presumptuous of me.”

“No, it’s not you,” I reassured him. “God, that sounds cliché. But it’s really not. It’s me.”

“No, I shouldn’t pressure you into anything you’re not ready for.” He grabbed one of the plates of appetizers, and I took the other, following him out to the small dinette set. “Tell me what you made tonight. It looks just as amazing as everything else. I’m tempted to tell you to bring a bit of everything to the party, but that would blow through the budget and money we’re hoping to collect in donations.”

“Oh, it’s a fundraiser?” I sat back, allowing Carson to fill his plate first. He quirked an eyebrow and looked across the table, his fork hovering over the phyllo cups. “The orange ones are a buffalo dip cup and the other is spinach and artichoke. They’re not much, but they sounded good. The flaky phyllo shell pairs nicely with the creamy, rich filling. The square ones are curry puffs. They probably wouldn’t work well for an event with kids, but they sounded so good I couldn’t resist. You’ll have to tell me what you think.”

His eyes widened as the blend of curry-spiced potatoes and peas flooded his senses. The taste was a complexity of flavors—spicy, aromatic, a little sweet—all intermingled in perfect harmony.

“So?” The anticipation was killing me almost as much as the little moans that passed his lips as he savored the first bite.

“These are extraordinary,” he finally said. “It’s like you’ve packed an entire Indian feast into a single bite.”

“Mission accomplished then.” I smiled, pleased that my curry puffs had passed the test. I hesitated for a moment, holding the tray of miso-glazed eggplant bites before setting it down between us. The little cubes were dark and glossy, covered in a glaze that shimmered under the light.

“I thought we’d try something different tonight,” I said, trying to read Carson’s expression. “Ever had miso-glazed eggplant before?”

Carson looked intrigued but cautious, his eyes flicking from the tray to

meet mine. “Can’t say that I have. Is it good?”

“I think so.” I shrugged, my heart pounding a bit. “But it’s one of those dishes you have to taste for yourself to decide.”

He chuckled, picking up a tiny fork and skewering one of the cubes. “Here goes nothing,” he said, bringing the eggplant to his lips.

I watched nervously as he chewed, my stomach twisting in anticipation. The aroma of miso and roasted eggplant filled the air between us. It was a complex, earthy scent that could go either way, depending on individual taste. I wouldn’t have been offended if it was too far of a departure from meat and potatoes for someone like him.

After what felt like an eternity, Carson’s eyes lit up, and my heart soared. “This is really good,” he exclaimed. “It’s got this rich, savory thing going on, but it’s also a bit sweet. It’s complex but not overwhelming. You really know how to pick ‘em.”

Relief washed over me like a warm tide. “I’m glad you like it. Cooking for someone is a bit like baring your soul. It’s always a risk, but when it pays off, it really pays off.”

Carson’s gaze met mine, soft and warm. “Well, consider me impressed. Both with the eggplant and the man who made it.”

I felt my cheeks flush at the compliment, but I couldn’t have been happier. “Then I consider tonight a rousing success,” I said, my voice tinged with newfound confidence and affection.

We both reached for another piece of eggplant, our fingers brushing briefly. The simple touch sent a shiver down my spine, and I couldn’t help but think that the evening had just gotten a little more delicious.

The better part of the next hour was spent sharing food. He listened intently as I geeked out over every dish, going into the most minute details. When he didn’t like something, he wasn’t afraid to say it wasn’t his taste, which made the praise he gave that much more meaningful.

After dinner, I wasn’t sure what to do. He didn’t strike me as the video games sort of guy, and if he was, he was more *Grand Theft Auto* than *World of Warcraft*. Unfortunately, it seemed he was just as lost as I was.

The conversation petered out, leaving both of us staring off into space, an uncomfortable tension building between us. I was the host. That meant it was my job to break the ice. I cleared my throat. “We could watch a movie if you want. Or maybe just a TV show? I’m sure you’re probably tired after working all day and have things you need to get done. If you need to go,

don't feel obligated to stick around for my sake."

My body tensed when Carson put a hand over mine. "Relax, Ezra. I can't say I'll be very good company, but I'd love to hang out for a bit. Maybe we could turn on some music and get to know one another a bit better?"

"Oh, right." Dinner had been comfortable, and he'd made it easy to forget we were little more than strangers. I'd felt that way every time he was around, other than the whole inconvenience of my stomach twisting in knots because he was someone unattainable. But then, I'd found out he wasn't. And now, he was in my apartment.

Life was officially crazy.

"What kind of music do you like?" I asked as I got up and started clearing our dishes.

"Anything but Christmas songs," he responded.

I was sure he hadn't meant anything by it, but the way his lip curled like he'd tasted something sour got my attention. This wasn't the first time he'd expressed his dislike for the season, which made zero sense given that we'd first really interacted because of his involvement with the Christmas party. He sat at one end of the couch, and I curled up in the corner. Sitting on the other end felt too far away, but I couldn't sit right next to him either. That would have been presumptuous. Finally, my curiosity got the better of me. After all, he was the one who'd said he wanted us to get to know one another better. "What's the deal with you and Christmas?"

Carson shrugged. "There's no tragic story if that's what you're thinking. I just don't like it."

"But why?" I pressed. It bugged me that he was such a Scrooge. Walking down Main Street to check out the displays in the shop windows put a smile on my face, even on the gloomiest, grayest days. It was strange to think something that only happened six weeks out of the year could be a deal-breaker, but I wasn't sure I could ever be with someone who grumbled at the sight of carefully curated Christmas villages complete with cotton batting to simulate snow and fairy lights.

"It's so overdone," Carson explained. He held up a finger and rose, crossing the room to grab his drink.

The interruption gave me the perfect opportunity to watch the way his thick thighs and sculpted backside flexed as he walked. He was truly a glorious specimen. When he relaxed back at his end of the couch, he bent one leg on the cushion with the other hanging over the edge. That was dangerous

because the faded jeans he wore didn't only mold themselves to his thighs. My mouth went dry as I caught a glimpse of the outline of his penis. My butt clenched as I imagined what that thing would feel like pressing into my hole.

Carson cleared his throat. My lips parted, and I pulled my knees up to my chest when our eyes met and I noticed him watching me intently. It wasn't until he cocked his head to the side that I realized he'd said more I hadn't processed. "Sorry, I got distracted. What were you saying?"

"As long as you weren't drifting off because I bored you, I think I'm okay with being your distraction," he teased. "What I said was that the holidays lost their meaning for me when I realized there was no time to enjoy the very things the season's about."

"How so?" It was hard to pay attention, and I probably looked like an absolute fool staring at him so I wouldn't drift again.

"It's just too much, you know?" I didn't, but I kept my mouth shut. Luckily, he explained his logic. "When I was younger, it started before Thanksgiving was even over. My mom and her sisters couldn't even make it through the family dinner before they were talking about the deals they wanted to find on Black Friday, and everyone had to go to bed early because they wanted to get up early enough to drive up to Pineville to get the best deals. But then they were grumpy by the time they got home because there was no time to relax because my Gran and her mom had a tradition where we all baked cookies all weekend."

"That doesn't sound so bad." So far, it sounded downright idyllic. I would have given anything to have a close family. Mine got together to celebrate the holidays, of course, but there were no fun traditions.

Carson's eyes glinted. I loved how little lines formed at the corners of his eyes when he genuinely smiled. "Careful what you wish for. That tradition lives on, even if it's been scaled back since my great-grandma died. I'll drag you along to put everyone else to shame."

"You make that sound like a threat, but I was serious." I wasn't going to push, but if he seriously wanted me to join his family to bake, I'd be in heaven. The Langsford family could have been the inspiration for at least a handful of Hallmark movies, and that was before he'd started telling me about his family's traditions that had apparently ruined the holidays for him. "Christmas is supposed to be about spending time with the ones you love."

"Exactly my point." Carson shifted to get comfortable, distracting me once again. This time, it was his biceps and pecs. If I was shallow for being

so obsessed with his physique, I'd own it. "The entire month of December, it felt like we were constantly on the go. Between the school programs, rehearsals for the children's Christmas program at church, different get-togethers, our parents packing us into the car to go from one family celebration to the next, it sucked. By the time Christmas night rolled around, we were all at one another's throats. What's the point of it all if you can't actually enjoy the time?"

"So make new memories," I suggested. Sometimes, my mouth worked faster than my brain. The words fell out as if it were that simple. "You already said your family's cookie tradition is smaller than it used to be. Maybe it's time for you to scale things back and find a bit of that joy you wished you could have had."

"And how do you recommend I do that?" Carson scoffed. "You've obviously never met my mom. Even though we don't have as many family dinners to go to as we used to, she always wants everything to be perfect."

"Have you considered that maybe she's doing that for your benefit?" If I had a family, that's what I'd do. I'd want to give them everything I didn't have when I was younger. I wished there was a way to give that to Carson too. "Was there anything you did like about Christmas when you were younger?"

He considered my question for a long moment. A wave of emotions crossed his face, and I wished I could peek into that brain of his to see what memories he was recalling. The corner of his mouth tipped up when his eyes finally met mine. "My great-grandma used to make the best gingerbread. A lot of it was these cutout cookies we decorated to give away, but then she always made a batch of dough Gramps would cut into the pieces for us boys and our cousins to construct gingerbread houses. Everyone's was different. They weren't just houses either. By the time all of us were done, we'd created the ugliest gingerbread town you'd ever seen. But they always praised us for how beautiful it was. I think they just liked that it gave us something to do so we weren't underfoot when our moms and grandma were baking the cookies that didn't get frosted."

The way he lit up as he described the gingerbread construction project was infectious. That was something I could give him. It was officially time to make Carson reclaim the Christmas spirit.

We talked a bit longer, mostly me asking questions about him and his family. That seemed safer than navigating the unpleasantness of my own

upbringing. Soon enough, I'd tell him about my ultra-conservative parents, who would never approve of anything I did. But for now, I wanted to keep the mood light.

The longer we talked, the harder it was for Carson to stifle his yawns. As much as I'd have loved listening to him all night, I needed to get some sleep too. But I couldn't figure out how to convey that without him thinking I was giving him the boot. The music softly played through the lulls in our conversation. My eyes drifted closed as I savored this memory. I wasn't sure if it counted as a date, but in my mind, it totally did. And it was the best first date I'd ever had.

"I should probably head out." Until he spoke, I hadn't realized I'd actually nodded off. When I opened my eyes, Carson was standing directly in front of me, his back arched and arms stretched over his head. The movement lifted the hem of his shirt enough for me to see a dark line of hair from his belly button down past the waistband of his jeans. "Sorry, back was tight."

"It's—you're fine," I assured him, hating that I'd once again stumbled over my words.

"Do you need a ride to work tomorrow morning?"

As much as I appreciated the offer, I didn't want to put him out. I considered telling him I'd figure it out, but the only people I could call would have to leave work to drop me off at the bakery. I could probably get away with not going in again, but I didn't want Shiloh to think I was flaking on him. Carson was my best bet. And he'd offered. I hadn't asked. I rubbed the back of my neck. "If it's not too much of a problem, that would be great."

He stepped closer, offering me his hand. When he tugged me off the couch, I had no choice but to press my chest against his. That wasn't exactly a hardship. I inhaled deeply, loving the way he smelled. I tilted my head back, needing to know what the view was like standing so close to him. It was everything I'd dreamed of and more. I shifted the lower half of my body back slightly so he wouldn't feel my arousal against his leg.

It was a damned good thing his hand was still on the small of my back when he smirked at me before pressing those full lips against my forehead. Heat flared through my body, and I couldn't guarantee I hadn't whimpered. That wasn't where I wanted to feel his lips, but at the same time, it felt like the perfect gesture. Neither of us was in a place to rush anything, and he was respecting me.

That counted for something. Maybe everything.

I followed Carson to the door, grabbing his jacket from the front closet and holding it out to him. “Thanks for a great night.”

“I feel like I’m the one who should be thanking you. All I did was show up.” I didn’t even try hiding my appreciation as he shrugged into his jacket. And when he opened his arms, I went willingly, slipping my arms inside his jacket. His embrace was comforting, safe, and oddly something akin to familiar. He leaned back, looking down at me. I held my breath, wondering if he would kiss me for real this time. Instead, he did something that meant even more. “I know it’s probably weird to even ask, but if you seriously want to see the Langsford insanity that is our cookie tradition, I’d love for you to join us this weekend. I know you might have to work, but if you don’t, I could pick you up. We start early, but Mom makes sure to keep us well-fed and caffeinated.”

It was refreshing to know I wasn’t the only one who rambled. Like he’d done to me before, I pressed a finger against his lips. “I’d be honored. I mean, as long as your family isn’t going to think it’s something like a declaration of our undying love or something.”

Carson’s chest vibrated as a deep laugh escaped his lips. “Definitely not. I’m pretty sure they’ve given up on me finding love. They’re pretty chill. They won’t make any assumptions.”

“Then I’d love to join you.” And if I could manage it, I’d have a surprise of my own for the family.

EZRA

IF I WANTED TO SURPRISE CARSON AND HIS FAMILY, I HAD A LOT OF WORK TO get through, and there was no way I could accomplish it in my tiny galley kitchen at the apartment. That meant asking Shiloh's permission to stay Friday after I finished with prep work for the weekend. And that meant telling him what I was up to.

I waited until Lacey was out front getting ready for the lunch rush before approaching him. He was working on mixing the sourdough for tomorrow's loaves. Like most things he created, they'd become crazy popular, and over time, it was more and more work for him. What had been one big container of dough when I'd started had tripled just in the time I'd worked for him, and we'd still be out by the end of the day.

"Hey, Shiloh, can I bend your ear for a second?" I asked as I pulled out the rolling flour bin to help him. He insisted on doing all the mixing and folding himself, but we had a process down where I was at least trusted to measure out the dry ingredients for him.

"Yeah, what's up?" He looked up at me as he used a whisk to dissolve the starter into water. I chuckled as I wondered how many people would be disgusted by what their favorite bread looked like at this stage. He quirked an eyebrow as he waited for me to talk.

"I want to try something, but I don't have the pans or space to do it at home," I explained. "Do you think I could do some baking here this afternoon? I have most of the ingredients in my backpack, so I won't be using much from the bakery, and I'll pay you for what I do use."

"How many times do I have to tell you? You don't have to ask me any time you want to try something new?" The answer? Probably at least two or

three times a week because I never wanted Shiloh to feel like I was taking advantage of him. “Do what you want. If it turns out, let me know, and we’ll see about putting it on one of the menus.”

“That’s the thing...I’m not sure this is the type of thing we’d be able to sell,” I confessed. Cookies, other desserts, and finger foods were easy for him to implement. This was totally different.

Shiloh stopped whisking and simply stared at me. “So what are you thinking? I’m sure there’s a way we can make it work. Your ideas have been amazing.”

That was high praise coming from Shiloh. I wasn’t sure he knew how much I looked up to him. He’d done everything I’d never have the courage to do. But in his case, there was the added layer of pressure because his family had been in the business for generations. He was constantly trying to live up to their expectations. I didn’t have that. I felt like I was constantly trying to prove myself. I needed to prove to my parents that I was talented enough to bake for others. I wanted Shiloh to value me enough to keep me around. Now, I wanted to show everyone who came to the Harmony House party that we were—that I was—gifted enough for them to trust me with their events.

“Come on. You’ve never been shy about telling me the latest recipes you’ve found online,” he pressed when I wasn’t forthcoming right away.

Telling anyone, even him, felt a little too vulnerable. I was pretty sure Carson wasn’t as straight as I’d originally assumed, but that didn’t mean us hanging out would lead to anything more. And this was something very personal to Carson as well. I wanted to help him relive happier memories so he might be able to change his opinion that the holidays were nothing but stress and forced excitement.

The whisk clanking against the stainless sink basin echoed in the kitchen. Shiloh didn’t keep working. He just watched me. I wasn’t getting off this hook. Maybe I could tell him without giving away anything about my motivations.

“I want to do some gingerbread,” I finally admitted.

“Oh. Well, that’s cool, but your recipe is already perfect. The orders are already coming in for cookie plates for Christmas, and almost everyone wants your gingerbread men included.”

I’d noticed. I was obsessed with checking the bulletin board where Shiloh tacked the printed orders every morning when I came in. Luckily, the cookies could be baked ahead of time and frozen so I wouldn’t be breaking my back

leading up to the week before Christmas. I shook my head. “No, this is different. I want to bake the pieces for some gingerbread houses. They’re different from the recipe I use for the cookies because they can’t be soft, or the houses will collapse.”

“That’s an awesome idea!” Shiloh grabbed his notebook and started sketching out a design. “Do you think you could do something like this?”

“I mean, I think so. That’s what I want to try this afternoon.” His design was simpler than the templates I’d printed off Pinterest, but it was still cute. I kneeled to grab the cardstock patterns out of my backpack, along with the picture of what each was supposed to look like when they were done. “This is what I want to try. I’ve never actually built one, but I thought it’d be fun.”

“You’re right. It’s brilliant. We could even put something together so families could come in and we’d supply everything for the kids to decorate them.” Shiloh paused, and I recognized the moment he realized he was getting ahead of himself. “I’m sorry. Was this something you were doing for yourself? I shouldn’t keep assuming everything you create is for my benefit.”

“No, I think it’s a great idea.” And I really did. Thinking about how Carson talked about his memories of decorating the cookie houses with his brothers as a kid, it wasn’t a stretch to imagine and get excited about seeing other kids do the same thing. It was a way I could maybe help another family experience the joy without the stress that ruined things for him. “I can’t guarantee anything is going to work out, but if they turn out the way I’m hoping, we could definitely talk about putting something together. The thing is, we’d have to get an idea of how many families to expect because I don’t want to make the pieces for a dozen houses and then only have a few families show up.”

“You grossly underestimate how many people will freak about something like this. Go ahead and test things out, and let me know how it turns out.” We returned to our assigned tasks, still chatting about what a family event would look like. The more he talked, the more my excitement and anxiety battled inside my head. If it was a success, it could be the start of reviving the old Christmas fair and market along Main Street. But if it failed...

Nope. I wasn’t going to think about that.

“Thanks, Shiloh. I’ll let you know how it goes.” He continued working on prepping the bread dough for the weekend rush while I turned to the other side of the kitchen and started mixing the first batch of gingerbread. It only had a few minor tweaks from the original recipe. Unlike some I’d seen, I

wanted it to be possible to eat the pieces if the guys weren't on board with reliving the past. And now that we were talking about making this something we offered at the bakery, it was even more important that the quality be up to Shiloh's high standards.

After the bakery shut down for the day, Shiloh and Lacey worked on cleaning up before they left while I made some minor adjustments to the original designs. I wasn't confident the first batch of cookies would hold up the way I wanted, and I'd gotten a bit too intricate with the designs, forgetting that the beauty of gingerbread houses came from the decorations, not the cookies themselves.

Once alone in the bakery, I cranked up the stereo, blasting a country Christmas playlist that never failed to put me in a good mood. It was slow work because I had to cut each piece individually before carefully transferring them to baking sheets. While the mistakes would be covered in thick icing, sloppy work would make it harder to fit them together.

The afternoon sailed right by. Before I knew it, there was a knock at the back door. I glanced at the clock over the swinging doors, surprised to realize it was almost four o'clock. I looked around at the carnage that was the kitchen. Carson was here to pick me up, and I was nowhere near ready. On top of that, if he looked at the cooling racks, there was a good chance he'd realize what I'd been up to.

Well, that was a bridge we'd cross if it became necessary. Maybe he'd be so wiped from a long day getting people's cars ready for the upcoming cold snap and next week's forecasted snowstorm that he wouldn't notice anything. I took off my apron, hanging it on the hook before making my way down the back hallway. When I swung the door open, Carson held a Styrofoam container from Stella's. "I thought you might be hungry. You said you were going to hang out at Stella's until I got done, but then you weren't there."

"Am I that transparent that you knew I'd be here?"

"Nope." He offered me a kind smile. "You're that devoted to a job you love. I think that's pretty fucking cool. Not everyone's lucky enough to be doing something that brings them to life and has a boss who encourages them to play around. Are you about ready to take off or —"

His words cut off when he looked around the kitchen, seeing my work area still coated in flour, the mixer starting to crust with remnants of the last batch of dough, and a sink filled with soapy water. At least I'd gotten that far in getting ready to clean up.

“Why don’t I get to work on the dishes while you finish up whatever you have left to do?” he suggested. He shrugged out of his sherpa-lined flannel jacket and pushed up the sleeves on his Henley. “It smells amazing in here. Are you going to let me taste what you’ve been baking?”

“Sorry, this is a special order, and I don’t have any to spare.” That wasn’t exactly a lie, and I suspected he’d forgive my fib once he found out what I’d been working on the past few hours. “But if you’re a fan of gingerbread cookies, I could make you some next week. Shiloh said we need to start putting them in the case because so many people are already ordering them for their Christmas parties.”

“You’re going to single-handedly save Christmas in Harmony Grove if you’re not careful.” Carson stepped behind me. I scooted closer to the work table to let him pass, but he surprised me by massaging my shoulders. I let out a needy little moan, hoping he didn’t stop. I hadn’t realized how tense I was from rolling out five batches of dough, lifting the mixing bowl, and everything else. It was short bursts of exertion, but apparently, that added up over time. He leaned in, kissing my neck just below my earlobe. “Who knows, maybe my mom will be so impressed by your work tomorrow she’ll throw in the towel and say she’s just going to hire you next year.”

“Would you really want that?” As much as Carson complained about the stress of his family’s traditions, I’d hate to be the reason he lost another one. And with there being kids in the picture now, thanks to his brother and Michael, it seemed more important than ever to keep the memories alive.

“You’re probably right. Even though it feels more like work than going into Hot Rod’s, I’d probably miss getting that time with my family,” Carson reluctantly admitted. “That means the only other option is to figure out a way to keep you around so you can be in charge of decorating. We’ll get done quicker, and then we can sit around and have hot cider until Mom sends us out to hang the lights on the house.”

“Man, could your family be any more cliché?” It wasn’t until the words were out of my mouth and Carson started laughing that I realized how horrible my comment sounded. “I’m sorry. I just meant that when you tell me about everything your mom has you doing for the holidays, it really does seem like the start of the plot for a made-for-TV movie.”

“Yeah, for all I know, that’s where she gets her insane ideas.” Carson hefted the industrial mixing bowl into the soapy water, tipping it onto its side to fill with suds. “The woman is obsessed. Can you believe they’ve already

been playing for over a month? Every week when we go over for dinner, she's got one on."

It was a good thing he hadn't looked at the favorited channels on my cable box. As I cleaned, I imagined what it would be like to sit down with Eleanor once all the cookies were baked and watch a feel-good movie while her sons worked to get the lights strung across the roofline and woven through the spindles on the front porch. It didn't seem like a horrible way to spend an evening.

With the two of us working together, it took almost no time to get the kitchen cleaned. I followed Carson out the back door of the bakery, trying to figure out how I could get the gingerbread pieces packed and ready to go without him knowing since he was my only transportation for the next few days. I made a mental note to ask Shiloh to help me. In exchange, I'd give him my full blessing to set up the event, and I'd even offer to work the event off the clock.

On the short drive home, Carson explained the delay in fixing my car. When he'd originally told me it would take longer than anticipated, I'd suggested picking it up and then dropping it off once the parts came in, but he hadn't been a fan of that. There'd been a brief moment when I'd worried I was mistaking his concern for control. The sincerity in his voice reassured me I wasn't reading the situation wrong. Even though he tried convincing everyone he was distant, he had a heart of gold. He didn't want me driving my car because he didn't want me breaking down on the side of the road. That was pretty dang sweet.

Carson pulled into my assigned parking stall, but tonight, he didn't turn off the engine. He turned in his seat and rested his hand on the armrest between us. He opened and closed his mouth a few times as if there was something he wanted to say but kept second-guessing himself. I rested my hand on top of his, which earned me one of those brilliant smiles that shone all the way to the corners of his eyes. "I wish I could be rude and invite myself in, but I have to get to dinner with my family. Unless we're out of town, it's expected that we all show up at Mom's every Friday night."

I chuckled and shook my head. "And you wonder why I said your family seemed like something out of a TV movie."

"Yeah, I suppose you're probably right." He scrubbed at the coarse hair on his cheek. "Thank you, Ezra."

"For what?" I needed to be the one thanking him. He didn't have to be

my chauffeur, but he'd reworked his schedule around mine the past few days. And when I'd asked him about it, he swore that wasn't the case.

He threaded our fingers together, giving mine a gentle squeeze. "You're making me look at things in a different light. What I see as routine and a pain-in-the-ass obligation, you see as something cool. I probably sound like a total bag of dicks, complaining all the time because of my family when it's easy for me to forget not everyone has that."

"Well then, you're welcome." I should get out of the truck. He had places to be. When he started leaning across the console, I held my breath, wondering if he was finally going to kiss me. I'd been obsessed with the idea of feeling his lips against mine, of learning what it felt like to have someone claim my mouth. I'd heard the phrase often, but it was foreign to me.

I'd have bet money Carson was an expert kisser. Even if we were well-matched in the sense we'd both never been with a man, he probably had plenty of experience.

I froze when he reached up, cupping my cheek in his rough palm. He cleared his throat. "Are you still up for tomorrow?"

"Of course," I confirmed. "If you were hoping to scare me away by telling me about your family, you've done a poor job."

"Then I'll pick you up a little before eight." His hand was still pressed to my cheek, and I leaned into the touch.

Tomorrow, I hoped I'd be brave enough to do the same to him so I'd know what his beard felt like against my skin. "Can you make it about seven-thirty if that's not too early? I need to run by Shiloh's before we go to your parents' place, if that's okay."

"Then I'll see you at seven-thirty," he confirmed. "Do you want me to swing by the Hearth & Foam on my way here?"

"I'd love you forever if you would." I clapped a hand over my mouth and groaned. "I mean, yes, that would be wonderful. Thank you."

"Damn, if I knew that's all it would take to make sure you fall for me, I'd have brought coffee every day this week. I'll see you tomorrow morning, Ezra." I took that as a dismissal and unbuckled. His hand drifted down my arm, giving my forearm a gentle squeeze before breaking contact.

I swallowed hard as I opened the door. "I'll see you then."

I stood in the entryway, watching as Carson backed out of the parking stall. After checking my mail, I glanced out the door one more time in case I could still see his brake lights as he drove away. With nothing and no one to

occupy my Friday night, I heated up some leftovers and turned on my guilty pleasure.

CARSON

BY FRIDAY, I WAS OFFICIALLY LOSING MY SHIT. THE PARTS FOR EZRA'S CAR still hadn't come in. Something about being on backorder and no one having the part in stock. That meant I was his chauffeur, which was a job I didn't mind at all. It was surprising how much I'd gotten to know about him during the short drive between his apartment and the bakery.

The problem was, every time I dropped him off, it took every ounce of willpower I had to not lean over the console and kiss him.

Tonight, I'd almost given in to temptation. But Billy's warning had me stopping a split second before I took the plunge. Before I took that leap, I needed to know for certain this wasn't just some sort of perverse curiosity or fooling myself because I was jealous of the happiness my brothers had found. Which was why it was time for a fresh perspective.

"Hey, little brother," Anson answered. The tapping against the mechanical keyboard told me he was still at the office, and I was on speaker. I hated when he did that because I never knew if he was actually listening to me.

"You busy?" If he was, I'd just talk to him when I got to family dinner, although that ran the risk of the rest of the family overhearing what was going on, and I didn't want that. Maybe I'd give Waylon a call. He'd never been with a man when he and Jasper met, and they were the most oddly perfect pair I'd seen in a long time.

"Nope, just wrapping up a ratification on a contract so I can get the hell out of here for the weekend." He said that as if there was a snowball's chance in hell he'd be able to work over the next two days. Mom would drive down to the office and drag him out of there by his ear if she had to. "You heading

out to Mom and Dad's for dinner?"

"Yeah, but I was wondering if we might be able to swing by the Tap for one before we head over." Knowing Mom would put us to work as soon as the dinner table was cleared, maybe a drink wasn't a bad idea anyway.

"That sounds like a damn good idea." Anson sounded as wrung out as I felt. Being an attorney in a small town, his work went in fits and starts, but when he got busy, it seemed like everyone wanted him to work on a real estate transaction at the same time. "I can be there in about fifteen. We'll have to hurry so Mom doesn't start blowing up our phones trying to find out where we're at."

I wasn't so sure we'd get that lucky, but the reminder we didn't have time to waste was good.

Since I was only a couple of blocks away, I beat Anson to the bar. I parked in the back so no one could see my truck and rat me out. The black crew cab with tinted windows and chrome everywhere I could manage without making the truck look too gaudy tended to stand out whenever I parked it on the street.

Inside, the regular after-work crowd lined the bar, ready to wind down after a long day. Quinten waved to me from his seat at the other end of the bar. I should have known it'd be impossible to go anywhere in town without running into someone who'd want to chat. I jerked my chin up in a silent hello but didn't move closer to him. He was like a dog with a fucking bone when he caught wind of any sort of gossip. As it was, I was pretty sure he'd caught on that something was going on between Ezra and me.

Which would have been funny if there actually was an us. But there wasn't because I was too chicken-shit to do anything more than that first kiss on his forehead. My lips tingled as I remembered the feeling of his soft skin, warm against my lips. The way his body melted against mine, the way he tried casually putting some space between us, hoping I wouldn't feel how hard he'd gotten for me.

The feeling was absolutely mutual. I'd even found myself watching more porn in the past week than ever before. It wasn't about getting myself off though—at least, not entirely. If something was going to happen between us, I didn't want to be a bumbling idiot. I wanted to go into this the same way I did everything else in life. I learned as much as I could, and only then would I take on a new challenge.

Wes, who was a few years younger than me, was working the bar tonight.

He waved to let me know he'd seen me as he helped some of the crew who looked like they'd just gotten off from the manufacturing plant down the road. Finally, he approached. "Hey, Carson. What can I get for you tonight? You need a menu?"

"Hell no. I'm just here for a quick one before family dinner." No further explanation was needed. Wes had grown up down the road, and our families were similar other than the fact that my parents had land they leased out to a farmer while Wes's family worked their own farm. Both properties had been in our respective families for over a century, which was a huge deal. If anyone understood my family's dynamics, it would be him. "Grab me a pint of the cider and whichever IPA you think is best for Anson. He should be here soon."

"Drinking before heading over to the parents' place?" He grabbed a bar towel and started wiping the already clean bar in front of me. "Everything good over that way?"

"Yep." I wasn't falling into his trap. Everyone knew bartenders were masters at getting people to spill their darkest secrets. "Just want to spend some time with my brother before the chaos starts."

"That's right, you guys are doing your baking thing this weekend." Wes shook his head. "Man, I can't believe you guys are still doing all that. I miss those days."

This was why I was usually careful about who I talked to about this sort of shit. To everyone else, family traditions were sacred. While I understood where they were coming from, they could also become one hell of a chore. And it wasn't until Ezra had forced me to face my feelings that I realized it was more resentment than loathing. While people like Wes longed for what my family had, I'd always wondered what it would be like to spend Christmas Eve with just my parents and brothers, followed by a single big meal on Christmas Day. Instead, our family had always dragged shit out because there were so many different branches.

"Yeah, the insanity will begin as soon as Mom fires up the oven in the morning." Wes left the rag sitting in front of me and drew my pint. I grabbed it before he could set it down on the cardboard coaster and took a long pull from the chilled glass. "I'm sure she'll have us mixing up the dough tonight so she can start baking while we're eating."

"It's cool to hear that some things live on," Wes mused. "Sometimes it feels like the old traditions are dying off. Did you hear they're not doing the

tree lighting this year?”

“Yeah.” I was glad he hadn’t mentioned that particular turn of events in Anson’s presence. It had been the topic of conversation the past two weeks at family dinner. Michael was frustrated by how Mayor Thompson kept trying to inject his beliefs into town policies, and the more he heard, the more determined Anson became to get him out of office come spring. In this case, the problem was that a group from Pineville had protested the nativity being displayed on city property the way it had been for as long as I could remember. The mayor’s solution had been to say there would be no tree, either, because he considered it too much of a nod to perverse beliefs that had no place in this town.

I was just waiting for someone to point out that it wasn’t submitting to other religions so much as appropriating holidays to try to squash the minority. Decorating trees, caroling, and even mistletoe and holly had all been taken from pagan customs. It was too much to hope the mayor and those like him knew this and that was why they were so adamantly against it.

Anson walked in and sat on the stool next to me, rescuing me from more of Wes waxing poetic about how people our age weren’t living up to the deeply rooted history of Harmony Grove. He wasn’t wrong, but sometimes things needed to change in order for them to *live on*.

“Hey, brother.” Anson patted me on the back as he reached for his pint. “Thanks for this. I needed it.”

“Rough day?”

“Rough week,” he responded. “I’m trying to get everything together for the party, but then there’s this inconvenience called my job.”

“Then why’d you agree to the Christmas party?” I really wanted the answer to that because it was even more out of character for Anson than it was for me. He kept to himself for the most part. The fact Kevin’s name kept coming up in every conversation felt like a clue as to his motivations.

Anson shrugged as he leaned back on his stool. “We need to be doing more. Things are going okay over there, but numbers have been dropping lately. It seemed like a good way to get more people through the doors.”

“Mm-hmm.” I lifted my glass to my mouth.

“So what did you really call me down here for? It’s not like we wouldn’t have seen one another in a little bit anyway.”

My mouth went dry, and my chest tightened. If I asked what was on my mind, there’d be no coming back from it. Billy knowing was one thing; he

was safe. He'd spent years geeking over the human condition, and he'd recently fallen in love with his best friend. Anson was different. Someday, he'd be the head of the family. As much as I didn't want to think about what it would take for him to ascend to that role, it was an inevitability of life. Because of that, his opinion felt weightier.

"What would you do if you found yourself attracted to someone totally unexpected?" I asked, hoping that was close enough to the truth for him to give me some sort of guidance.

He didn't respond right away. He paused with his glass halfway to his mouth, just watching me. "What are we talking about here? I don't want to make any assumptions."

"Let's say, hypothetically, of course, that you started hanging out with someone, but it was more than friendship." That much, I was almost certain he could identify with. "You've always hung out with petite women, most of them with dark hair and eyes. What if you started to feel similar things with someone who...wasn't like that at all?"

"Cut this shit, Carson," Anson chided me. "Either ask me what you really want to know, or I'm going to drain this pint and head out to the farm."

"Do you think it's possible to be attracted to a dude even if you've only ever been with women in the past?" The words hung heavy between us. Again, Anson didn't speak.

When he finally reacted, it was with a simple huff of amusement. "That's got to be one of the dumbest things I've ever heard you say."

"Fuck you!" I didn't need him mocking me. I'd asked him to meet me because I needed my fucking brother. "I'm being serious here."

"So am I," he deadpanned. "If there's one thing Mom and Dad pounded into our thick heads, it was that you don't run from love when it finds you."

"No one said word one about love," I protested. I wasn't in love with Ezra. Not yet. But I could see things heading that way if I didn't manage to find a way to fuck shit up. "But what are the odds of three of us being in one family?"

Anson shrugged again. If we weren't in public, I'd have punched him in the gut. "What do the odds matter? There are plenty of families out there who defy those same so-called odds by having all straight kids. Why couldn't our family tilt the other way? If there's someone who makes you happy, does it really matter at the end of the day what they have in their pants?" He paused, but I was pretty sure that had been a rhetorical question. He proved me right

when he continued, “No, it doesn’t. And that is what Mom and Dad tried getting us to see from the time Danny was little. We all knew he was different from the rest of us. If that means we’re bi or pan or whatever the fuck, but he’s a gold-star gay, so be it. And if we’re straight, that’s cool too.”

Snippets from the past flashed through my mind like some old movie as I tried absorbing what Anson said.

The summer of junior year, when Bennett Markham and I were at the end-of-summer bonfire. It had been the first time my dick got hard just from looking at someone. The way the flames reflected off his smooth skin had mesmerized me. At the time, I’d chalked it up to too many Zimas and not nearly enough to eat when the grill had been running.

He’d looked at me from across the dancing flames of the bonfire, and I’d been lost. As I rose to follow him into the woods, Billy had approached, telling me it was time to go. I’d glanced over my shoulder, hoping he wouldn’t wait on me forever, and accepted that it was nothing more than being drunk and horny as fuck. Totally normal for someone my age.

But that didn’t explain my freshman year of college when I couldn’t peel my eyes from the way Eddie Christenson’s ass filled out his jeans when he was bent over the front bumper of a car. He was the shortest guy in my practical application class, and that meant he often had to stretch to get the job done. I’d been in a nearly constant state of arousal thinking of him. He hadn’t come back after the fall semester, and I’d once again blown my chance to see if there could have been something brewing there that neither of us had previously acknowledged.

So maybe being attracted to guys wasn’t as foreign to me as I was trying to convince myself. The tendencies had been there, but I’d never been given the opportunity to act on them.

“But everyone around here thinks I’m some sort of unfeeling fuck boy.” It came out whinier than I’d expected. I wasn’t proud of the reputation I’d built for myself. It wasn’t the person I wanted to be, especially now. And that feeling only intensified now that I’d realized all the ways I’d misstepped in the past. I wasn’t going to make the same mistakes with Ezra.

“So fucking do something about it,” Anson stated as if it were a simple accomplishment. Maybe he’d been the wrong brother to call down here after all. “Listen, I love you, but you have a shitty habit of standing in your own way. You’re pushing forty now. At some point, you need to figure out what you want out of your life and fucking go for it. Quit thinking about what you

believe others expect from you and live your own damned life.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” Lately, my life had felt like a series of challenges. There was always something to face, beat down, and move on to the next. And if Anson was pushing me to take a look in the mirror, it was time for him to be honest too.

“Yeah, it is.” Well, fuck. That wasn’t at all what I’d expected. “And I almost fucked it up already. You want to know why I’m so hell-bent on this Christmas party being the talk of the town? It’s because I’m not going to fuck up again. I’ve found someone I like spending time with, someone who likes me for some unknown reason, and I’m not about to let him down. Can you say the same?”

At that moment, I couldn’t. But Anson gave me plenty to think about. We finished our drinks, and I settled the tab so we could get to Mom and Dad’s before dinner was served. The entire drive out to the farm, I wondered what they’d say when they found out I’d invited someone to join us tomorrow.

CARSON

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN YEARS, I FOUND MYSELF LOOKING FORWARD TO spending the day with my family, baking and decorating cookies. I wasn't ready to put up a tree of my own or dance around my living room while I listened to Christmas music and drank cocoa, but Ezra was getting under my skin. Even if I wasn't a fan of Christmas, he was. And I was warming up to everything about the holiday season, thanks to him.

I pulled up in front of Hearth & Foam at seven-fifteen. There was a line right to the door, and I cursed myself for not getting up early enough to get here in time to not put myself behind schedule. If I wasn't at the house before seven forty-five, my brothers would never let me live it down. We all knew better than to be late. By eight o'clock sharp, the oven would be preheated, Mom would be rolling out dough, and she expected us there to start setting up the decorating station while two of us helped her roll out and bake.

My hope was she'd be so distracted this year by the addition of Henry and James that she wouldn't notice if I was running behind.

While I waited in line, I sent Ezra a quick text, letting him know I might be late and also asking what he wanted to drink. That would have been helpful to have found out last night when I offered to pick up something for him, but I'd been so distracted I hadn't even thought of it.

Every time the gangly teen behind the counter called up the next customer, I checked my phone again to see if he'd responded. By the time I stood in front of them, there was still no response, and I was clueless.

"What can I get for you this morning?" the kid asked as I studied the menu, waiting for something to pop out at me as the perfect choice for Ezra.

"I know I'm going to want a tall black coffee," I said so it didn't seem

like I was completely lost. Finally, I had to concede defeat. I wasn't the type of guy who could look at a drink menu and know what someone else would want. "Sorry, I'm getting a drink for a friend, and I'm not sure what he'd like."

"You could always go with the gingerbread latte," Mara, the owner of the shop, suggested. The way she smirked when she made the recommendation seemed off. "That's usually a pretty safe bet unless it's for someone who's more of a cocoa guy."

Oh hell, I hadn't even considered that. "What would you do if you weren't sure?"

"Go with the cocoa." She smiled and winked at me. That was strange. "You can't go wrong if you add two pumps of hazelnut and one of dark chocolate, then I'll top it off with all the goodies."

"I'll have what she said." The teen rang me up, and I thanked him before moving down the line.

"How've you been, Carson? I haven't seen you around here in a while," Mara said as she continued working through the orders stacked up in front of her. This was just the sort of job that fit someone with her personality. I remembered her from when we were younger; she'd been friends with Danny. They didn't hang out all the time or anything, but she'd been around enough I thought of her as someone friendly who loved to help others and always had a smile on her face.

Sort of like someone else you know. My brain was a stupid place to be. I couldn't even stop my dopey smile as I thought about Ezra. The two of them were so damn similar. I studied her features when I realized the commonalities weren't only in their personalities. I wracked my brain, trying to remember her last name. For that matter, it dawned on me her last name wouldn't do me a damned bit of good when I didn't know Ezra's.

She probably thought I was a buffoon by the time she handed me my drinks. I hadn't even responded to her attempt at small talk. Then again, that could be chalked up to the early hour and my lack of caffeine. "Thanks, Mara."

"Not a problem at all." I expected that to be the last of our interaction, but she rounded the end of the counter, joining me at the little bar against the wall where she kept the milk and sugar. "So, I know this might not be my place, but I can't keep my mouth shut."

"Welcome to small-town life," I deadpanned. No one around here could

keep to themselves. Sometimes, I wondered what it would be like moving to a city where a man could be anonymous. I replaced the lid on my coffee and turned to her as I took the first blessed sip. “Sorry, what’s up?”

“That cocoa...it’s for Ezra, right?” she kept her gaze on the cups in my hands, but that didn’t mean she was some shy wallflower. She squared her shoulders and finally looked directly into my eyes.

“Yeah, it’s for him,” I confirmed. “But how did you know that?”

“He’s my cousin, and he might have talked to me earlier this week about you,” she explained. “It doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together and come up with four. Anyway, I just want you to know what a special guy he is. He’s had a rough go of it, even though he comes from one of those families that looks totally normal from the outside.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to press her for more information or run out before she could share any dark family secrets with me. If Ezra wanted me to know about his upbringing, he’d tell me. Then again, maybe he wouldn’t because he didn’t want to admit why a family like mine was something he wished he had.

Fuck. It was so much easier to not give a shit and hide out in my apartment when I wasn’t working.

But if Ezra was hurting, I wanted to be the one to make it better for him.

“Yeah, he’s a good egg.” That was one of the dumbest things I could have said in response. In my defense, I was reeling from the revelation that he’d talked to her about me, apparently about something that made her feel the need to warn me about him. I knew he had a huge, tender heart, but this was something more than that.

Fuck. My gut clenched when I realized she was friends with a girl I’d dated a little over a year ago. Nothing had come from our brief fling because I couldn’t see myself settling down with her, and to be honest, I couldn’t even remember her name at this point.

Mara probably thought I was some sort of man-whore, looking to stick my dick in any willing hole. But that wasn’t at all who I was. Not anymore.

But when had that changed?

I knew exactly when everything had tipped on its side. It was the day I walked into Shiloh’s and was captivated by this slightly awkward, shy little baker. And since then, he’d wormed his way into my brain and was quickly working his way into my heart.

Fuck. Was I falling for someone? For a guy?

If I wanted any chance of things working out with Ezra, I needed people like Mara to hold me accountable. I'd spent so long as the good-time guy who went out and got some when I felt the need but otherwise kept to myself. I didn't want to be that guy anymore.

"Listen, you don't have to tell me what a great guy he is," I reassured her. I glanced around to see who might overhear. Not that it mattered, but I still didn't want my shit laid out for the whole town to hear about before I could even make it out to Mom's. "I know he's...well, he told me about his lack of dating history."

"So you can see why I'd be concerned about him hanging out with someone like you all of a sudden?" She tipped her head to the side. "Look, you're not a bad guy, but I know more than you probably realize about your exploits. If this is just some way for you to explore a new way to get off, I'm begging you to walk away."

"It's not," I promised. God, it was something I couldn't even explain to her. If it was about sex, we could have done that the night he invited me to his place for dinner. But I'd worried about that fucking kiss to his forehead because I valued him enough that I didn't want him feeling pressured into anything he wasn't ready for. "I'm not sure what the fuck it is, but it's not an experiment or a change of pace or anything like that. I really like him, Mara. As soon as you get done threatening to lop off my dick or whatever you're thinking of if I hurt him, I'm picking him up so we can go out to my mom and dad's house for the day. That should tell you something."

Her eyes widened comically, and she whistled through her teeth. "Shit. I didn't know it was that level of serious."

"It's not," I corrected her. "But I think I want it to be. I just have to figure out what that looks like for me. For us. But you have my word. I'd rather castrate myself than hurt him."

Mara threw her head back and cackled, drawing the attention of the customers trying to enjoy their morning coffee. "Sorry, but that's one hell of a visual. I'm glad to hear it. Now, before you take off, swing back up by the register and tell River I said you need to get an apple turnover, warmed up. He might spend a lot of time in the kitchen, but that doesn't mean my cousin bakes for himself. It'll earn you a brownie point or two."

"Thanks, Mara." I nearly hugged her before I realized that would have been wildly inappropriate. She wasn't a close friend or anything like that.

I did as she suggested and speed-walked back to my truck. Her lecture,

while sweet, had put me even farther behind schedule.

When I got to Ezra's complex, he was standing on the front stoop, a scarf wrapped around his neck and his hands stuffed deep into his pockets. As soon as he spotted me, he made his way down the walk.

I leaned over the console and pushed his door open. "Sorry I'm late. The line at the coffee shop was brutal." I didn't want to tell him about my conversation with Mara. From the bits and pieces I'd gathered, there was a history of people thinking they needed to shield Ezra from the pains of the world. I doubted he'd think his cousin's meddling was as sweet as I had.

I didn't even think twice before I acted. As soon as Ezra's ass landed on the preheated leather seat, I curled my hand around the back of his neck and pulled him to me. I stopped myself, giving him a chance to pull away. When he didn't retreat, I closed the distance between us and my lips pressed to his, gently at first. When his fingers carded through my freshly groomed beard, I groaned, opening my mouth and pressing my tongue to the seam of his lips.

He let me take the lead, and I was all about showing him what it felt like to be kissed by a man. My own insecurities took a backseat to my needs. I deepened the kiss, scooting as close as the fucking console would allow me. Ezra's other hand fisted the front of my shirt, holding on for dear life. I understood that feeling all too well. I wanted this moment to last forever.

But nothing that good could last. Eventually, the need for oxygen overrode my need for him, and I broke the kiss. "Good morning, sweetheart."

"Uh. Yeah. Wow." I couldn't help but laugh at his stunned expression. "Good morning to you too. That was..."

"Fucking hot?" I offered when he didn't finish his statement.

"I was going to go with a surprise, but yeah, it was really good." He blinked a few times, his mouth gaping open. "I don't know what's gotten into you, but I think I like it."

"You think?" I teased. As soon as he was buckled in, I handed him the turnover I'd stashed next to my thigh to keep it warm on the drive over. "This is for you."

"These are my favorite!" he exclaimed as he peeked in the bag. Before he pulled the flaky pastry out, he took a sip of his cocoa. "As weird as it'd be if you guessed, is it safe to assume my cousin was at the shop this morning?"

"Yeah, but I swear I didn't tell her I was picking up something for you. I didn't even know she was your cousin until —"

"Until what?"

Oh hell, how was I going to get myself out of this one? “She may have mentioned it when I was putting sugar and cream in my coffee.”

Ezra’s head thumped against the headrest. “I swear, I’m going to kill her.”

I squeezed his hand. It really was sweet of her to be so protective of him. Based on the little bit she’d hinted at during our brief talk, it seemed he needed someone in his corner. “Don’t do that. I don’t think you’d look good in prison orange. And she just wanted to make sure I wasn’t stringing you along. I swear, that’s all.”

Technically, it wasn’t a lie because I was the only one who made any verbal threat to my anatomy.

“Well, either way, thank you.” He took another long sip from his cocoa. “This was the dead giveaway. It’s not on the menu, but she made it for me one time, and I loved it, so it’s what she makes me when she’s worried about me.”

There was nothing for her to worry about. I planned on taking great care of her loved one.

As expected, we were the last to pull into the gravel parking area beside Mom and Dad’s house. I quickly rounded the front of the truck and opened Ezra’s door. Then, I opened the back door, where a stack of boxes we’d picked up at Shiloh’s were carefully arranged across the bench seat. “Are you going to tell me what’s in all these?”

“You’ll see soon enough.” When I pretended to open one of the boxes, Ezra swatted my hand. “No peeking. You might think it’s stupid, but I wanted to do something for you to say thanks for the rides and for inviting me today.”

I pressed my chest to his back, slipping one hand around the front of his waist. If anyone was spying from the living room windows, there’d be no doubt Ezra was more than a friend. Oddly enough, that didn’t scare me the way I thought it would. “You don’t need to thank me every time I do something nice for you. It’s been my pleasure. Truly. And as for today, I wouldn’t rush into showing your gratitude. You might get in there, realize I was right about my mom being nuts when it comes to baking Christmas cookies, and run in the other direction.”

“Doubtful. I’m pretty sure you’re the one who’s going to regret inviting me,” he teased. “By the time we’re done, the house might be bursting at the seams with cookies looking for a home. This is like crack to me.”

“Then you’ll fit right in.” I took the stack of boxes out of Ezra’s hands and jerked my head toward the door. “You’ll have to get the door for me. I’m not risking anyone’s wrath if I drop whatever goodies you’ve brought for us.”

As expected, the house erupted the moment we walked inside. None of my brothers gave Ezra a second glance, which meant either Billy or Anson had blabbed to Danny, but as expected, my mom had caught our moment by the truck, and she had a million questions.

EZRA

WALKING INTO THE LANGSFORD HOME, IT WAS EASY TO SEE HOW SOMEONE could become overwhelmed by the holidays to the point they didn't want to see another figurine or string of lights. Every surface inside the house had been transformed into a winter wonderland to the point I wasn't even sure where to look first. Between the decorations, the music playing softly, and the different conversations happening all at once, I was already on the verge of sensory overload.

"Hey, Ezra," Anson greeted me. As I unzipped my winter jacket, he held out a hand to take it from me. "It's good to see you again. Are you here to put the rest of us to shame?"

Without realizing it, he'd actually struck one of my reservations about coming. There was a huge difference between the sort of cookies I decorated and what the typical family did. I didn't want them to think I was showing off, but I also knew I'd quickly grow bored with slathering on some frosting and haphazardly shaking sprinkles on cookies. That had never seemed like fun to me. What I really enjoyed was looking at the cookie like a blank canvas. Many times, the finished product didn't look anything like the intended result. A star could easily become a Christmas tree with a bit of the mantel and fireplace peeking out from behind it. Christmas trees turned into Santa. The possibilities were endless.

"Nope, I'm just looking forward to hanging out for the day," I assured him.

Billy approached from the kitchen. "Oh, hell no. We're putting your ass to work today. Someone's gotta help us get through the containers Mom already baked this week. I'm not sure you realize what you're in for."

The brothers acted as if it were completely normal for me to be part of their crew. I looked around, quickly noticing there was no one who wasn't part of the family in attendance, other than James's boyfriend, Theo.

While Anson hung my coat and Carson delivered the boxes I'd insisted no one open yet to the kitchen, Billy invited me to the dining room, which had been transformed into a cookie decorating factory. Down the center of the table, there were bowls of frosting in every color you could possibly need, covered in plastic wrap with two butter knives crossed on top of each. Between them, there were bags filled with the same colors. And the decorations...good lord, I was pretty sure they had one of every sugar, jimmy, and festive shape they'd ever found in the store. Some of the lids were yellowed with age, which would have been concerning until Danny appeared with a metal picnic basket-looking thing. He worked to fill each with the appropriate decoration from bulk bags.

This was an impressive operation. I was a bit intimidated. I worried it would feel too much like being at work, but I promised myself I'd keep an open mind. After all, if I was home and decided to make cookies for someone, I wouldn't consider that work. And from what Carson said, the family did this so they could share a bit of holiday cheer with as many people in town as possible.

I was starting to wonder how it was possible anyone would need cookies from Shiloh's as Billy explained to the boys how many different types of cookies they'd make by the end of the weekend. Again, it was a novelty to outsiders but likely less interesting when it was something you felt forced to do.

I hung at the edge of the room, listening as Billy talked to the boys, not sure what I was supposed to be doing. I assumed Carson was still in the kitchen, but I didn't feel comfortable wandering around the house on my own. Danny looked up at me and smiled. "Hey, Ezra, thanks for coming over. You wanna give me a hand getting everything set up?"

"Tell me what you need me to do." I pushed up my sleeves and squirted my hands with the bottle of sanitizer sitting on a TV tray at the entrance to the dining room.

"I thought you could take a look at the icing bags and tell us if they're right or not." He sucked his bottom lip between his cheek as if he was embarrassed about something. He'd always been the quietest of the brothers, but it made no sense that he was nervous when I was the outsider. "We don't

use them much, but I thought you might prefer them since it's how you decorate at the bakery. But then Blake said something about it being too thick, and now I'm worried I messed it up."

I placed a hand on his shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. That he'd thought of me and what I'd prefer was touching. "I'm sure it'll be fine. Is there more frosting anywhere?"

"Yeah, we go through an insane amount, so we made a bunch this morning," he explained.

I peeled back the plastic on the bowl of white, gave it a good stir, and scooped some onto the knife. "It's a bit thick. That's good for spreading, but trying to pipe with this consistency will give you an RSI before long."

"Huh, I guess that makes sense." He finished filling the last little container of jimmies and set the storage box aside. "If you want to show me what you need, we can get it fixed."

And that was how I wound up giving Danny an impromptu lesson about the different consistencies and what each was for. He portioned out fresh bowls of frosting and got to work coloring them. Blake joined us and pulled out more disposable bags while I thinned the icing to the perfect texture. "We can still use what you already have done. Those will be fine for adding details to the frosted cookies. I'm going to make some smaller bags at what's called medium peak. That's what I prefer for outlining cookies. Then, I'll thin it out a bit more, and that's what I'll use for flooding the cookies."

By this point, I had the attention of everyone in the house. They'd gathered around for my lesson on the more advanced fundamentals of cookie decoration. The feeling of so many eyes on me as I worked made me a bit queasy. I was acutely aware when Carson's mom moved closer, watching intently as I tested the thickness of the icing to make sure it was ready for the first bags.

I turned to Carson. "Could you get me a glass or a cup?"

"Sure." He quickly turned toward the cupboards, then turned back. "What type do you need?"

"Something tall and a standard-size opening. I'm going to use it for holding the bags open." To the rest of the family, I said, "When you're filling, it's easier to use a cup instead of trying to hold it open. The bag will stay cleaner, and it's less frustrating."

There were murmurs about how much sense that made. I preened, loving how they hung on every word I said. Teaching wasn't as scary as I'd

expected it to be. Then again, I wasn't sure the Langsford family was capable of intimidating anyone once they'd welcomed you into their house. Even the big, scary brothers were soft and squishy in their mom's presence.

Carson returned, handing me the glass. I shivered when his hand rested on my shoulder before slowly sliding down my back. I glanced over my shoulder and smiled, silently thanking him for the reassurance and for including me in their day.

Eleanor waited until I'd finished bagging the white and thinning it for the flood consistency before telling her men it was time to get to work. That was the first time I realized she was the only female in the building. It was strange to me, but she seemed to love being the queen of the castle. And it was obvious the men all knew she was in charge. They scattered, Danny getting to work rolling out dough, Blake standing near the oven, ready to bake as soon as each pan was filled, and everyone else, with the exception of Carson, made their way to the dining room.

"Sorry about that," he apologized as he pulled the top of the next bag over the top of the glass like I'd demonstrated. "I know that was probably uncomfortable as hell for you, but they loved learning about what you do. If you get sick of answering questions, feel free to tell my brothers to buzz off. They're competitive as hell, and I wouldn't doubt it if they all decide they're master artists by lunchtime."

"It's okay," I reassured him. And I was surprised to realize it really was. "When you invited me to join your family, I wasn't sure what to expect. I don't always do well around people I don't know, so it was nice to have a way to break the ice."

He slipped an arm around my back and drew me closer to him. "I like the way you fit in with everyone."

I rested my head against his shoulder. "Me too."

I'd always been the outcast in my family. Even before I'd announced I was going to college out of state, majoring in English instead of something useful, as my dad put it. Long before I'd moved home and figured out what I wanted to do with my life because I was over the college scene but didn't have the necessary letters behind my name to do something in my field. I'd never fit in with them because I questioned rather than having blind faith.

But here, I felt as though my words had value.

The morning flew by. As Carson had warned, everyone wanted to learn how to decorate using my methods rather than simply slapping frosting on

the cookies and drowning them in decorations. The results were...well, it was safe to say my position at the bakery wouldn't be in danger from them any time soon.

"Boys, we're done with baking the cut-outs, so I'm going to get to work on lunch," Eleanor called out shortly after noon. I was probably the only person who was upset to hear she'd cut out the last batch of dough. I'd been hoping to spend some time in the kitchen getting to know her better, but the brothers and their families had kept me busy.

Lunch was every bit as chaotic as I'd expected. With the dining room table still covered in dried bits of frosting, sugar, and sprinkles, the only place to eat was in the living room. Blake sat on the couch with Danny on the floor in front of him. Billy took one of the chairs, and Michael sat in front of him. The boys huddled in the corner and chatted animatedly about how much fun they were having. When I looked around for a place to sit, I spotted Carson on the couch. He spread his legs a bit wider in invitation.

He leaned forward when I sat with my back against the front of the couch. "Are you having fun? If you want, I can run you home before we get back to work."

"Are you kidding me? This is awesome." I turned to face him, resting a hand on his knee. "I'm honored to be a part of your family's tradition. They're not nearly as intimidating as you said they'd be."

"Hey now, what's that supposed to mean?" Randall, Carson's dad, protested. "You been telling tales about us?"

"Just about how insane you and Mom are about Christmas," Carson admitted with a hint of challenge. "And if you try telling me you're not, I'll call you a damned liar to your face."

My chest tightened and I held my breath as I waited for Randall's rebuke. If I'd ever dared to speak to my dad that way, he'd have given me a tongue lashing I wouldn't forget whether we had company or not. Instead, Randall held up his hands and started laughing. "I suppose it might seem that way, but someday, you'll fall in love, and maybe then you'll understand what it's like to do whatever it takes to put a smile on that special someone's face."

"Pretty sure that ship's getting ready to sail," Danny muttered under his breath. There was something odd about the way Blake squeezed his shoulder and glared down at him. Danny turned to look at his husband. "I didn't say anything everyone else wasn't thinking, Da —"

My eyes widened, wondering how someone who was married could come

so close to calling his husband by the wrong name.

“Behave, both of you,” Carson warned them. “I swear, if you screw this up for me, I’ll find a way to make you suffer.”

Danny looked back at his brother, his chin tipped to the floor and his shoulders slumped forward. “Sorry, Carson.”

Blake scrubbed a hand over the top of Danny’s head. Their relationship was odd, but I couldn’t pinpoint why. Then again, it wasn’t exactly my place to dissect.

My stomach was twisted in knots, and I couldn’t bring myself to eat Eleanor’s pizza burgers, no matter how delicious they smelled. I shoved the salad around on my plate for a bit and picked at my sandwich, trying to at least make it look like I’d eaten something so I wouldn’t offend her. Everyone else started getting up as they finished eating, but Carson stayed by me. “Hey, why don’t you come up here and sit with me for a few minutes?”

“Yeah, okay.” He took my plate, setting it on the end table. “I feel like I messed up, but I don’t know what I did or how to fix it, Carson. Things were going so good this morning, but then there was this weird tension during lunch.”

“Sweetheart, that’s not on you,” he reassured me. “Sometime, I’ll explain everything to you, but I want you to believe me when I say you did nothing wrong. Danny was distant for a long time after he came home. As nice as it is to see him relaxing, there are times when he speaks before he thinks.”

“But how did he—” I replayed the conversation in my mind, trying to figure out what he could have said wrong. My mouth fell open when I realized what he’d been implying. “Wait, was he trying to say you’re falling in love with me? That’s stupid. We aren’t even boyfriends, so we can’t be in love.”

“But we could be,” Carson replied.

“Could be what?” I was starting to think being a virgin until the day I died would be less complicated than trying to teach someone to speak in a way my brain could process. Did he mean we could be boyfriends or we could be in love? Those were still very different concepts.

Carson took my hand in his, turning me to face him. “Do you need me to write you a note with checkboxes at the bottom?”

“Huh?” I was starting to get a headache. It was like Carson was talking in riddles at this point.

He brushed the hair away from my face before leaning in to kiss my

cheek. “I’m sorry, it was a song reference, but you might be too young to understand. What I’m trying to say is that I’d love to be your boyfriend, Ezra. As for love, that’s something that might come over time, or we might decide we can’t stand one another. But I want to take the chance with you.”

“Why?”

Carson looked at me like I’d grown a second head. “Because I like you. And if my brothers were in here, they’d be giving me shit because I don’t even remember the last time I wanted something more than just fooling around with anyone.”

“To be fair, it’s not like what we’ve done could be considered fooling around.” At least, I was pretty sure some cuddling and one scorching hot kiss weren’t what he was implying. But would he still want to be my boyfriend if he knew I wasn’t sure when I’d be ready to do it? There had been a time when I was in college when I would have surrendered my virginity to just about anyone, if only to say I’d had sex.

But now, there wasn’t the same sense of urgency. I was smart enough to know part of that was fear and anxiety talking. If I didn’t get naked in front of a man, he couldn’t find me lacking. If we didn’t tumble into bed together, he wouldn’t know how clueless I was.

But there was more to it than that. I wouldn’t go so far as to say I’d only have sex with someone I was madly in love with, but it had to be more than a one-night fling. Carson was offering me exactly what I wanted, so why was I so reluctant to throw myself into his arms and say yes?

“Listen, I meant it when I said I have no clue where things are going to go between us, but I’m going with my gut here.” Carson swallowed hard. When he dragged his tongue across the seam of his lips, my body took notice. It remembered what it had felt like this morning when he’d finally kissed me. God, had that only been a few hours ago? “I’ve spent more time than I’d like to admit trying to figure out what it means that I’m constantly thinking about you, counting the hours until I’ll get to see you again, even if it’s just to give you a ride home. When I invited you today, I was scared shitless, but not enough to take it back. That has to mean something.”

“Oh my god, this is painful to listen to,” someone complained from the other room. “Ezra, will you please put him out of his misery so the two of you can get your asses back in here?”

“Fuck you, Anson,” Carson shot back. He opened his mouth to say more, then quickly pressed his lips together. His attention returned to me. “He’s an

asshole, but he's not wrong. I'm dying here, Ez. Can you put a pathetic man who's in over his head out of his misery and say yes?"

I pretended to think about it for a few seconds. Although I already knew my answer, I didn't want to cave too quickly. Otherwise, I'd be the desperate one. Then, I threw myself into his lap, forgetting that we were on his parents' couch and the entire family could at least hear us. I crashed my lips against his as I tangled my fingers in his thick, dark beard. "Yes, Carson. I'll be your boyfriend on one condition."

"Name it."

This was the moment of truth. His response to the request I needed to make would determine whether we had a realistic chance of making it. "Be patient with me? I really, really like you, but I can't rush things. I need to know what we're building is real before..."

There was no way I could say the words. Not when I imagined at least one of his brothers standing just out of sight, straining to eavesdrop.

"I promise, sweetheart." He kissed me once more before pushing me off his chest. "Now, we'd better get back to work before Mom comes in to see what we're doing."

That sealed my mortification. Just the image of Eleanor walking in to find me tackling Carson on the couch was enough to send my arousal into hiding.

My face burned all the way to the tips of my ears when we walked back into the dining room, hand in hand, and received a round of applause.

CARSON

“ARE YOU GOING TO SHOW ME WHAT’S IN ALL THOSE BOXES YOU MADE ME carry in this morning?” I asked as we cleaned the dining room after the last cookie was frosted. Ezra had spent part of the afternoon in the kitchen with Mom while the rest of us worked on the cookies. No one said a word about having overheard my confession of...whatever that was to Ezra. I’d been honest when I said it wasn’t love.

Maybe it was more of a promise than a confession. He’d been vulnerable and honest with me about his dating history, and it felt important that he know I wasn’t going to jilt him the way some others had. If anything, his lack of experience was refreshing to me because he wouldn’t judge me any more than I would criticize him. We were going to learn together.

When I grabbed the edge of the plastic tablecloth to throw it away, Ezra grabbed my wrist. “You might want to leave that for now.”

“Uh, okay?”

“Trust me?”

I wondered if this request was about a table covering or if there was some deeper meaning. Either way, my answer would be the same. “Absolutely.”

The smile he flashed me was all the confirmation I needed that he understood the meaning behind that single word. He pushed his glasses back into place with the knuckle of his index finger. “Get your brothers. I’m going to grab the boxes and then meet you in here.”

I didn’t ask questions. On my way to the living room, I spotted Ezra and Mom chatting in the kitchen, both seeming excited about what was to come. Mom pointed to the fridge, and Ezra nodded. I didn’t hang around long enough to see what they were up to. If she was in on his surprise, I wanted to

experience it without any hints of what was going on.

“Hey, Ez wants us back in the dining room,” I told my brothers, who were all busy unpacking and detangling the Christmas lights. It was already dark outside, but that was par for the course on this job. We were used to working in the dark to get everything hung so the bulbs all pointed in the same direction and we could see any weird gaps where one string ended and the next began.

“What’s going on?” Anson asked.

Danny picked up on the shortened version of Ezra’s name. “How cute. Does he call you Car?”

That earned my brother a reprimand from his husband, even though I knew it was Danny returning the ribbing he’d taken his entire life. I couldn’t hear what Blake said after that, but it was followed by a quick, unnecessary apology from Danny.

“You’re fine,” I reassured him. I wouldn’t tell him, but I liked seeing him confident enough to speak out. There had been a time when it felt like he was constantly walking on eggshells around us, which was the real tragedy. To everyone, I said, “I’m just as clueless as you are. He asked me to stop by the bakery this morning and loaded up a bunch of boxes in the back seat of my truck. He and Mom are in the kitchen tittering, and he wants us in the dining room. So get off your asses and don’t forget to thank him for making it so you don’t have to freeze your balls off right this second.”

“Yeah, because it’ll be so much more fun to do even later,” Anson scoffed. I glared at him. If he said a single fucking word to make Ezra feel bad, I’d kick his ass into the tallest snow drift I could find. “Sorry. That was bitchy of me.”

“Yeah, it was.” I wasn’t letting him off the hook. It wasn’t lost on me that as recently as a few weeks ago, I might have been the one making snide comments.

A lump formed in my throat when we stepped into the dining room and I saw identical stacks in front of eight chairs and candies in bowls down the center of the table. It took me a second to recall our conversation from the other night when I told him how much fun it had been to decorate gingerbread buildings with my brothers, all of us trying to create the best candy house.

“Ez, this is…” Nope. I was not going to get emotional about this, no matter how sweet it was. I pulled him into my arms, pressing my face into the

crook of his neck. “When did you do this?”

“Yesterday,” he admitted. “I was worried you’d see what was on the cooling racks and figure it out. The way you talked about how much fun you used to have building these, I wanted to give that back to you.”

“Fuck, baby, that’s...” Fucking amazing is what it was. No one had done something that meant as much as this. When I closed my eyes, I could almost imagine my grandparents walking into the room, critiquing our work and offering tips for how to make our designs even more elaborate. “And you told Mom about this?”

“Yeah. As it turns out, peeking is a family trait.” Ezra smirked and shook his head. He leaned in closer, keeping his voice barely above a whisper. “Don’t tell her I said this, but I’m pretty sure she’s worse than all of you guys. She admitted she looked as soon as we were all in here working and Danny’s back was turned.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, she’s never been one to do well with surprises. That’s why Dad always took us shopping for her presents the afternoon of Christmas Eve.”

Ezra shuddered. “That sounds like a nightmare. I can’t imagine going to the malls when everyone’s frantic to find last-minute gifts before everything closes for the holiday.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t fun,” I agreed. I felt the muscles in my face turning into a wry smile as I thought back on those trips. Dad had been crazy, taking four boys with him to the mall. He always used the excuse that Mom deserved some time alone before they dragged us all over the county. When we’d get home, the dishes she agreed to bring to each celebration were neatly lined up on the counter, right beside storage bags filled with sandwiches and snacks to tide us over if we got hungry on the drive. “But it wasn’t all bad either. Mom and Dad had very different ideas of preparing us for the chaos. No one ever told her Dad took us all to lunch at the same diner every year. They only had cold sandwiches and other easy foods because they were busy getting their ready-to-cook dinners prepped for pickup, but that didn’t mean we went hungry. We always gorged ourselves on rum balls and rosettes because those were two things Mom didn’t make.”

“That sounds really cool.” I could practically see the wheels turning in Ezra’s mind. If I wasn’t careful, everything I mentioned that was even tangentially related to food would turn into him trying to recreate the Christmas magic for me. I opened my mouth to tell him he didn’t need to

start hunting for recipes and supplies when he silenced me by pressing his lips to the corner of my mouth. It was such an innocent gesture, but it meant the world to me that he was comfortable enough to show me how he felt in front of my family. “Don’t worry. I tried rosettes once. It was a nightmare that had me ready to throw the iron across the room. I’m not making those again.”

“If you do, let me know so I don’t die by hot metal impaling my skull,” I teased. “Don’t look now, but I’m pretty sure we have an audience. You might want to tell us what’s going on before they start ribbing us about making out in front of everyone.”

“We weren’t —”

“I know, sweetheart,” I assured him, hating that we were still in that getting-to-know-one-another phase while he simultaneously had the challenge of trying to feel comfortable with my family. “Come on.”

I turned Ezra to face the rest of the family, who were working hard to not spy on our private moment. I gave him a quick nudge forward, and he cleared his throat. He laced his fingers with mine, holding on for dear life. Ezra coughed into the crook of his elbow, which caught everyone’s undivided attention. “I wanted to do something to thank you all for inviting me to be part of your day,” he explained. As he spoke, his voice reflected his growing confidence. “Carson told me how your grandparents used to have you decorate gingerbread houses and buildings to keep you out of trouble. After seeing the chaos here today, I think I can understand a bit of why they wanted to keep everyone busy.”

Everyone laughed at his joke, and Billy flashed me a quick thumbs-up.

Ezra turned to Anson. “I also want to thank you for allowing me to be part of the Harmony House party. The work you’ve been doing over there is so valuable. I hope this can be the start of something that becomes a new holiday tradition. I thought it would be fun to decorate these to use for the party. Shiloh wants to do a family-friendly decorating party at the bakery too. If you wanted, you could probably put up some fliers or something to make sure people know what’s happening.”

“That’s a great idea.” I gave Ezra’s hand a squeeze. “The more people we get involved, the more money we can raise and the more gifts we can buy.”

“Gifts?” Danny hadn’t been as involved as the rest of us because of time constraints with his job.

“Yeah, Kevin suggested we team up with other community organizations

to help get presents to families in need,” Anson explained. “He took the lead on it, so we’re going to have a tree there, and people can take a tag for someone they want to buy for. We’re hoping to use part of the freewill donations to make sure every wish is granted.”

My heart swelled at the thought of all of us going shopping on Christmas Eve this year so we could wrap and deliver gifts that evening. Anson had joked that he was going to spray my beard white and make me dress up as Santa. I’d threatened him with bodily harm when he first suggested it, but now I found myself glancing at Ezra, wondering if he’d be my little elf helper.

Since it was already after six, Mom let out a sharp whistle to get us back on task. “Thank you, Ezra, for doing something so thoughtful for the boys. James and Henry, when Billy and your uncles were kids, their grandparents used to work together cutting and baking the pieces for gingerbread houses. Once the boys decorated them, they were displayed like priceless art until Christmas Day, when the boys begged us to let them eat their creations. Learn a lesson from your elders: don’t try and eat something that’s been sitting out for a few weeks unless you want a trip to the dentist on Christmas Day.”

“That was one time,” Billy grumbled. “But she’s right. You can decorate to eat or decorate to display, but not both.”

Mom continued bringing out candies, each bag separated into a few bowls to distribute along the table. Ezra and I took our places at the only open seats. “Are they all the same?” I asked as I grabbed a bag of white icing to start constructing my building. I already knew what I wanted to do. The trick would be figuring out if it was possible with the supplies we had on hand.

“No, every building is a little different,” Ezra explained. “I love the way the Christmas village in the window of the vintage store looks, and I wanted to recreate that with gingerbread. It’s something I always wanted, but my parents never allowed in our house growing up. They were pretty strict about only allowing a simple nativity. We didn’t even have a tree.”

“That’s... Wow, Ezra, I’m sorry.” As we worked on decorating our houses, I started compiling a mental list of everything I could give Ezra so he had a Christmas he’d never forget.

EZRA

SOMETHING HAD CHANGED OVER THE COURSE OF OUR DAY AT CARSON'S parents' house. He'd shifted from begrudgingly helping out to being the captain of the cookie team. Or maybe the head cheerleader, but I wasn't sure how he'd look in a skirt. The point being, once we took our seats at the table, his attention was divided between giving pointers on how to assemble the houses and rooting for the boys to beat their dads.

It was adorable.

Eleanor and Randall didn't join in the action. Instead, they wandered around the room, pretending to be the judges. It didn't take long before the brothers realized what was going on, and they played along.

"Anson, you seem to be taking a unique approach with the building materials," Randall observed, standing over Anson's shoulder. "Can you tell us what you've selected for the roof of your creation?"

"Everyone expects the roof to be somewhat simple, Randall," Anson explained as he worked to unwrap and break his candies. "Instead of the more traditional frosting-only approach or the use of plain chocolate accents, I've opted to use the white-chocolate Pocky, cut down to the perfect length to simulate a thatch roof."

"And are you concerned at all about the structural integrity of your choice?" Randall continued.

He should have been. While it was a neat concept, it would be very difficult to adhere the sticks to the roof and make them look good. But I wasn't going to ruin his fun by saying so. If it fell apart before the Christmas party, he would probably make up a funny story about some winter storm that blew through and took the roof with it.

At one point, Carson's hand slipped under the table, and he gave my knee a squeeze. When I looked at him, he mouthed, *Thank you*.

He'd expressed his gratitude a few times now, but I felt as though I should be thanking him. He was the one taking all the chances here. I was the lucky one who got to spend my weekend doing something I loved with people who were the very definition of a loving, supportive family.

Eleanor announced there were only ten minutes left until the deadline, continuing the cooking show theme. Everyone hurried to put the final touches on their structures and carefully move them to the window seat Randall had cleared off. She then gave everyone the rest of the night off, suggesting they come back one evening during the week to put up the lights.

Carson tried being sneaky about joining me at the back of the room, but his movement didn't slip anyone's attention. "What do you say we get out of here and head back to your place?"

"I'd like that." I followed Carson around the room, thanking everyone for a great day.

When we got to Carson's mom, I was shocked to be pulled into a tight hug. "Thank you for making my boy smile like that. It was a wonderful day without him grumping around."

"I didn't do anything special," I argued.

"Oh, but you did." She kissed my cheek. My family never would have shown any sort of affection that way. For us, it was something that was known but never shown. "He's not an easy man, but he has a good heart. Be patient with him, Ezra."

Funny, that was exactly what I'd requested from Carson earlier. She wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know. Both of us were like skittish animals. The slightest sudden movement had the potential to scare us off.

"I will, Eleanor," I promised.

Carson rested his hand on the small of my back, stepping close enough I felt the heat of his body against my side. "Mom, don't scare him off."

He gave his mom a hug and a kiss on the cheek, promising he'd be over the following day to start hanging lights. I nearly opened my mouth to offer to help but then remembered my presence was demanded for church the next morning, with lunch afterward. By the time I got done dealing with my family, there was no way I'd be fit for civil company.

That thought plagued me on the drive home. Sure, I'd always had issues

with my family, but it wasn't until today that I realized I'd never fit in with them. I'd been raised that even if you didn't like your family, you owed them love and respect. Never mind the fact I wasn't offered the same in return.

Spending the day with the Langsforths was like pulling back the blindfold and seeing everything you'd always wanted, only to have it snatched away.

"Hey, are you okay?" I flinched at Carson's voice as he placed his hand over mine. I stared at the houses along Main Street, not wanting to burden him with this. "Talk to me, Ezra. What's going on?"

"I was thinking about spending time with my family tomorrow and how unpleasant that's going to be after today." Understatement of the century. It was going to be hell, pretending to be the dutiful son when I was only going through the motions at our church service. I was going for my grandmother's benefit, no one else's. She believed it was our duty to be in attendance every week, but especially during certain times of the year. I let out a resigned sigh, allowing my head to fall back against the headrest, turning so I could see him. "You're really lucky to have such an amazing family. I hope you know that."

"Trust me, I do." He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel as he approached the center of town. "I'm glad I was able to share today with you. You helped me see what I've been taking for granted for too damned long."

"That's probably easy to do when it's your normal." Carson laced his fingers through mine as he continued down the street after letting a truck cross the intersection. Teddy waved as we passed their house. The front was adorned with meticulous rows of white and blue icicle lights, and there was a pretty family of lighted deer silhouettes on the front lawn. I envied them having a place they could decorate like that. "You really seem to love the holidays though."

"Yeah, I guess I do." It would have sounded pathetic if I'd admitted why I was such a geek about making sure others had happy holidays. It was my way of giving others what I didn't have.

"So why don't you have a tree or anything at your place?"

"I guess it doesn't make much sense to decorate when I'm the only person who will see it," I admitted. When he pulled up to the next stop sign, he continued straight rather than turn toward my apartment complex. "Um, Carson? I think you forgot to turn back there."

"Nope." He sat straighter behind the wheel, then leaned forward and turned on the stereo. If not for the fact the streets were mostly deserted

already, I'd have worried about him paying more attention to the dashboard than the road ahead. Finally, he found what he was looking for and turned the volume up. "Do you have anything you need to get home for at a certain time?"

"No." I never had plans until recently, and those had all been with the man sitting next to me. The melancholy that had been threatening to settle lifted. "What did you have in mind?"

"You'll see." His eyes sparkled under every streetlight we passed. Something had possessed my boyfriend—and OMG, I had a boyfriend now!—and he started singing along with the radio. He was no Bing Crosby, but his voice was a warm, rich baritone I wanted to serenade me all night. "You know, someone once pointed out that it was ridiculous of me to be anti-Christmas just because my family tried so hard to make good memories for us when we were younger."

"You don't say," I scoffed. "Whoever that was must have been pretty bold to make such an observation."

"I think you're right," he responded playfully. "I think I'm going to take his advice and turn over a new leaf or whatever. You want to help me?"

"Absolutely!" I closed my eyes and swayed gently as Mariah Carey's voice started singing "O Holy Night." I wasn't much of a fan of some of her Christmas tunes, but this had always been one of my favorites, and even Mimi couldn't mess it up.

We sang along with the satellite channel's playlist all the way to Pineville. Carson pulled into the parking lot of one of the big-box stores, turned off the engine, and turned to me. "Let's go get you some Christmas decorations."

"I already told you there's not much point since I'm the only one who will see them."

He ignored me, jumping out of the truck and coming around to open my door. "Not true. I was there earlier this week, and I noticed. And if you're my boyfriend now, I might start spending more time there. Just because I'm not one of those weirdos who decorates for Christmas while there are still trick-or-treaters in the neighborhood doesn't mean I can't appreciate them when they're in someone else's house."

My heart raced as I imagined curling up on the couch with him to watch TV in the evenings, with only the glow from the Christmas tree lighting the room. There was a ledge along the exterior wall of the apartment where I

could start building my own Christmas village, but I'd be particular about what buildings I picked up so they weren't gaudy. My village needed to have character. And if I was unleashing the holiday spirit at home, I'd definitely have to pick up some candles or something so I could smell cinnamon and apples whenever I walked in.

"Would you really want to help me decorate? That's..." I pressed my lips together, not wanting to point out how domestic shopping for Christmas decorations together felt. It was just a few hours ago that he asked me to give this chemistry between us a real chance. Heck, I hadn't even gotten an opportunity to text Mara and tell her the good news. And now, he was talking about choosing home decor.

"Relax, Ez." He guided me away from the doors, wrapping me in his broad arms. "You like Christmas but don't have anything to lift your mood in your home. I want to help you with that. It's sort of like how none of us complain when Mom wants us to help decorate the house. It makes her happy, and her being happy is something that makes all of our lives easier. I wouldn't do any of this for myself, but I know it'll make you feel good. So we're going to go in there and pick up some things."

"How can you say you don't do relationships?" I mused as we grabbed a cart and wandered toward the back of the store. It wasn't fair that he swore he didn't have experience being in a relationship, but he was somehow a natural at it.

He bumped his shoulder against mine. "Maybe I subconsciously knew none of them were worth committing myself to."

"And I am?"

"Time will tell, I suppose." That he was so honest with me about not knowing for certain where things between us would lead meant the world to me. I'd rather have cautious honesty than someone blowing sunshine up my backside. "Where should we start? Do you want an artificial tree? If not, there was a stand at the front of the parking lot. We can stop there on our way out to see if there's a tree that catches your eye."

"I think artificial will be better. That way, I don't have to worry about remembering to water it." When I'd been a kid, my parents loved casually bemoaning the dangers of real trees. Whenever there was an incident involving a tree being to blame for a house fire, they talked about it where we could hear, and that would become even more reason for us to not put up a tree. As soon as the seasonal area came into view, my eyes were drawn to the

tallest, fullest tree in the display. And then I spotted a rainbow-colored tree. There were white ones and realistic ones, and some with programmable lights. It became apparent I couldn't be trusted to make this decision because I wanted all of them. "How big do you think I can get away with in my living room without feeling like I'm living inside the tree?"

Carson scratched his beard as he slowly walked the line, reading the tag on each before moving along. He came back to one in the center of the row. He plucked one of the pick tags out of the plastic holder. "This one. It's not garishly big, but it doesn't look cheap either. And it's got programmable lights, so you can pick the color scheme you want once the ornaments are on it."

I checked the price, mentally comparing it to the balance in my bank account. I wasn't hurting by any means, but that was because I didn't make frivolous, impulsive purchases. This felt like both.

"Come on, Ezra," he mock-whined when I took too long to decide. "I bet I can find a way to make the lights play in sync with music."

"You cannot," I argued. While it would be cool for a few minutes, it would drive one of us crazy if it continued for too long. Carson raised one eyebrow as if asking if I was daring him to do it. "Fine, you probably can, but that doesn't mean you should. What about something smaller?"

"If you get something smaller, we're just going to have to replace it next year." We'd have to?

I swallowed the lump in my throat, feeling the weight of emotions tugging at my heart. Him talking as though it was a foregone conclusion we'd even be together this time next year was a combination of exhilarating and terrifying. I pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. "You really have a way of making things seem simple."

Carson chuckled softly. "It's a talent. Now, come on. Let's see what we can find to go on the tree. We can't have lights and no ornaments. Are you a tinsel or garland type of guy?"

I poked a finger against my chest. "Horribly deprived child. Remember? I can say with certainty I have never considered which I prefer."

"And I call bullshit," Carson scoffed. "If you pulled out your phone right now, there are probably at least a dozen pins with Christmas trees on that picture app, and I'd bet they will show you your so-called nonexistent preference."

I pulled out my phone, determined to prove him wrong. When nothing in

particular jumped out at me, I switched to my search engine and looked up images of trees with tinsel and then garland.

“Oh my gosh, people actually string loose stuff like that on their trees?” I quickly checked the area around us, certain there would be someone holding a huge bag of tinsel directly behind us. “Definitely not that.” I pointed to the hanging display next to us. “But not that either.”

I took another look at the pictures on my phone, like Carson had suggested. Now that I knew what to look for, I did see a lot of commonalities between them. “You know, none of these have either. Is it a law that I have to pick one?”

“Absolutely not,” Carson assured me. “It’s your tree and you get to pick. So, should we skip this aisle and move along?”

We spent the next hour wandering through aisles filled with twinkling lights, delicate ornaments, and other festive decorations. At one point, Carson picked up a cute little reindeer ornament and held it to my face, teasing, “Look, it’s just as cute as you!”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help laughing. “Are you comparing me to a reindeer now?”

He winked. “Just the cute ones.”

By the time we checked out, our cart was brimming with decorations. Carson insisted on paying for everything despite my protests. “I’m the one who insisted on shopping. My surprise, my treat.”

All it took was him looping a hand behind my back and pulling me close, and every protest fled my brain. He buried his face in the crook of my neck, his thick bear tickling my cheek. “Please, Ezra, let me do this for you?”

How could I argue when he was being so sweet? “Fine, but no more. And this counts as my Christmas present from you.”

“We’ll see.” He turned away from me as he reached for his wallet, drawing my attention to the way the denim of his jeans molded to his body.

Back at my apartment, we set to work. It was late, but neither of us cared. Carson strung lights around the windows, creating a warm, inviting glow. I worked on setting up the village on the ledge, placing each building with care. Once that work was done, we got to work on the tree. We worked well as a team, with him reading the directions and putting up the tree while I took the tags off all the ornaments. For someone who hated Christmas, he had very clear opinions on how a tree was supposed to be decorated. I couldn’t even get annoyed when he plucked off the trinkets I’d just hung, moving them to a

different spot on the tree so there wasn't a huge cluster in one area.

We were nearly done when he pulled something out of his pocket. I couldn't help but laugh at the blown glass pickle in his hand. "What in the heck is this?"

"Have you seriously never heard of a Christmas pickle?" His mouth gaped. I wasn't sure if he was being serious or if I was punked. I most certainly hadn't heard of something as ridiculous as a pickle-shaped ornament.

"Is this some sort of sex joke?" My cheeks flamed hot just thinking of the innuendo. I imagined him finding a pickle-shaped ornament and giving it to me as some weird symbol of him offering me his body.

Carson doubled over, clutching his ribs. He swiped at his eyes as if what I'd said was so hilarious it made him cry. "That would be fucking epic, but no. It's a real thing, I assure you."

I pulled out my phone and searched for the history of the Christmas pickle. It wasn't any less ridiculous than when he'd first mentioned it. Apparently, it was a German tradition, and whoever found the pickle got an extra present or got to open their gifts first. As I read on, it started to sound like something Americans made up, tying its history to some completely random place.

Either way, everything I read talked about it being a family tradition. I held the pickle reverently in my hands, wondering if this was something we'd be putting on our tree together decades from now. And then, I could tell everyone the story of Carson giving me his Christmas pickle.

When we finished, my apartment was transformed. It looked cozy and festive, a stark contrast to the sterile environment it had been before. We curled up on the couch, and Carson humored me by turning on a Christmas movie. It was only right, he said, since we were surrounded by the scent of warm apple cider and the soft glow from the Christmas tree lights Carson had fun playing with, changing the color scheme about every three minutes.

It was well after midnight when we woke in a heap in the corner of the sectional sofa. "I should probably head out."

I hesitated, wondering if I should let the words slip since they were pretty much the exact opposite of what I'd asked for earlier. "You could stay."

Carson untangled himself and stood. He pulled me off the couch and into his arms. "Sweetheart, I'd love nothing more, but I don't think either of us is ready for that. Why don't you give me a call tomorrow when you're done

with your family, and I'll come over with dinner?"

"You know how to cook?" I didn't mean to sound as shocked as I had, but I vaguely remembered Carson mentioning he lived off takeout and frozen dinners.

"It's not the same when you're cooking for one," he pointed out. "I'm nowhere near as good as you, but yes, I do know how to cook."

CARSON

“SO ARE WE JUST NOT TALKING ABOUT THE FACT CARSON HAS A BOYFRIEND?” Danny asked as we started unloading the haul from Anson’s shopping trip. Because we’d never done a Christmas party at Harmony House before, and we wanted to make sure we represented as many holidays as we could, he and Kevin had run up to Pineville this morning.

“No, we’re not,” Blake scolded him. “If Carson wants to talk to us about whether this is something new or simply new to us, he’ll tell us. Until then, we choose to be happy for him and let him have his peace.”

“Okay, but you have to admit it’s strange,” Danny continued. Even I understood the look Blake gave him. My baby brother was cruising for a spanking when they got home, and it wouldn’t be the fun kind. “How have we gone from me being the token gay kid in the family to three out of four of us being with men?”

“Danny...” This time, Blake dragged his name out a few extra syllables in a stern warning.

“You’re no fun,” Danny mumbled, earning himself a playful swat on the ass. “What if he’s going through some sort of midlife crisis or something? First, he gets a boyfriend, and today, he’s down here making sure the decorations are just perfect. I mean, if it was Billy, it would make sense. He’s always been a geek for the holidays. But this is Carson.”

“Maybe he’s decided he’s found someone worth settling down with, and we owe it to him to let the two of them sort out whatever they’re doing without your meddling,” Blake countered. If it wouldn’t be weird as fuck, I’d have kissed the man.

Watching the two of them together was oddly sweet. When Danny and

Michael had been together, we'd all worried that his submission was coerced, that somehow Michael was taking advantage of his best friend's younger brother. But now that he was in a healthier relationship for him, I saw how desperately Danny craved Blake's attention and guidance. I tried to not think about how that translated in the bedroom, but there was no hiding their dynamics, even in public. And if they wound up opening a club outside of town like they'd been talking about, there'd be zero chance of them hiding.

Blake pulled Danny aside and whispered something in his ear. My baby brother shifted uncomfortably, but the look in his eyes assured me it wasn't fear that caused him to have a case of the wiggles. Blake was a big fan of positive reinforcement, and I'd bet money he'd just offered Danny something good if he behaved the rest of the day.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out to see a picture of Teddy, Billy, Michael, and the kids at the tree farm. Since Teddy had the biggest truck, he'd been put on Christmas tree duty. Shiloh had stayed back so he and Jasper could start working on some yule logs to put in the window sills. It seemed everyone in town wanted to get in on the celebration.

"I'm not really sure there's anything to talk about," I responded to Danny's original question. "You were all there listening as I tried to bare my heart to him."

"Yeah, that's the point." Danny continued hanging ornaments on the tree.

It reminded me of last weekend when Ezra and I had put up the tree in his apartment. I wouldn't admit it to my brothers, but since that night, I'd enjoyed being at Ezra's much more than my own place. It was warm and cozy, and it felt like us. Even though the tree and decorations were something I did for him, I liked looking around and remembering how we'd worked together to bring his stale apartment to life.

"As long as I've known you, you've never begged anyone to be with you. If anything, you push people away as soon as they want to get close." When I caught Blake glaring at Danny, I shook my head. If Danny wanted to talk about this, we'd talk. I wasn't hiding anything. "And since when are you into men?"

"Since Ezra," I said flatly with a shrug. "It's nothing I ever thought about, really. And I'm still not sure what it makes me because I'm not into all guys, but he's something special."

"Huh." Danny turned away from the tree as I explained my attraction to Ezra.

Fuck, I missed him. I wanted him here with me because today was all about family time, and I was quickly coming to see him as that. He belonged with me. Instead, he was at the bakery alongside Shiloh, Lacey, and their newest hire, trying to get ahead on the baking for this weekend. Not only were we demanding a lot out of their little kitchen, but Shiloh had also taken three other orders for private parties since word got out about Ezra's culinary genius.

"So do you suppose you're demi or pan or what?" Danny pushed when there was a lull in the conversation.

"How in the fuck should I know?" I bit back. I'd never been a fan of people thinking everyone needed to wear some sort of label on their chest announcing their sexuality if they weren't straight. "The important thing is I'm not running away from how Ezra makes me feel. That should tell you something about him."

"It does," Blake agreed. He took Danny by the hand, leading him onto the front porch. I really hoped he wasn't about to lecture my brother about his curiosity. Danny had always been the one who wanted to know what was going on in detail. I was used to his questions, even if I wasn't completely comfortable answering questions about my sexuality.

A few minutes later, they returned, Anson and Kevin right behind them. Together, and Kevin was holding Bart's leash. "Seriously, did you have to bring the menace with you?"

"I tried leaving him home, but he swore it's his party," Kevin responded without missing a beat. I still wasn't sure what in the fuck was going on between them, but Kevin had secured his place in my heart with his quick wit and ability to tease my brother. He reached down to scratch my brother's dog's head. "As for Bart, he's been doing a lot better recently. I convinced Anson to bring him out for some people time. I think that's a big part of his problem."

"His problem is Anson's never bothered training the dog," Blake muttered under his breath. "I swear I'm getting him a gift certificate for behavior training for Christmas."

"The dog or my brother?" Danny asked, all too happy to play along.

"Both." We all chuckled at Blake's immediate response.

As the workday ended, more people showed up to help us decorate for the party. I pulled up the drawing Ezra had sent over to make sure we had enough room for all the food my brother had insisted I order. There was no

way we weren't all going home with plastic containers of leftovers, but there were worse fates than living off Ezra's cooking.

"Where are we putting the gingerbread display?" Danny asked. He picked up the first structure, carefully carrying it to me. I checked Ezra's plans and pointed to the deep window sills. "They won't get too warm being over the radiators?"

"I'm assuming not. And if they do, we'll move them." I showed him the plan. "We're putting ours in the windows first, and then we'll fill it in with any that are donated on Saturday morning."

"Who's working the party?" Billy asked. "I don't feel right asking Ezra to work when he should be at your side."

I didn't either, but none of us had thought that far ahead when I'd first met with him. If he wound up working during the party, I'd have to find a way to make it up to him after.

"We have a few of the teens who have been talking to Shiloh," Anson cut in. "We've been talking about doing a work-partnership program, and this seemed like a way to help a few of the older kids enter the workforce with local businesses so they don't have to drive up to Pineville."

Fuck, sometimes I forgot how amazing my brothers were. They really were doing a lot more with the youth center than giving kids a place to hang out after school. I really needed to talk to Anson and Billy to find a way to take part in that program. Rod might grumble about it, but Hot Rod's was exactly the type of place that should be helping kids realize there were paths other than college. Plus, he was the one who was always bitching about how kids didn't want to get their hands dirty when they could sit their asses behind a computer.

A while later, Anson approached as I was unwrapping plastic tablecloths for the long banquet tables. He held a credit card between two fingers. "Why don't you get out of here. Go pick up Ezra and tell him you need his help. I want there to be plenty of gifts for every kid who comes this weekend. We'll need a variety of gifts, and you can wrap them based on interests, age group, gender, whatever."

"Uh, Anson..." I understood what he was getting at, but it felt disingenuous for us to separate the gifts by gender. Until now, I'd been happy to be the silent partner, but my mind drifted to Ezra. More than likely, something like a baking set would be set aside as a "girl" gift, but he would have been happy as a pig in mud to receive something so meaningful.

Likewise, there were probably girls out there who would appreciate tools or something equally “masculine.” If we were going to stand behind our mission to be inclusive for all, we needed to find a better way. “We really need to find a better way to make sure everyone gets something they’re going to love. I know opening gifts is part of the fun, but is that what we should do in this case? Or would it be better to simply have everything set out where the kids can see?”

“Hmm, good point.” Kevin dropped Bart’s leash, and I held my breath, waiting for the terror to knock over the tree or take someone out at the knees. To my surprise, he headed straight for the dog bed that had appeared out of nowhere and curled up to go to sleep. So much for socializing. “Is there a way we can put a hold on going shopping and send out an email with a form for the families who have already signed up? Then, we can put out one last push on social media and check the tree tags for ideas on other gifts.”

“Or we can get some gift cards,” Anson added. “That way, if someone gets something they truly don’t like, we can have an exchange table and give them a gift card.”

I liked that idea. It would also teach the kids there was no shame in speaking up when you received something that wasn’t to your taste. “So, does that mean you have something else for me to do?”

I should have known better than to ask. Anson handed me his laptop. “Yeah, you can take this over to the bakery or whatever. Put together a simple form. The list of attending families and kids coming on their own is already open. Reach out to them and let them know this is urgent. We need to know by tomorrow, and then we’ll all head up to Pineville for shopping and dinner. Maybe we’ll even rope Mom and Dad into the fun.”

That sounded like torture. But Anson wasn’t done yet.

“Do you think Ezra could make some graphics to post on social media too? He seems like the creative sort.” I wasn’t sure being able to decorate cookies translated well to graphic design, but I wasn’t going to shoot Anson down. Being involved felt good.

Or maybe knowing Ezra and I were working together to give the kids a good Christmas was what kept me from speaking up. “Yeah, we can do that. Are you sure you don’t want another tree for the other room? If this party is as big as we’re hoping, there’s likely to be an overflow. I don’t want people having to choose between being cramped in here and being in a boring room.”

“Look at you, turning into Mr. Christmas,” Danny teased. “Maybe there’s hope for us getting you to dress up as Santa after all.”

“Don’t press your luck,” I grumbled. But unlike when they’d first mentioned the idea, there was no heat behind my words.

Anson glanced in the room off the main hall. There was no arguing it looked utilitarian by comparison. “What are you thinking we should do? I agree it needs something, but we do need to take our budget into account. This is getting to be a pretty massive production, and I don’t want it taking away from the other programs.”

“Then I’ll pay for whatever we need in here.” I lived well below my means, and thanks to some smart investments, I wasn’t hurting. I didn’t make that public knowledge because no one, not even my brothers, needed to know the state of my accounts. “And while I’m at it, I’ll take care of Shiloh too. It’s the least I can do.”

“That’s going to be a chunk, Carson,” Anson warned as if I wasn’t aware of the final catering bill Shiloh had sent over. I was pretty sure he’d undercharged, but he swore everything was right. If everyone else could put their money where their mouths were, so could I.

“Yeah, and maybe I’m trying to do something nice here. Would you stuff a sock in it before I change my mind?”

Anson leaned against one of the tables set up but still bare. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at me. He pursed his lips and let out a sigh. “What’s really going on here, Carson? It’s not that I don’t appreciate the help, but this isn’t you.”

“What in the hell is that supposed to mean?” I rubbed my temples as I blew out an exaggerated huff of annoyance. There was no winning. When I hadn’t wanted to take part in planning this party, he guilted me into it because all of us were supposed to be involved with Harmony House. And now that I was all-in, he was questioning my motives.

My brother held up his hands in surrender. “I’m not trying to start a fight, but it’s like you had a brain transplant or something. Not even a month ago, you went out of your way to be a hermit. We practically had to threaten you with Mom to get you to come to Friday dinners. You looked like you wanted to take a torch to every Christmas display and a hammer to every speaker playing holiday music. Now, you’re trying to get us to do even more than we originally talked about. Oh, and you’re suddenly in a relationship *with a man*, even though you’ve always gone out of your way to make sure the *women*

you've dated understood you don't do commitment. Admit it, you'd call me out if roles were reversed."

"Funny you should say that," I bit out, glancing over his shoulder to where Kevin had Henry on his shoulders to put a star on top of the Christmas tree. "I've wondered myself about you diving headfirst into the Christmas spirit, but I didn't say anything. And do you want to know why? Because it's none of my fucking business what you're getting up to. I supported you because you asked me to. So, would you like to explain yourself?"

Anson clenched his jaw and his face flared bright red. If one of us didn't call a truce, this could easily come to blows we'd both regret before the bruises formed. Okay, so neither of us had resorted to physical violence in over a decade, and the last time, there'd been too much alcohol and too much pent-up frustration over other things, but this was how it always started. We were so much alike that it led to us locking horns from time to time.

"Fine, I see what you're saying," he responded through gritted teeth. "I'm just... I don't know how to explain what's going on between us because I really don't have time to get involved with anyone right now. And even if I did, he deserves someone who will shelter him from the world, not growl at him all the fucking time."

"So change," I suggested as if it were that simple. And it sort of was when you found the person who made you want to be better. Maybe both of us were on our way to that, as long as we didn't fuck things up. "Let your mask down and see what happens. You might realize you like yourself better that way too."

Anson smirked. "Speaking from experience?" He knew damned well I was. He gave me a playful shove. "Get out of here, moneybags. Go pick up that boyfriend of yours and go on a shopping spree. Maybe, after the haze clears and we both have a chance to breathe, we should sit down and actually talk. I feel like we could both use some insight."

"You might need to hash it out, but that's not us. Never has been, probably never will be." Fuck, Mom was going to be annoyed as hell when she realized she was going to stay the only woman in the family—unless one of us adopted a little girl. We were definitely testing her insistence that she wouldn't know what to do with a girl after so long spent taking care of boys. "But if you want to come over and split some wings and beer while we watch football Monday night, I wouldn't be opposed."

Anson hedged, not giving me the quick response I'd expected. The corner

of his mouth tipped up in a smile as he heard Kevin's voice from the other room. "Would it be okay if I get back to you on that?"

"Yeah, man. Do what you gotta do." I gave him a quick thump on the back and said my goodbyes. There was shopping to be done, and the only way I was going to enjoy myself was with Ezra by my side.

EZRA

AS SOON AS WE WERE DONE STORING THE LAST MENU ITEMS FOR THE PARTY, Shiloh shoved me out of the kitchen, telling me he'd finish up with the high school students helping us out. They were good kids, and I really hoped we'd be able to keep them busy enough they didn't leave. Jude was a natural at baking, but his inability to deviate from the recipes made it more difficult for him to work on the appetizers. Emma, on the other hand, was a quick study at altering the spices so a dish tasted just right.

"Are the two of you going to be here in the morning?" I asked as I cleaned up my workstation. Shiloh had offered to take care of it so I could relax for a bit, but I wanted to model good habits for the teens. It wouldn't do any good if they started assuming someone else would come behind to clean up after them.

"I have play practice in the morning," Jude admitted. The crestfallen expression on his face seemed out of place from the little I'd gotten to know about him. His shoulders slumped, and it may have been my imagination, but he seemed to be closing himself off from us.

"Hey, that's cool. You said you're doing sound crew, right?" He nodded as he traced a finger through the flour dust still coating the table. My heart ached when I realized what I was witnessing. I felt his pain because I saw a bit of myself in him. This wasn't a kid who thought what he was doing was stupid. He just wasn't used to anyone taking an interest in his passions. "When does the play open? I'd love to be there on opening night."

"You don't have to."

"No, but I'd like to be." I gave his shoulder a quick squeeze. I'd have wrapped my arms around him in a hug, but I was pretty sure that was a huge

faux pas since he was a minor. “It’s been a long time since I saw a play live. Maybe I’ll even drag Carson along with me.”

Jude’s eyes went wide. “Now I know you’re bullshitting me. There’s no way he’d want to sit through our play.”

“Dead serious,” I responded. Carson might not be the first in line at the box office, but the squishy heart he kept hidden under those muscles and flannel would probably go along with my suggestion. He’d confessed to me earlier this week that he felt bad about convincing himself he didn’t need to do anything as long as he helped Harmony House financially. Since then, we’d talked a fair bit about what it meant to be committed to the future of Harmony Grove rather than just involved. “So tell me when, and we’ll be there.”

That earned me a shy smile from the teen. He started asking more questions about the desserts we’d be offering at the party, about the upcoming catering orders, and what I did in a more general sense. If he continued showing this same level of interest and attention to detail, it wouldn’t be long before he challenged me to up my own game.

Working together, it didn’t take us long to finish cleaning up. We’d picked up my car after work last night, but it seemed both of us liked riding in together. When I’d gone out to start my car this morning, Carson had been sitting in his truck waiting for me. As sweet as the gesture had been this morning, now I was without my own way to go anywhere. I bundled up and offered a quick, silent thanks that the sidewalks were clear and the winds were calm.

Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined I’d have the opportunity to spend the entire day baking recipes I’d tweaked and perfected before walking up Main Street to visit my boyfriend while he and his family worked to decorate for the biggest Christmas party Harmony Grove had seen in years. There were still moments when I expected to wake up, realizing this had all been a dream.

The main hall of the youth center was glitter and light-covered chaos when I walked in. Billy and his family were working on decorating the tree while a few of the teens were gathered on the floor discussing how to best lay out the model train tracks. I would have expected them to look down on something so childlike, but they were animated and every last one had definite opinions.

As I was about to join the bustling crowd, my phone vibrated in my

pocket. I glanced at the screen, my heart sinking. It was Mom. Every bit of exuberance I'd felt moments before vanished the second I saw her name. Taking a deep breath, I stepped outside, bracing myself for the conversation.

"Hi, Mom," I greeted, my voice steady despite the churn of emotions inside. I should be relieved she was only calling rather than marching into Shiloh's to express her concerns for my soul. It seemed that was the only thing she ever wanted to talk about lately.

"Ezra," she began, her tone heavy with that familiar disapproval. "I heard you're...involved with a man."

I clenched my jaw, feeling the old familiar pain. "Yes, Mom, I am. Carson is important to me."

"Seriously, I don't know what's gotten into you," she continued. I braced myself against the wall, willing myself to be strong this time. She wasn't going to ruin the best thing to ever come my way. I was happy for a change. "That man isn't even a homosexual, did you know that? I'm not sure what you're trying to prove, but this isn't the way."

"You're right, he's not gay, Mom. He's bisexual. That means his heart is big enough to care for another person regardless of whether they're male or female." A lump formed in my throat, and I flinched, expecting her to lash out at me. Maybe it wasn't my place to share Carson's personal business, but I also wasn't about to let her diminish what was growing between us.

There was an agonizing pause, and when she spoke again, her words were laced with that same old hope that cut deeper each time. "Ezra, you know this is nothing more than a phase. You need to come back to your senses, to your faith."

The words stung, reinforcing every doubt and fear I'd been wrestling with. "Mom, it's not a phase. This is who I am."

"I know you think that, but someday, you'll see." I rolled my eyes. She'd been telling me for more than a decade that I just needed to meet the right girl—a God-fearing girl—and I'd give up on this foolishness. I tuned out her speech, having memorized it sometime around my sophomore year of college. The sound of Carson's name brought my attention back to her. "... even if you continue on this path of depravity, you can't seriously believe he'll be content lying with a man. I pray for Eleanor and Randall every day. I can't even imagine the pain of knowing what's in store for you. It has to be like a knife to poor Eleanor's heart every time another of her son's immorality is exposed. Carson will want to give her grandchildren someday."

“She already has grandkids, Mom.” I let out a heavy sigh, uncertain why I was even trying to argue with her. Eleanor couldn’t love Henry and James more than she already did, even if they were her flesh and blood. “And while I don’t expect you to welcome Carson into your home with open arms, I won’t sit here while you talk bad about him. He makes me happy, and perhaps you could learn a thing or two about unconditional love from Eleanor Langsford.”

“People don’t change at the drop of a hat just because they meet someone. The person you first meet is the version of them you should trust. Honestly, Ezra, I don’t understand how you can’t see his personality change as a glaring red flag.” Her sigh was heavy, filled with a sorrow that seemed to come from a place of love, however misguided. “We’re praying for you, Ezra. We love you, but we can’t support this path you’ve chosen. If you insist on flaunting your *relationship* around town, your father and I will have to discuss what that means moving forward. I was hoping you’d join us for Christmas services, but...”

No matter how upset I was about her words, the sobs on the other end of the call tore my heart in two. The only way I could please them was to deny who I was, and that was no longer a possibility.

The line clicked dead, leaving me staring at the phone, a mix of anger, sadness, and an aching sense of isolation swirling within me. It was a stark reminder of the divide between the world I was building with Carson and the one I had left behind.

With a heavy heart, I pocketed my phone and walked back inside, the cheerful chaos now seeming miles away from the cold loneliness I felt.

Carson. I needed to get to him, and he’d make everything better.

But what if your mom’s right? What if this is just a game to him?

No, Carson’s never been anything but sweet. Quit letting her get into your head.

I was just about to approach Carson after spotting him in the side dining room when something stopped me in my tracks. The tension between him and Anson was almost palpable.

“...I’m not trying to start a fight, but it’s like you had a brain transplant or something. Not even a month ago, you went out of your way to be a hermit. We practically had to threaten you with Mom to get you to come to Friday dinners. You looked like you wanted to take a torch to every Christmas display and a hammer to every speaker playing holiday music. Now, you’re

trying to get us to do even more than we originally talked about. Oh, and you're suddenly in a relationship with a man, even though you've always gone out of your way to make sure the women you've dated understood you don't do commitment. Admit it, you'd call me out if roles were reversed." I should walk away. This wasn't a conversation meant for me to overhear, yet I was rooted in my spot.

A hollow ache formed in my chest as Anson voiced my own concerns. He *had* changed. And as badly as I wanted to believe Carson was truly enjoying this holiday season, part of me worried it was all a front.

Or maybe that's your mother wheedling her way into your head.

No. You know that's not true. Don't let her ruin something good.

Carson was giving me exactly what I'd asked for: patience. But were the cuddles, kisses, and above-the-belt touching enough for him? For how long?

"Get out of here, moneybags. Go pick up that boyfriend of yours and go on a shopping spree..." Anson was talking about me. I was the boyfriend. It only took my brain a couple of seconds longer than it should have to realize that. I rushed toward the door, hoping no one would blow my cover and tell Carson I wasn't just getting there. Then again, that would mean someone would have had to notice me coming in, and the chances of that were slim, given the chaos.

I waited until the brothers were done talking, then rounded the corner. "Hey. I got done earlier than I thought, so I walked up here."

"Awesome!" Carson pulled me into a tight hug. "It sounds like I have to go shopping again. It's my brother's punishment for me opening my big mouth."

"Yeah, what did you say?" My mother used to say no good came to those who snooped, and her words echoed through my head now, along with Anson's comments about how out of character Carson's behavior was. As much as I hated to admit it, maybe she wasn't so far off-base after all. He'd never been ashamed of his womanizing ways in the past, and now he was with me. He'd never pressured me to take things further.

Logically, I knew that was probably him respecting my ask for patience, but Anson's words had me wondering if there was more to it.

But then there were the moments like this when he showed no shame in keeping me in his arms as he kissed my cheek. That wasn't something a person who was faking it did. And no matter how my brain tried convincing me this was some huge trick, I couldn't figure out the endgame.

“Hey, what’s going on in that head of yours?” He pushed the hair away from my face and my glasses up the bridge of my nose. I’d never thought either would be an intimate gesture, but they were. “You’re a million miles away right now. You didn’t overdo it at work today, did you? If it was too much, you could have told me. We could have simplified the menu.”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” I hedged, not wanting to tell my strong, confident man how insecure I felt. I managed a weak smile, retreating from Carson’s touch under the pretense of checking on something I’d forgotten in another room. I needed a moment—just one—to breathe without the weight of his concern or the pressing reality that maybe I was just convenient for now.

In the solitude of the back hallway, the festive noises of the main hall muffled by distance, I allowed myself to face the gnawing thoughts. *What if my mom is right? What if I’m just...just an experiment for Carson?* The idea that I might just be some sort of holiday experiment, a stray picked up in the spirit of Christmas, sent a cold shiver down my spine that had nothing to do with the winter chill.

Leaning against the cool wall, I closed my eyes. *How much of this is real? How much of what I’m feeling is just because I’ve never...?*

The thought was too painful, too raw to fully form. I was in uncharted waters, adrift without a compass, and the man I was starting to fall for might just be the one to pull the ground out from under me.

I heard footsteps, but I didn’t move. I couldn’t. The footsteps stopped, and I knew without looking that it was him.

“Ezra?” Carson’s voice was tinged with concern. “Talk to me.”

I shook my head, still not trusting my voice. *Don’t make me say it. Don’t make me admit that I’m scared of being nothing more than an experiment for you.*

He didn’t push, just stepped closer, his presence a solid promise. “Whatever it is, we can face it. Together. I’m not going anywhere.”

But that was just it, wasn’t it? I wanted to believe him so desperately, but my mom’s and Anson’s words echoed in my ears, a stark reminder of the past. People didn’t change overnight.

“I’m just tired, Carson,” I lied, finally looking at him. The lie sat heavily on my chest, but the truth—that I was terrified of him realizing he *did* care about a person’s gender after all—was a burden I wasn’t ready to share.

Standing so close to the back door, the cold of the evening seemed to seep

into my bones as I watched Carson's eyes narrow, the dim light from the street lamps sharpening the lines of concern on his face. His stare, intense and probing, felt like a physical force trying to coax the truth from my lips.

I watched his breath cloud in the frosty air, each exhalation a silent testament to the tension hanging between us.

"I can tell something's up," he pressed gently, his face half-hidden in the shadow of the building. "If you're not up for the crowds and the noise, we can call it a night. I'd rather just be with you. Make sure you're okay." His offer hung in the wintry air.

I felt the conflict within me churn. Part of me wanted him to keep probing, to force the turmoil out into the open, while yet another part craved the escape of silence. The earnestness in his voice, the way he stood there in the cold waiting for me to speak, it all made my heart ache with a mixture of gratitude and an inexplicable fear of the vulnerability that truth demanded.

"Can we go for a walk?" Carson slipped his hand into mine, giving it a gentle squeeze.

I nodded, grateful for the reprieve. As we walked side by side into the quiet of the evening, the twinkling lights of Main Street surrounding us, I made a silent vow. *I'll enjoy this, whatever this is, for as long as it lasts. But I won't let it consume me. I can't.*

We wandered in silence, my mind churning with the words I hadn't spoken. The festive glow of the shop windows did little to lift the weight from my chest.

The silence stretched between us, a vast and empty canvas against the backdrop of the quiet street. I was wrapped up in my own frenzy of thoughts when Carson's voice cut through the stillness, each word carefully measured, revealing a hint of his own anxiety.

"Ezra," he began, and I could feel the weight of his gaze on me, even as I kept my eyes fixed on the frosted patterns forming on the car window. "I'm not blind to the storm behind your eyes. It's obvious you're holding something back."

I could hear the soft crunch of hard-packed snow under his shifting feet, a restless movement from a man who usually stood as solid as a rock.

"You've got that look," he continued, his tone a mix of concern and a raw edge of frustration, "the same one when you're trying to figure out what's missing in a recipe and it's driving you crazy. Talk to me, please. Whatever it is, we can figure it out."

I felt the tension coil tighter within me. I wanted to let him in, to release the flood of doubts and fears, but something held me back—a fear that once spoken, my words couldn't be reeled back in.

Carson sighed, a sound that seemed to carry the weight of everything we hadn't said aloud. "Look, I don't want to push you, but it's killing me seeing you like this and being unable to help." His hand reached out, hesitating for a moment before settling gently on my arm, a silent offer of support amidst the uncertainty.

I stopped in my tracks, the silence around us stretching like the cold December night. I turned to face him, my heart warring with the need to be truthful and the fear of being vulnerable. "Carson, I think...I think I need to go home," I whispered, my voice barely carrying over the melodies of carolers in the distance.

His brow furrowed with concern. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, it's not you," I said, the words tumbling out in a hurried breath. "It's just this is all so new to me. I'm not sure I know how to navigate it without... without potentially hurting us both."

That felt easier than the potential misunderstanding of him thinking I didn't trust him enough to not hurt me. My issues were mine to own. I'd never been the best at reading people, and when I was in Carson's presence, the reality was muddied even more.

Carson stepped forward as if to close the gap I'd put between us, but I held up a hand. "Please, just...I need some time to think. To make sense of things."

He nodded, the lines of his face softening. "Okay. But know this, Ezra—whatever you're feeling, we'll work through it. Together, alright? I'll give you the time you're asking for, but when you're ready, I hope you'll trust me enough to talk things through."

The promise in Carson's voice was a thread of warmth in the chill of the evening. "Okay," I finally managed to say, voice strained with the turmoil inside. "Can you...? Would you mind taking me home? I think...I think I need to be alone right now."

Carson's eyes searched mine, concern etched deeply into his features. He nodded slowly, the motion heavy with unspoken questions. "Of course. Whatever you need."

The drive was silent, both a reprieve and a cacophony of unspoken words. When we arrived at my apartment, the usual comfort of arriving home was

replaced by a sense of desolation. I lingered in the warmth of the truck, the cold outside mirroring the sudden chill in my bones.

“Thank you for the ride,” I murmured, reaching for the door handle, wishing it was my resolve instead of the cold metal I was grasping.

“If you need anything—” Carson began, but I interrupted him with a small shake of my head.

“I know. Thank you, Carson,” I said, forcing a smile that didn’t reach my eyes. I stepped into the cold, a physical manifestation of the retreat I felt within.

Carson didn’t drive away immediately, and I hesitated outside the entrance to my apartment, my hand on the door, my heart in my throat. Through the glass, our eyes met one last time, and the pain of leaving him there—warm, caring, and confused—was almost too much to bear.

As I watched his truck pull away, the taillights a receding beacon in the growing night, I wondered if I’d just made the biggest mistake of my life. My apartment, once a sanctuary, felt more like a cell, holding me captive with my doubts and fears.

With Carson’s departure, the weight of my decision settled in, heavy and cold. I leaned against the closed door, watching the snow begin to fall in earnest, each flake a whisper of what might have been, a silent testament to the distance I’d placed between us.

And as the quiet of the night enveloped me, I resolved to protect my heart, even if it meant losing a chance at something real. But the question lingered, unbidden and haunting. Had I just let go of the one person who could have made it all worth it?

CARSON

(CARSON)

Navigating the crowded Christmas aisles without Ezra by my side felt like being adrift in a river of echoes, each memory a current pulling me into the cold depths of what could have been. The air was thick with the chorus of Christmas carols, their joyful notes clashing against the dull ache in my heart. I moved among artificial pines that released an imitation pine scent, a stark contrast to the genuine warmth of home that Ezra brought to life.

The last time I'd been here, it had been with him. I hadn't wanted to succumb to the hype, but he'd made resistance impossible. His exuberance over the holidays had been infectious, and by the time we'd gotten back to his place, I was almost as excited as he was to transform the apartment into a winter wonderland. Tonight, my gaze seemed drawn to everything that would fit right in with the rustic, cozy decor he gravitated toward.

All around me, families wove tapestries of holiday plans in excited tones, but their cheer felt distant, like watching life through frosted glass.

I found myself rooted before a display of Christmas ornaments, each a miniature masterpiece that could have sprung from Ezra's hands. The delicate sugar-dusted snowflakes and glossy fake icing that adorned the confections were cruel reminders of his craft. My fingertips grazed the cold surface of an ornament, imagining Ezra's reaction to seeing it on the tree.

Memories of him with the rest of my family, as if he belonged there, filled my mind. I swore I could smell the rich scent of baked gingerbread and hear the soft hum of holiday tunes from my parents' living room as he morphed from the slightly awkward, shy man I'd first met to a confident partner explaining how he'd baked gingerbread kits for my family to give me

back something I'd remembered fondly.

I could still see the light in his eyes, a reflection of the fairy lights we hung with shared smiles, each bauble and ribbon a promise of something to come. Sitting in his apartment after the cotton meant to resemble snow was carefully stretched and fluffed throughout a small Christmas village, soaking in one another's nearness as we admired our handiwork.

The memory enveloped me, a ghostly caress, as if Ezra's laughter was a whisper in the hum of shoppers, his presence a phantom warmth at my side. It was there, in the midst of the delicate dance of hanging ornaments, that a truth had settled within me. I had started to fall—not into a simple, shallow pool of affection, but into the kind of love that sinks deep into your bones, the kind that reshapes the very fabric of your being.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't figure out where in the fuck everything had gone to hell. He'd been happy this morning when I dropped him off at Shiloh's, but by the time he arrived at Harmony House, something had shifted. But what?

The hum of the store faded as I stood lost in thought, a single question echoing through my mind. Where had it all gone wrong? Just this morning, Ezra had been a beacon of warmth in my otherwise mundane routine. As I hovered between rows of festive decor, I felt a chill that had nothing to do with the December air.

"Carson?" Rodney's gruff voice broke through my reverie. "What are you doing moping around the Christmas section? Ain't like you to be caught dead here without a reason."

I turned to find Rodney, his rugged face more worn than usual, eyes scanning the shelves with a practiced detachment. He was holding a couple of action figures, likely for his grandkids. I remembered he'd mentioned they were coming over for the holidays.

"Just picking up some stuff," I muttered, my voice lacking conviction. Rodney raised an eyebrow, not buying it for a second.

He placed the toys in his cart and stepped closer, his gaze sharpening. "You look like someone ran over your dog, boy. Spit it out."

I shifted, uncomfortable under his scrutiny. "It's Ezra," I admitted, the name feeling like a balm and a sting. "We had a...misunderstanding, I guess."

Rodney snorted, a sound that was more understanding than dismissive. "Misunderstanding, huh? That the term we're using now for lover's spats?"

“It’s not like that,” I defended, though my heart wasn’t in it. “We didn’t fight. He just...retreated. Said he needed space.”

“Space,” Rodney echoed, a frown creasing his forehead. He leaned against the display, causing a precarious tower of boxed ornaments to wobble. “Let me tell you something, Carson. I’ve had more years than I’d like to admit thinking over space. It’s never about the space itself. It’s about the fear of what fills it. Your boy’s scared, and it’s on you to prove to him you’re not gonna bail the second things get tough.”

I looked at him, really looked at him, and saw a glimmer of pain in his eyes that spoke of personal experience. Rodney had always been the rock, the immovable force in our small town, but, in that moment, I saw the cracks.

“Rodney, I—” I began, but he cut me off with a raised hand.

“Don’t ‘Rodney’ me with that tone. If this Ezra kid means half of what I’ve seen he means to you, you fight for him. You don’t let fear—his or yours—dictate the play. You hear me?”

His words were a jolt, snapping me out of the fog that had settled over me. I realized then that Rodney was more than the tough exterior he projected. He was the embodiment of the lessons life had handed him, lessons he was now passing onto me.

“You’re right,” I conceded, my resolve firming. “That doesn’t mean I know fuck-all about how to fix this. Hell, I’m not even sure what I did to freak him out.”

Rodney’s gaze softened, the lines of experience etching a map of understanding across his face. “Listen, you’re both new to this dance, right? It’s like learning to walk. You’re gonna step on each other’s toes a bit, maybe even fall on your ass. But you get up, you learn, and you try not to make the same mistake twice.”

I let out a dry chuckle despite the turmoil inside. “Easier said than done.”

“Nothing worth having comes easy, son,” Rodney replied, his voice firm. “Take it from an old man who’s been through the wringer a few times. If you love him—and I see it clear as day that you do—you make the grandest gesture you can muster. You show him he’s worth the effort.”

I nodded, a plan quietly taking root. Ezra’s passion for Christmas, his face lighting up at the mention of traditions and decorations... It was that same magic that had ensnared me despite myself. “You think going the extra mile is what it takes?” I asked, more to myself than to Rodney.

Rodney gave a chuckle that rumbled deep from his chest, his nod slow

but deliberate. “It’s about effort, Carson. These baubles? They’re trivial things, but they represent the effort someone’s willing to make. That’s what sticks.”

My gaze drifted back to the display of cookie ornaments, each a delicate replica of Ezra’s creations. They weren’t just bits of painted glass to me. They were fragments of shared laughter, mutual dreams, and the warm glow of Ezra’s smile. “Thanks, Rodney,” I said, feeling a solid resolve replacing the hollowness. “I’ve got some things to sort out.”

Rodney’s hand came down on my shoulder, a rare gesture of camaraderie from the old man. “Don’t dawdle. These things have a way of slipping through your fingers if you’re not careful.”

I placed a large wicker basket in the shopping cart to keep the stuff for my apartment separate from what needed to go to Harmony House in the morning. I grabbed one of each of the cookie ornaments, every one a promise I intended to keep. I wasn’t just trying to fill the branches of a Christmas tree. I hoped to fill a space in our lives, a place where fear and doubt had no hold.

Of course, that meant I also had to buy a tree. I’d never decorated, never seen a need. The holidays were all celebrated at my parents’ place, and anyone who knew me well enough to be invited into my space understood I wasn’t the holly-jolly type. My ego was tempted to make a bold statement by grabbing the biggest, fullest tree of the bunch, but logic kicked in. Not only did I not have the space, but no matter how Anson liked to give me shit about having expendable cash, even I had limits.

Besides, I looked forward to the future, when the ornaments Ezra and I bought together would adorn the same tree, when my brothers gave me shit for having two because there was no doubt in my mind Ezra would insist we put them both up.

I grabbed what would eventually be the smaller of our trees, a funky little thing that didn’t even come pre-lit. It was the thought that counted, right?

After the tree, I went to housewares and got one of those plug-in air fresheners, remembering Ezra’s smile when he’d plugged it in and the room had been almost overcome with the scent of apples and cinnamon. Plus, no matter how clean I kept my home, there was always a lingering smell of grease and gasoline. That wasn’t the first impression I hoped to make when I invited him over.

As I lined up at the checkout, I sensed Rodney’s approving nod. These ornaments were more than festive trinkets. They were the beginnings of a

blueprint, pieces of a future I was determined to build with Ezra.

The drive home was more reflective than usual, the dashboard's glow the only light in the car, piercing the still night. As I drove through Pineville, each stoplight was a reminder, bathing the cab in a red or green glow—a mocking echo of festive joy that still felt just out of reach but getting closer.

My hands were firm on the wheel, seeking some control over the chaos of emotions within. Because he hadn't been willing to talk about whatever was bothering him, there was still a chance all this was for nothing. Ezra may have simply changed his mind, realized I was too damned much work, or that he wanted to focus on the explosion of business the bakery was already seeing. My heart clenched, wondering if I was an idiot to think some cute little ornaments would do a damned thing.

Stepping through the doorway into my apartment, the space felt hollow, almost alien, without Ezra's presence. He should be here with me. I'd wanted to shop together for the decorations for Harmony House and gifts for the kids. Tonight, I'd been prepared to ask him to spend the night with me for the first time. Instead, I was trying to figure out how to salvage the best fucking thing I'd ever had.

The stillness seemed to echo back my unease and the void where his voice should have resonated within the walls. I missed the warmth he brought into every room, a contrast to the cool, impersonal air that now greeted me.

The soft rustle of the ornament bag was the only sound as I set it down, the delicate decorations inside crafted of felt and fabric, materials that absorbed sound as much as the night outside absorbed light. They were quiet, much like this evening felt—subdued and introspective.

I assembled the tree I'd bought on a whim, its presence in my living space both a first and a commitment. The artificial branches felt strange and new under my hands as I worked to give them life, spreading them out to mimic the fullness of the real thing. It struck me then—the significance of this act—it was a foundation, a beginning, something I hoped Ezra and I could do together in the years to come.

As I wound the string of lights through the branches, their soft glow began to infuse the room with a tentative cheer. This act of decorating, which had always seemed unnecessary, now took on a new meaning—it was a beacon, a signal to Ezra that I was here, that I was waiting and willing to bridge the gap between us.

Hanging the few ornaments I had, each a symbol of Ezra's craft, I

allowed myself a moment of reflection. The tree was sparse this year, but it was a promise to Ezra and me. By next Christmas, I hoped we'd be choosing decorations together, building our own traditions. This tree was a testament to that hope, a belief in the strength of what we were creating.

The apartment, once stark and uninviting, began to soften around the edges, the glow from the tree casting long, dancing shadows against the walls. It was a solitary endeavor this year, but it was also a statement of intent. I was laying the groundwork for a future I suddenly wanted more than anything.

Settling onto the couch, I let the gentle light wash over me, a solitary vigil in the quiet night. The simple act of setting up a tree had turned into something more, something profound—a night of quiet determination and the silent forging of a path forward.

Tomorrow, I would invite Ezra here, to this place that was now ready for him. I would show him this tree, sparse as it was, and let him know that it—and I—were waiting for his touch, his presence. And together, we would fill in the empty spaces, not just on the branches, but in our lives. This was the start of something enduring, and I was ready to take that leap.

EZRA

AFTER FRANTIC WEEKS OF PLANNING, THE BIG DAY HAD FINALLY ARRIVED. IT was too bad I wasn't able to enjoy the frenzied excitement as much as I would have liked. While Emma chattered incessantly about how cool the Christmas party was going to be, my own mind rattled with the potential fallout after last night.

Eventually, Carson would get tired of my hot-and-cold routine. I wasn't a sports person, but even I could understand the concept of three strikes being all a person got. A hollow pit formed in my stomach as I realized I was one strike away from losing him, and my own insecurities weren't the partner I wanted in my life.

"Hey, you feeling okay today?" Lacey asked. She even went so far as to press the back of her hand against my forehead. "I thought you'd be bouncing off the walls."

"I have a lot on my mind," I admitted. She'd been a lifesaver as I'd navigated my first-ever relationship. I pressed my hands to my cheeks, hating how even my own thoughts could be enough to make me blush. A man my age shouldn't be a novice, but she'd never given me a hard time after I admitted how out of my league I felt. I wasn't ready to talk about last night, not even with her or Shiloh, and definitely not when the kids were around. The way they loved to gossip, I felt certain they'd get word up to Harmony House about what a dolt I was. "I feel like tonight is a make-or-break moment, so I'm going over all my lists to make sure we aren't forgetting anything."

Lacey placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. "It's going to be fine. You need to remember they came to us because they love what you and

Shiloh do. There's nothing to prove to anyone. My biggest fear is it's going to lead to even more business, and Shiloh's going to start talking about buying the lot behind us so he can expand again."

She meant to be reassuring, but I felt queasy as I considered Shiloh might be hoping for that level of success. The weight on my shoulders was almost enough to crumple me.

"Okay, it's time for you to take a break." Lacey grabbed me by the elbow, leading me to the break area. "Are you sure you're not sick? You just got white as a sack of bleached flour. Do you need to go home and rest so you're fresh for tonight?"

Even if I had been sick as a dog, that wasn't feasible. Shiloh and Teddy were coming in to help after they made a run for plates, napkins, and all the other paper goods we'd need because the numbers for the party kept going up. It was turning out to be the event of the season for Harmony Grove. I slumped back on the lumpy couch, allowing myself a few moments of peace before returning to the ovens and checklists. Luckily, everything from the original order was prepped and ready to bake, and Jude had suggested a few simple add-on appetizers while Emma worked on some cupcakes.

"I'm good, Lacey. I promise." She handed me a glass of water. If relationships were this distracting, maybe I wasn't cut out for one. I had a tendency to hyperfixate, and today, the object of my attention was the man I'd give just about anything to spend the night with. Recently, I'd found myself stroking the other side of the bed, wondering what it would feel like to rest my head on his broad chest as we drifted off to sleep. My libido stirred as visions of him rubbing my back as we came down from a stellar round of orgasms flashed through my mind.

Tonight. I needed to talk to him tonight. I couldn't let my fears continue getting the best of me. I couldn't let my insecurity chase off the man I was now certain I was completely in love with. It didn't matter that I'd never been in love before. What I felt for Carson was lightyears beyond anything I'd felt for anyone else, and that was how I knew this was love.

All I had to do was get through the next five hours of prep, followed by three hours at Harmony House, and then I'd beg him to give me another chance.

“THAT LOOKS LIKE EVERYTHING,” Shiloh announced as we traysed the last of the spinach and feta pinwheels. While we’d worked on a few of the dishes that couldn’t be made and stored earlier in the week, Jude and Emma had worked on cleaning up the kitchen. “Ezra, I want you to head out for a while. Jude, Emma, thank you for all your help this week. I’ll send you both a message about the hours for next week. Lacey, if you want to shut down early today, I’m not opposed.”

“I don’t need to take off,” I protested. Shiloh trusted me with this party, which meant I needed to be here. It was what a responsible employee would do.

“You do because it’s going to be a kick-ass night,” he countered. “You’re going to be the face of Shiloh’s at that party. Teddy and I will handle baking the first round while you’re gone, and I’ll send him up there with it at three. Since there’s not a kitchen at Harmony House, I figured the two of us will handle baking and delivery while you work your magic. And maybe you can sneak away for a kiss under the mistletoe with your sexy mechanic.”

“Yeah, doubt that’s going to happen,” I muttered under my breath.

Dang it. That was supposed to stay inside my head.

“Did things not work out between the two of you? Shit, Ez, I’m sorry. Do I need to send Teddy over to kick his ass for you?” Shiloh scowled, and I could imagine him storming up to his burly partner, insisting Teddy beat up the man who hurt me. Except, I was that man. Maybe Teddy should cuff me upside the head for being such an idiot. I swallowed hard, hating the idea that I might have caused Carson pain in my attempt to protect my own heart. Something must have shown in my body language because the next thing I knew, Shiloh pulled me into a fierce hug. “Oh, honey, you know you can talk to me. And I really hope you also know that you deserve to be happy. You deserve him. He might come across as a bit of a jerk, but that’s so no one sees his squishy center.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle weakly at the visual. He’d described Carson to a *T*. He was the man who hated Christmas, but very few people realized it was because he wanted more time to spend with the people he loved and hated the rush from one party to the next. And despite the way he glared at every holiday display in the windows, he’d driven me to Pineville because it was a shame I didn’t have my apartment decked out for the season.

That had been the night I started truly seeing the cracks in his veneer. It was a way for him to let me in. Now, I needed to do the same.

Knowing it was a losing battle to argue with Shiloh about staying to help, I grabbed my coat off the hook. “Are you sure you don’t want me to help pack the warmers?”

“Positive.” Shiloh gave me a playful shove. “Now, go, before I tell you to stay home tonight and relax. I can’t begin to tell you how much your hard work and dedication mean to me. I know it’s been more than you asked for when you came in looking for a job, but you’re a natural at this.”

I preened at the praise. Shiloh was one of the first people who hadn’t expected me to live up to expectations that were never suited for me. And now, I had a huge found family rooting for my success. Yeah, I needed to get out of there and clean up.

I gave Shiloh and Teddy quick hugs, which never would have happened a month ago. But without realizing it, Carson had opened my eyes to how much love and support there was in this town—if I was brave enough to drop my guard and let people in.

Despite the fact it had been snowing since morning, my windows were scraped clear. But the biggest surprise was the man leaning against the front of his truck in the parking spot next to mine. “Hey, can we talk?”

It took everything in me to not throw myself into Carson’s arms and beg his forgiveness. Instead, I was cool and collected as I approached him. The front of his lined flannel was damp with melted snow, but that didn’t stop me from pressing my body against his, burying my head against his shoulder. “I’m an idiot, Carson.”

“No, you’re not.” He gripped my chin, forcing me to look into his deep eyes. I’d heard so many times in my life how the eyes were the windows to the soul, but never until that moment did I fully understand. I saw every ounce of fear, pain, and...love as he stared back at me. “I still don’t get what in the hell happened last night, but we’re both going to have times we completely fuck up. Give me long enough, and I’ll probably piss you off far more often than you could imagine. But a wise man told me I can’t let you run just because you’re scared. He said I had to fight for what I wanted, and that’s you.”

“But why?” The words were muffled in the thick fabric of his jacket. Maintaining eye contact was uncomfortable, no matter how I wanted to show him that respect. “You could have anyone, and now that you’re out, your pool of eligible partners is even bigger.”

“Don’t care about any of them,” he responded sincerely. “Have you

considered I never settled down with any of the people I slept with because they weren't right for me? And I'm glad because settling is all it would have been, and I might not have realized you were the reason none of them were enough for me. And I love that you're just as freaked out and inexperienced as I am. I'd much rather figure things out with someone I love than someone I have to worry about letting down if I don't like something or if I don't have the foggiest fucking idea what I'm doing."

I didn't miss the way he slipped the L-word in there like it was nothing. A lump formed in my throat, giving me time to figure out what part of his little speech I wanted to discuss first. I swallowed hard and leaned back. "I love you too, Carson. It's insane to me that I can feel so strongly for someone when we haven't been intimate, but I do."

Carson leaned in so close that I could feel his breath on my lips, and then he pressed them faintly against mine. My head spun as I pulled back to look into his eyes, the deep brown pools of lust staring back at me, all earlier traces of anxiety gone.

"You're wrong. Intimacy is more than just sex," he whispered huskily, his hand now resting firmly just above the swell of my backside. "I may have had sex before, but I've never felt as connected to anyone as I do to you." His words sent a shiver down my spine as I let out a low moan. Carson continued divulging his deepest thoughts, promising an experience that was so much more than physical pleasure. He finished by stating boldly, "There's no rush."

"What if I want there to be?" My words hung in the air, and Carson's fingers brushed against my cheek as his lips found mine again. I melted into his embrace, and for the first time since I'd met him, I started to let go of my fears. This man loved me, and he wouldn't hurt me.

I wanted to make this moment last, and from the way Carson's grip tightened around me, he felt the same. It didn't matter that it was cold outside or that the snow was still falling—I knew I wouldn't be able to feel anything other than the feelings I had for this amazing man.

As our kiss ended, we stayed in each other's arms until Carson finally spoke up.

"Let's go home," he said softly, his breath tickling my ear. "A little birdie told me you have a big night ahead of you. After the party, we'll talk about what comes next."

I smiled and nodded, feeling more content than I had in a long time. We

got into his truck, and as he drove away, I could sense a change in our relationship. Whatever had been broken before now felt repaired, and even though I knew our relationship was far from perfect, I also knew we had what it took to make it work.

“Where are we going?” I asked when Carson turned in the opposite direction of my apartment complex.

“I have something to show you,” he responded cryptically. He kept one hand on the wheel and the other covering mine on the console as he navigated the snow-covered streets of town. “I meant it when I said I did a lot of thinking last night. I’m not sure I’ll ever find the words to tell you how happy you make me. I was comfortable being the Grinch of the family. No matter how they teased me, it didn’t matter because the holidays lost their meaning long ago.

“But then you came into my life, and I couldn’t let my storm clouds dull your shine,” he continued. “The lack of decorations at my place was fine. It suited me. But when I walked into your apartment and you had nothing, it felt so fucking wrong. You exude happiness, and I didn’t miss the way your entire face lit up when we passed the shops downtown. You love the holidays, but you held back from surrounding yourself with any reminders when you were home.”

I hated how well he knew me. It wasn’t often I had people over to my place, but the few who’d been there trusted me when I told them I had other things to spend my money on than a tree and ornaments that would spend most of the year in storage. But not Carson. He still didn’t know the full reason, but he seemed to understand that I loved what the season represented, even if my own memories were painted with a brush I wanted to run from.

He parked the truck and quickly rounded the front, opening the door for me. It was little gestures like this that reminded me just how lucky I was. I promised myself right then and there that I’d never take his kindness and chivalry for granted. “It dawned on me yesterday that you’ve never been here, and I’m sorry for that.”

“To be fair, most of the time we’ve been together, you were giving me a ride home because my car was broken.” It hadn’t struck me as odd that I’d never been to his place, but I still loved him trying to rectify what he saw as a slight.

We walked up the front steps with our hands linked. One of his neighbors came out the front door, waving to him in greeting. I chuckled at the look of

shock on her face when he reciprocated with a cheerful, “Happy holidays, Wendy.”

“You really did embrace the Grinch thing, didn’t you?”

“More than I care to admit.” He entered his code on the keypad next to the door. When it clicked, he stepped aside, ushering me in ahead of him. “But I’m hoping you’ll help me make the sort of memories I’ve always longed for.”

“For as long you let me,” I promised. There was a new weight as I followed him up the stairs. My nerves jangled, and I had to remind my libido he’d already warned me nothing would happen until later tonight. This afternoon was for fulfilling one of my slightly tamer fantasies.

CARSON

MY HEART RACED AS I OPENED THE DOOR FOR EZRA. THE TWINKLING LIGHTS illuminated my otherwise dark apartment, and I watched with anticipation as his face lit up in disbelief. The small artificial tree looked absurd in the corner of my living room, dwarfed by the presents neatly arranged beneath its branches. I felt a swell of pride knowing I had done it all for him. I held my breath as he took in the Christmas explosion, waiting and wondering if he'd understand the symbolism of the gesture.

His eyes widened, and he turned to me, almost speechless.

“Surprise,” I said with a grin.

“This is...” He spun around slowly, trying to take it all in. I reached for his wool coat, hanging it over the back of a chair.

“I know it’s a bit much, but I did this for us,” I explained. “You made me see what I was missing, and I wanted to bring a bit of that here because I’m hoping maybe we’ll split our time between our places from now on.”

“You didn’t have to do this,” Ezra said, still taking in the decorations and presents I had set up around the room.

I pressed a finger to his lips, silencing him as I slipped a hand around to the small of his back. I fucking loved the way his body melted against mine whenever I held him like this. I leaned forward until my nose brushed against his, and he shivered.

“You’re so fucking wrong. This isn’t nearly enough, but it was the only thing I could do last night.” I led him to the tree, my heart swelling as he carefully inspected each of the cookie ornaments adorning the branches. “I was standing in the middle of the Christmas section wallowing because I wished you were there, and then Rodney spotted me. He basically told me to

pull my head out of my ass, and it felt like a sign. This is the start for us, Ezra, and I'm hoping we'll keep adding to the tree for years to come because this is our season now."

There was no hiding the yawn as he buried his face against my chest again. "Sorry. Tired. I can't believe you did this for me."

I wasn't sure which of us loved it more when he plastered his body to mine as if seeking comfort from me. "Come on, sweetheart. It's time for a nap before your big night."

"It's your party," he protested as I led him to the bedroom. "I'm just serving the food."

"You're so wrong about that." I rushed across the room, grabbing him a pair of sweatpants. They'd be ridiculously big on him, but better than nothing. I tossed them onto the bed and kept my back turned while he got comfortable. As desperate as I was to lay eyes and hands on every inch of his bare skin, I didn't trust myself to keep my promise to wait until later.

I pulled back the quilt on my bed, holding his hand as he climbed in. I hadn't expected him to turn and wrap his arm around my waist before I could step away, but I didn't try to remove it either. Instead, I gently kissed his forehead and stroked his cheek before tucking him in properly with a whispered, "Sleep tight."

"Aren't you going to stay with me?"

I nearly caved at the pleading tone in his voice and the raw need in his eyes. Instead of giving in, I slipped his glasses off his face, placing them on the nightstand beside him. "Not right now, but I won't be far. I'm going to stay up to make sure we get out of here on time. Do you want me to run to your place for a change of clothes while you rest?"

"Please," he responded sleepily, already drifting off. He mumbled something unintelligible after that, his eyes fluttering slightly as sleep quickly claimed him. He looked peaceful and content nestled against the pillows, blanket drawn up snugly beneath his chin.

I brushed a few strands of hair off Ezra's forehead as he snuggled even deeper into the bedding. For a moment, I just stood there, marveling at how suddenly this man had become such a big part of my life. It was hard to believe things had changed so drastically in the not even two short months since we'd met—from strangers to partners—but whoever said change was bad had never felt this kind of love and satisfaction when they were close enough to touch someone they cared about like this.

I allowed myself one final look before quietly retreating from the room with a smile. After grabbing the keys to his apartment out of his coat, I quickly scribbled a note letting Ezra know I'd be back as quick as I could. Even though I'd told him I was going to grab a change of clothes for him, I didn't trust he'd remember if he woke up while I was gone. I hated how exhausted he was from the preparations for the Christmas party.

Once in the car, I decided it was time to make a phone call. My mom picked up on the first ring, which was almost unheard of for her. Most of the time, we had to call, leave a message, and wait for her to realize her phone was in her purse or on the kitchen counter. "Hey, sweetie. Is everything okay? Do you need me to come down to the center early to help with set up?"

Mom had been itching to get her hands on the party since Anson had first told her about it. While we would have welcomed her help, it would have likely turned into a full-blown holiday festival that closed down Main Street, featured carolers, and a huge Christmas market. I imagined what something like that could look like as I approached the center of town and realized I didn't hate the idea as much as I thought I would. Maybe it was something to talk to Billy and Michael about for next year. There was no way we'd have been able to pull off something like that in a month.

"No, Mom. We're all good," I reassured her. "I was down there this morning to check the decorations, and Billy's running up to Pineville right now to grab gift cards and the presents families suggested for the kids who are coming."

"Oh, that's wonderful! I wasn't aware you boys were going all out." I cringed at the hurt in her voice. Yeah, we'd screwed up by not asking her to do something. We'd have to get her input for next year, but I was looking forward to seeing her face when she and Dad walked through the doors later.

"We weren't," I explained. I turned into Ezra's parking lot and parked in his assigned spot since his car was at the bakery still. We'd have to figure out how to get it to one of our places later. "Kevin thought it would be a nice addition. We have the giving tree set up, but a lot of people still struggle even if they don't qualify for community assistance."

"That's awfully thoughtful of him." I turned off the engine as she rambled about what a good boy Kevin was and how she hoped he found someone because it was horrible that he was all alone in the house he'd bought when he moved to town.

I wasn't sure where the woman got her information, and I wasn't going to

ask. The gossip mill was truly alive in Harmony Grove. I also didn't tell her about my suspicions that Kevin didn't need to find anyone because I was pretty sure he and Anson were failing miserably at keeping whatever was between them a secret from everyone but our parents.

It only took a minute for the cold outside to seep into the cab of the truck. The snow was falling fast but melting as soon as it hit the still-warm windshield. The more time I spent chatting with her, the more likely it was Ezra would wake before I got back. "Listen, Mom, I have to get going. I still have a few errands to run before heading over to Harmony House. Call me when you get there, and I'll move the truck so you and Dad can park close."

"You don't have to do that," she scoffed, even though she was wrong. Her hips and knees had been bothering her, and there was no way in hell I was keeping a parking spot close to the building while they had to walk a block or more through the snow. She let out a wistful sigh. "You're a good boy, Carson. And I'm glad you've found someone who makes you happy. It's good to have my boy back."

I felt a flush creeping up my face. At least she wasn't embarrassing me in front of Ezra and my brothers. "Thanks, Mom. I really am happy. Now, I just have to make sure I don't fu—mess up. I'm not great at relationships."

"That's only because you never gave them a chance. You have the biggest heart of all my boys, but it's also the most tender." I slumped back in the seat and closed my eyes, worried she was about to take a trip down memory lane that I wouldn't be able to escape. I'd heard this speech from her so many times in the past, but this was the first time I hoped she was right. Ezra deserved the world, and I still struggled with being enough for him.

"I'd like to believe you've had some good role models in your life. Treat that young man like the treasure he is, and you're destined for good things in your life. He hasn't had an easy time of it, not that he'd ever let on. He's so much better than his raising could have made him."

Ezra never talked about his family. I knew he was from Harmony Grove and his family was crazy religious, but that was about it. And I'd never asked for more because I wouldn't want anyone prying into my life either. The fact my mom felt protective of him meant I'd never hear the end of it if I screwed things up with him.

I'd been sitting in the car long enough now that the snow was starting to stick to my windshield. I really did need to get off the phone or let her keep rambling while I rummaged through Ezra's closet for something for him to

wear. And maybe an extra set of clothes in case I was able to convince him to spend the night. I told my mom as much, and she let me go.

As I ended the call, my mind started racing with thoughts of Ezra—how I could make things special for him, how I could show him that I appreciated everything he did for me, how I could make him feel loved. When I thought about my parents' relationship, Dad had always gone out of his way to do little things for Mom. To most people, bringing home a single candy or her favorite tea wasn't much, but she always acted as if he'd given her the world.

Those thoughts led to another stop being added to my errand list, so I hurried to find a black button-up shirt and slacks in Ezra's closet. As I turned back toward the door, I spied strips of silk hanging neatly at the back of the closet. The bright colors and fun designs seemed out of character for my typically muted man, but when I realized these were bowties, not regular ties, I realized they were a thousand percent him.

Because I knew he'd mentioned wearing all black tonight, I opted for a black bowtie with penguins and gingerbread men on it to keep with his self-imposed dress code while giving a nod to the season.

The parking lot at Hearth & Foam was empty, and I nearly drove right past until I spotted Mara's bright-red hair in the front window. I put the truck in park and turned off the engine. After nearly wiping out on the icy sidewalk, I took it upon myself to grab some salt from the pail beside the front door.

"I was just coming out to do that," Mara called, all bundled up but shielding herself from the wind with the door.

"Well, it seems I beat you to it," I joked. Her eyes went wide and her mouth gaped like a fish. I'd officially rendered Mara speechless. That in itself might be classified as a Christmas miracle. "I stopped by to get a drink for Ezra and almost landed on my ass. Figured I'd help you out so someone doesn't get hurt."

"I do know how to shovel and salt, you know," she responded defensively.

"Yeah, and once in a while, I do know how to do something nice for another person," I shot back. There had to be a way to break down the last of her defensive walls and prove I wouldn't hurt her cousin. Quite the opposite. If he let me, I'd make sure no one ever hurt him again. "Sometimes, even a self-absorbed asshole like me can do something good."

"Touché." At least she had the grace to look embarrassed by jumping to

conclusions. “Sorry. And thank you. I really was coming out to take care of the walk.”

“And now you don’t have to.” I flashed her what I hoped was a friendly smile. The gesture felt foreign, but I was trying this whole new-leaf thing. “While I do, could you make whatever has caffeine that Ezra would like and something to warm me up once I’m done?”

“Is he okay?” Her eyes widened, and she pursed her lips in a worried frown.

“Yeah, he’s just napping,” I explained. “He’s been working overtime to get everything ready for the party tonight, and I didn’t realize how exhausted he was until Shiloh called me this morning. I need to get better at reading him.”

Mara approached, placing a gloved hand on my arm. “Carson, you didn’t see it because he didn’t want you to. He’s always been good at pretending he’s not about to collapse under pressure. That’s just how it was in their house growing up.”

This was the second time in less than an hour someone had alluded to him having a crappy childhood. I swallowed hard, my fists tightening into balls as I struggled to hold my temper over anyone having tried to break such a beautiful man.

“Easy there, Cujo.” Mara laughed, but the sound was shaky and weak. “It’s not anything like you’re imagining. My aunt and uncle—well, actually, it was just my uncle because he’d never stand for his wife having an opinion of her own—he held Ezra to impossibly high standards. Failure was never an option even though I’m convinced the man gets off on trying to break him.”

“Fucker,” I muttered.

“Exactly,” Mara agreed. “Don’t beat yourself up. And thank Shiloh for noticing and reaching out to you. I’ve been telling him he’s trying to take on too much by himself at the bakery, but he keeps insisting he loves what he’s doing.”

“And he’s fucking brilliant,” I added. “You should come by the party tonight and see what he’s been up to. I mean, you probably already know how talented he is, but he’s created this whole story with the food. I’ve never seen anyone do that before.”

And now, I was the one who was rambling. Now that I’d offered to clear the walks, I needed to get back to work. Otherwise, Ezra really would be up before I got home.

“That sounds cool. And yes, I do know what a genius he is in the kitchen. I’m just glad it seems he’s finally found his calling.” She stared into the distance, snowflakes sticking to the brim of her knit hat. “Keep taking care of him, and we’ll be just fine. I’m sorry if I was snarky. The holidays bring out the worst in me because of assholes like my uncle and my dad.”

Now that I was learning more about Ezra’s family, I felt like a whiny, privileged asshole. Unlike me, it sounded like they were the ones who had a reason to resent the holidays. Me? I just didn’t like the fact it felt like we were constantly on the go, never fully relaxing before it was time to head to the next house.

Yeah, boo-freaking-hoo on me.

While I finished shoveling and salting, Mara made our drinks. She met me at the door, refusing to take any money for them. “The smile on Ez’s face is payment enough. Plus, it wouldn’t be right to charge you when you cleared the walks so I didn’t freeze my ass off. Feel free to come back any time.”

“Oh, I see how it is,” I teased. “You just want me for my strong back.”

“Hey, if I can’t get a man of my own, I might as well make use of Ezra’s.”

She gave me a quick hug before retreating inside. She watched from the front door as I backed out of the parking lot and turned onto Birch Lake Road. I really hoped she’d come to the party. Ezra deserved to be surrounded by everyone who loved and supported him as he took this first step into what could be something awesome.

The snow was falling hard enough that I could barely see the road ahead of the truck by the time I got home. If it didn’t let up soon, there was a chance people wouldn’t show up tonight, and that wasn’t acceptable. No way in hell was the first-ever Harmony House Christmas party going to be a bust.

I stepped out of the truck, feeling the cold wind whip through my hair and bite at my skin. I quickly made my way to the apartment building, the snow crunching under my feet as I climbed the stairs.

When I reached the door, I took a deep breath and steeled myself for what was to come. The first step had been inviting Ezra to nap in my bed. Now, I needed to work the plan to keep him in my space as long as I could.

The first thing I noticed was how silent it was. The only sound was the slow, steady breathing and soft snores coming from the bedroom. I tiptoed across the living room and peeked around the corner, taking in the sight of Ezra sleeping peacefully. He was lying on his back, his chest slowly rising

and falling with each breath. His face was slack, his lips slightly parted, and I couldn't help but admire his tranquil beauty.

I stood there for a moment, just watching him, taking in the sight of him. I was struck by a sudden urge to crawl into bed with him, to wrap my arms around him and hold him close. But I knew I couldn't—not yet, at least. I needed to be patient for just a few more hours.

EZRA

I WAS ACUTELY AWARE OF CARSON WATCHING ME FROM THE DOOR AS THE scent of hazelnut and chocolate wafted through the air. I smiled into the pillow, touched that he'd stopped to get me a drink on his way back from my place.

Wait. That wasn't a dream, right? I buried my head deeper into the pillows as I replayed the last things I remembered from before I'd passed out in Carson's bed.

Him tucking me in like I was precious to him.

Carson refusing to get into the bed with me because he didn't trust himself to be so close and not fool around. My heart raced as I remembered how badly I'd wanted him to stay with me. And now, waking up to find him standing there, watching me, made me feel a mixture of embarrassment and excitement.

"Hey," I said, my voice groggy from sleep.

Carson smiled at me, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Hey, sleepyhead. How are you feeling?"

"Good," I replied, sitting up slowly. Carson crossed the room, two paper cups from the coffee shop in his hands. "What time is it?"

"Almost three," he said, moving to sit on the edge of the bed. "You've been out for a couple of hours."

"Oh," I said, scrubbing my hands over my face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep for so long."

"It's alright," he said, his hand landing softly on my back. "You needed the rest."

I couldn't help but lean into his touch, my skin tingling at the feel of his

hand on me. I wanted to beg him to crawl into the bed with me so we could at least cuddle for a few minutes before I had to get up and ready. We'd been dancing around the chemistry between us long enough we'd likely combust the moment we were on the mattress together.

Carson cleared his throat, pulling his hand away. "So, are you hungry? Tell me what you need, and I'll get it while you're in the shower."

"Actually, I could go for some food," I admitted, my stomach growling. I'd been so focused on food prep I'd ignored the need for food consumption. "But don't feel like you need to run for anything. I'd even take some cheese and crackers to tide me over until tonight. I'm almost positive there will be leftovers once the party ends."

I hummed softly when Carson wrapped his arms around my waist. "Ez, I don't want you to feel like the hired help. If you're hungry, eat something. I hate that you have to work at all."

"I don't." I looked up at him for a moment, and he met my gaze with a gentle smile. His eyes told me he already had an idea of what I meant. "If it weren't for this party tonight, I might have never gotten to know you. And that would be such a shame."

I ran my hand up Carson's broad chest. Intimacy was still something that confused me to no end, but I was starting to get more comfortable touching Carson, trusting that he'd tell me if I was doing something wrong.

When I first realized I was gay, I'd believed my parents' warnings that I'd never meet anyone who'd love me as I am. And by the time I broke free from them, it felt like everyone else was so much more experienced and I'd never catch up. But with Carson, I was free to be myself. Sure, he'd had sex before, but he was just as unfamiliar with a man's body as I was.

Carson captured my lips with his in a gentle kiss, taking his time and allowing me to explore every inch of his mouth. He murmured softly against my lips before he pulled away, the heat of his breath leaving me wanting more. His nose brushed mine as he whispered, "Tonight, sweetheart."

As he walked away, I heard him mutter something about how the next few hours were going to drag on forever. I had to agree with him.

Part of me wanted to stay hidden in this room forever, locked away from the world with Carson by my side. But at the same time, I knew that would be too selfish—I had to be strong enough for both of us until it was our time together. There was work to be done and kids counting on us to give them a good Christmas.

I hurried to the bathroom across the hall, shutting and locking the door behind me before I could change my mind and drop to my knees in front of him, begging Carson to take me right then and there. I hadn't held on to my virginity for any good reason other than lack of opportunity until now. I didn't want my first time to be cheap and meaningless, but now, waiting torture after spending a few hours inhaling the scent of him lingering in his sheets.

I washed the soap off my body in record time, then toweled off and grabbed my clothes from where Carson had hung them over the doorknob outside the bathroom. I tried to ignore the full-body shiver that ran through me when I thought of standing there naked with Carson only a few feet away on the other side—a feeling that was quickly followed by intense arousal when I recalled his earlier promises.

The clock ticked on faster than I wanted it to, and slowly but surely, we were ready to go. The truck slipped and slid on the snow-covered roads, and I worried about what the conditions meant for the party tonight. Yes, I'd be upset if no one showed up to eat the food we'd prepared, but Carson and his brothers had put so much work into every detail of the party, and I wanted their efforts recognized.

Carson parked behind the building, right by the door and across two parking stalls. "I have a sign inside that we'll put up, so hopefully no one parks here," he explained. "Once Teddy brings the first load of food over, I'll move, but I don't want you guys having to walk in this shit."

Before I could thank him, Carson was out of the truck and coming around to my side. The chilly air contrasted sharply with the warmth emanating from Carson's embrace when he stepped in close as if he wanted everyone to know without a doubt that I was with him.

Teddy pulled up as we reached the top step, so we both trekked back down the steps. Anson appeared out of nowhere and started scraping the snow from the steps, even though it looked like it had been done within the past half-hour.

Carson's voice cut through the silence, his eyes boring into mine with intensity. "Are you ready for this?" he asked, and I could barely find the strength to nod. My mouth suddenly felt dry as terror ran through me like an electric current.

I was here to prove myself, prove that I could handle this pressure for both Shiloh's bakery and the Langsford brothers. One wrong move tonight,

and all my efforts would be wasted. If I pulled it off, though, if tonight was the success everyone predicted, then big opportunities would be waiting for me.

“Hey, everything’s going to be great, you’ll see,” Carson reassured me. He took me into his arms, holding the back of my head as I soaked in his warmth and strength. “You’ve done everything we asked of you and more. Now it’s time for you to watch all that hard work pay off.”

I hoped he was right.

We each grabbed one of the two large Styrofoam boxes before heading inside the building. Fresh evergreen wreaths hung over every doorway along with twinkling white lights and four Christmas trees filled corners of the room with warmth and cheer. The aroma of freshly prepared food flooded my senses as we placed each box where we’d set up the grazing tables.

The guests began arriving soon after Carson and I finished setting up, their laughter filling the air as they spread out to explore what was set before them. His family came bearing gifts for everyone. Billy passed out eggnog—which I realized a moment too late was spiked—in small cups decorated with holiday colors and designs.

Carson’s mom hugged me when she arrived at my makeshift workstation in the back corner of the room. She thanked me profusely for my hard work and praised my efforts in making sure there were so many delicious options available to enjoy.

“I know you might have plans already, but I hope you know you’re more than welcome at our house for Christmas,” she said as the conversation ended. If I hadn’t already been leaning against the tall stool Carson had brought over earlier, I might have lost my balance.

I looked around for my boyfriend, not wanting to accept his mom’s invitation without making sure he didn’t see it as overstepping. As much as he loved her, he was the first to accuse her of meddling when she thought her sons needed a push. I cleared my throat. “That’s sweet of you. Can I get back to you about plans? I need to talk to my mom and see what they’re doing.”

I didn’t want to explain that my family thought it was far more important to be seen at church on both Christmas Eve and the following morning or that we didn’t celebrate the way most people did. Seeming satisfied with my noncommittal response, Eleanor flitted off to make sure everyone in attendance enjoyed themselves.

The evening felt like an eternity as I waited for the party to end. Once it

finally did and everyone but the family left, I remembered why waiting was worth it: we were finally free from distractions and prying eyes, free to just be ourselves and express our love however we desired.

Instead of everyone rushing to clean up so they could go home, they congregated near the fireplace in the main hall, collapsing onto the furniture that had been rearranged to create a cozy conversational area. Carson grabbed my wrist when I started packing my area. After all, I was here to work. “Come on, sweetheart. It’s time to take a break.”

Carson placed a cup of eggnog in my hands, and I took a hesitant sip. I wasn’t exactly a fan of the drink, so I was relieved that no one seemed to expect me to finish it. The warmth from the fire was comforting, and I leaned into Carson as he draped his arm around my shoulders.

It wasn’t long before the conversation shifted from pleasantries to the usual ribbing between brothers, and eventually, Carson’s mom joined in as well. To my surprise, even Anson and Kevin were sitting close and joking around.

As we talked into the night, each of us sharing our plans for the days around Christmas, the brothers recalled funny memories they shared as kids growing up in the Langsford house. We all laughed and exchanged stories until, eventually, it was time to get back to work. While Carson walked his parents out to their car, I returned to the catering station.

“Hey, man, you were a rock star tonight,” Kevin said when he came over with a big garbage can. “I swear Anson spent half the night handing out business cards so people know how to get in touch with you. Might want to warn Shiloh things are about to get even busier down there.”

“Wow, thanks.” I hadn’t even thought to bring business cards because it was such a small town that everyone knew how to get in touch with Shiloh. Carson came back in and grabbed both of the now-empty coolers as I wiped down the tables.

“Are you ready to go home? We’re going to come back tomorrow to deal with tearing everything down.” Carson popped a leftover sausage puff into his mouth. It was a good thing Carson had made me a plate and insisted I eat. Otherwise, I’d be slapping together a peanut butter sandwich when we got home. To Carson’s. Even though I’d only been there once, it felt right that that was where I imagined when he said we were going home.

Together.

To have sex.

No. Carson had said we weren't just having sex. He wanted to make love to me. And I couldn't wait. My hole clenched with both excitement and anxiety. I'd played with myself there, just to see what the big deal was, but tonight would be different. Carson was a big guy, and from what I'd felt through his pants, he was proportionate everywhere. Taking him inside my body was going to be uncomfortable, but I wanted it. Needed it.

We drove in silence, the only sound being the faint hum of Christmas music playing through the radio. I glanced at Carson, his face illuminated by moonlight, and my heart fluttered. I'd been foolish to ask him to be patient with me when it only resulted in both of us being reluctant to take things to the next level. But tonight, patience wasn't an option.

Finally, we pulled into his parking lot and Carson shifted into park. He turned off the engine and reached out to brush a strand of hair out of my face. His touch ignited an electric current through my body, and I shivered with anticipation.

"Come on," he said softly, his eyes full of tenderness that made me melt inside. "Let's go inside."

I followed him up the steps to his front door, through the dark living room, and then down the hallway into his bedroom. Carson turned to me and cupped my cheeks with both hands before leaning in for a gentle kiss. His lips were soft yet firm against mine as we explored each other slowly. Our tongues touched delicately as we tasted each other, love filling our senses with joy and desire that seemed almost too powerful to contain.

He pulled away and looked deeply into my eyes before taking off my coat and laying it over a chair nearby. Then he unbuttoned his shirt, revealing thick chest hair I couldn't wait to comb my fingers through before pulling me closer for more passionate kisses.

My heart raced as our lips moved together in perfect harmony while our hands roamed one another's bodies, eagerly seeking more pleasure than I had ever experienced before. With every stroke of his fingertips across my skin, I felt myself growing closer to him until, finally, all barriers between us were removed completely.

My breath hitched as I felt his fingers fumbling with my bowtie. My body trembled when he started popping the buttons of my shirt one by one. I took deep breaths and bit back tears, desperately telling myself this man cherished me. No, he had never seen me naked, but that wouldn't stop him from loving me.

Carson slowly undressed me, taking the time to admire every inch of exposed flesh as if it were a precious gift. His strong hands caressed me, sparks spreading through my veins until my entire body was trembling with desire and need. He laid me down on the bed, leaving me to wonder what he was doing as he crossed the room to his dresser.

My butt clenched when he turned around, a new bottle of lube in one hand and a strip of condoms in the other. “You are so fucking beautiful, Ezra. Do you still want to do this? We can wait.”

“Don’t you dare,” I warned him. Just so he’d know how ready I was for him to make love to me, I curled my fingers around his wrist, pulling his hand to my erection. “I need you, Carson. Please don’t make me wait any longer.”

We explored each other’s bodies with a gentle reverence that gradually grew more urgent as our need for one another grew stronger than I thought was possible. His mouth left trails of fire everywhere he touched, sending waves of pleasure cascading through me until I thought I’d be swept away by its intensity.

CARSON

I COULDN'T GET ENOUGH OF EZRA. I WANTED TO REMEMBER EVERY WHIMPER and moan as I licked and kissed my way down his chest. The way his body arched as I cupped his balls in my hand. I batted his hand away when he reached for my cock. "Not yet, baby. Let me make you feel good."

That sounded a hell of a lot better than admitting to him I was already struggling to keep from busting a nut just from having him laid out beneath me.

Ezra's usually guarded green eyes darkened with desire. His full lips parted slightly as I leaned in to kiss them, and a low moan escaped as my tongue caressed his. He tasted sweet, like sugar and vanilla, and I wanted to savor every moment with him.

My hands roamed the length of his body as I kissed him—the smooth expanse of his chest, the soft lines of his hips, and the surprisingly hard muscles of his thighs. I was determined to make him feel as good as possible, and I couldn't get enough of him.

Ezra's eyes fluttered shut as I explored the length of his body, my lips and hands teasing him with pleasure. He was so beautiful, so perfect, and it was all I could do to keep myself from straddling him and burying myself deep inside. But I was determined to make this last, to make him feel good for as long as possible. I wanted to make him happy, and I wanted him to remember this moment, this time between us, forever.

My hands shook as I spread his thighs wide, settling between them. There were some things about sex that were universal, and I knew better than to give into my caveman urges and bury my dick inside his tight hole. I needed to stretch him, get his body good and loose for me.

Even though my heart was pounding, I slowly pressed one finger into Ezra, feeling the warmth of his tight body. If he was this tight around the tip of my finger, I couldn't imagine I'd last more than one pump when it was my dick breaching him. I stilled when he hissed, looking up his body and hating the pinched expression on his face.

"Don't stop," he pleaded. "I'm good. Just...how is that so different from when I play with myself?" As soon as he realized what he'd said, he covered his face with a pillow, groaning loudly.

I smoothed my free hand over the sparse hair on his inner thigh. I loved that he was already so lost in his arousal that his filter had checked out. I lowered my body enough to place a soft kiss on the tip of his cock. I licked the precum from my lips, sending my mind into a state of frenzy. I wanted to suck him deep, taste him, feel his slender cock tapping at the back of my throat as I fucked his little hole with my fingers. But that would likely have to wait for next time.

"One of these nights, I'm going to make you tell me about how you play with yourself," I warned him. My finger worked deeper into his hole. "Maybe I'll make you show me instead. I have a feeling there's a dirty boy hiding under that carefully polished shell. And I can't wait to make you lose control."

His breathing got faster and louder as I moved cautiously, in and out. With every motion, I felt a tugging inside me—both fear and excitement. His hands clutched tightly at the sheets beside us as if torn between wanting it to stop and wanting it to never end.

I could tell he was close, but it was time for something new, something daring and exciting. Taking a deep breath as I settled onto my stomach, I slid my tongue along the length of his tight hole until he moaned loudly. His whole body tensed under me, and even in this moment of pleasure, there was a sliver of fear radiating from him. The fact he trusted me enough to let go completely and accept whatever pleasure came his way was intoxicating.

His body quivered as I ran my tongue around the rim of his tight hole before slipping inside with two fingers. He cried out in delight as he pushed back against my tongue greedily, wanting more sensation than what my fingers could provide. My heart raced with satisfaction at being able to give Ezra so much pleasure. His surrender was an amazing thing to witness. Teasingly, I flicked my tongue against the sensitive nerve endings inside him before pushing deeper into his tight hole with another lubricated finger to

stretch him farther. I couldn't hold out much longer.

After slipping on a condom and smearing Ezra's tight hole with more lube, I started slowly, steadily massaging his entrance with two slick fingers. His body trembled beneath me, his moans becoming more frantic as he adjusted to the sensation. Satisfied that he was ready for me, I leaned over and kissed him deeply as I entered him inch by inch. My heart raced at the feeling of him surrounding me completely, squeezing around my cock tightly.

Every nerve ending in my body tingled as I reached for Ezra's lips, the electric current between us igniting a passionate embrace. His body moved in perfect harmony with mine, melding to it like two pieces of a puzzle. We thrust together with a frenzied rhythm that felt almost alive, and as our sweat mingled, I moaned softly against his mouth.

"You feel amazing," I uttered breathlessly, feeling the heat enveloping my cock, threatening my resolve to make this good for him. Ezra growled deep in his throat as I drove harder and faster into his ass, pushing both of us closer to an exhilarating climax. I'd known the sex between us would be good, but never in my wildest dreams had I imagined claiming someone could feel this fucking good. "Fuck, you're so tight."

Ezra responded with a loud moan as his hole clenched around me, my fingers gripping his hips tightly to keep him from moving away. Faster and faster, I thrust into him, our breath coming in short gasps and our bodies slick with sweat. My muscles burned, but the pleasure I felt was so intense it overruled any other sensation.

The heat between us rose until I felt Ezra's body clench down on me like a vice grip before he let out a roar of pleasure as his orgasm hit him like an electric shockwave. In response, I shuddered against him as my own intense climax took over my senses, leaving me temporarily paralyzed and dazed. I wished like hell there wasn't a barrier between us. I wanted to see my cum leaking from his shattered body when I pulled out. My fingers itched with the desire to push it back into him, fingering him languidly until he was hard and begging for round two.

As we both came down from our shared high, I leaned in and tenderly kissed Ezra again before rolling off him with a contented sigh.

We clung to each other for what felt like an eternity, letting the warmth of our passion radiate through us. Ezra's breath tickled my chest as he let out a satisfied sigh.

“That was incredible,” he murmured against my skin.

My smile widened, and I kissed his forehead before replying softly, “It certainly was. But I should warn you, now that I know what your body feels like around mine, I’m going to want it every fucking day.”

“I can’t promise every day, but same.” He curled around my body, his eyes drifting shut. We needed to clean up, but I couldn’t bring myself to disrupt his sated peace.

Just a few minutes wouldn’t hurt anything...

A few minutes turned into the best nine hours of sleep I remembered having, topped only by waking to the feel of Ezra’s morning wood pressing into my thigh and his body draped over mine. Even the drool on my chest couldn’t dampen how good it felt to wake up with him in my arms. The sun streamed through the curtains, casting a gentle glow over us. I closed my eyes and savored the moment. I imagined a future filled with lazy weekend mornings and relaxing evenings sharing dinner when we got home from work before tumbling into bed to burn up the sheets.

My cock stirred, remembering every second of last night and ready for a replay. But I needed to go easy on him. His ass was probably tender this morning, not that he’d admit it. And dammit, I really wanted to see him spread wide on my bed, fingering himself as he told me what he thought about when he got himself off.

I shifted slightly, making Ezra mumble in his sleep before snuggling even closer. His body was perfectly molded against mine, as though nothing could separate us. My arm crept around his shoulders, my strength just enough to secure him close. He let out an adorable snore before settling back against me. His breathing was slow and steady, contrasting with the slight twitching of his lips now and then as if he was fighting off a smile even in sleep.

My gaze trailed along that perfect face of his, following those full lips that had tasted just like the sweets that brought us together down to that sharp jawline—such an exquisite example of male beauty right there beside me—down to those broad shoulders and wide chest barely concealed by wrinkled sheets, and all I could think about was how much fun we’d had last night making each other beg for more. The memory alone sent shivers of delight coursing through every nerve ending in my body and made it difficult for me to suppress a gasp.

My determination to let him rest was saved by the sound of a phone buzzing somewhere on the floor. I eased myself out from under him, smiling

when he reached for my pillow, burrowing his face into it as he rolled onto his stomach. The phone had stopped ringing by the time I found my pants from last night. I waited to call my brother back until coffee was brewing.

“Hey, what’s up?” I scrubbed a hand over my face, taking stock of the aches and twinges in my body that only came from a good, hard fuck. And that’s what last night’s love-making was. It hadn’t taken me long to realize Ezra didn’t need or want slow and sweet. I couldn’t wait to explore his newly revealed needy side.

“...and then we’re heading to the Tap.”

Shit. I’d completely missed what Anson had said. I let out a groan, praying he didn’t give me shit. I could play it off as both Ezra and me being exhausted from the party, right? I gave my head a quick shake to clear my mind. “Could you start at the beginning again? I just got up and haven’t even poured my first cup.”

“Fuck, man, you’re usually up at the crack of dawn. You’re not getting sick, are you?”

“No, just needed to catch up on sleep,” I admitted. That, and I didn’t go to bed until later than usual because of the party and the epic sex that followed. “So lunch at the Tap, but what comes before that?”

“Oh, I was going to say we’re headed over to the center now to finish breaking everything down,” he repeated. It seemed all of us had been infected by the holiday spirit because Anson wasn’t even being a dick about me not listening the first time. “But why don’t you and Ezra relax for the morning, and we’ll meet you for lunch.”

Typically, I’d protest. When I felt slender arms wrap around me from behind and a sleep-warmed cheek against my back, I made a mental note to buy Anson a kick-ass present this year. I curled my fingers around Ezra’s, giving them a quick squeeze. “Thanks, man. I owe you one. What time do you want us there?”

“I’ll text you when we’re headed out. If you’re...otherwise occupied, don’t feel too bad.” Anson laughed. The boy thought he was a fucking comedian. “Did Ezra decide if he’s coming to Christmas? I heard Mom invited him last night.”

My body stiffened. While I wasn’t opposed to the idea—wanted him there by me on Christmas morning, in fact—she shouldn’t have been the one to make the offer. Now, my invitation would feel like something I was doing because my mom had suggested it. “I’m hoping he’ll be there, but we haven’t

talked about it yet. I'll keep you posted. Are you bringing anyone this year?"

"Nope." The way he popped the *P* was like a door slamming. Apparently, whatever was going on with Anson and Kevin would remain the town's worst-kept secret.

Anson and I quickly finished our call. I set the phone down and turned in Ezra's embrace. I kissed the top of his head. "Good morning, beautiful. I could get used to this."

"Me too." When he tipped his head back to look at me, I was stunned by how damned good he looked with that shy hint of a smile and glasses that were slightly fogged from him pressing his face against my chest. He did that a lot, and I liked knowing I was his security blanket. He looked so happy, and I vowed to put that look on his face every damned day. "So where are we going?"

"Huh?" I slipped a hand down his back until it rested on the swell of his tight little ass. Oh yeah, Anson. "Well, today we're apparently going to the Tap for lunch with my brothers and whoever else tags along. But Anson mentioned that my mom invited you to Christmas, and he was wondering if you're going to be there."

Ezra glanced away, and my heart sank. An eternity seemed to pass before he looked back at me. Gone was the lust and adoration in his expression, replaced by uncertainty. "Do you want me there?"

"Baby, if I had my way, you'd be permanently attached to my hip at this point," I told him. It surprised me to realize the truth of those words. "But since that's not possible, yeah, I want to see you in goofy Christmas pajamas right along with the rest of us, eating my mom's coffee cake and drinking cocoa."

"See, totally the Hallmark family," Ezra teased.

I laughed, and Ezra's face softened. He leaned in for a gentle kiss that told me everything I needed to know without any words. I wanted him with me for the holiday more than anything else.

"So you'll come?" I asked when he finally pulled away from the kiss.

"Yes," he answered with a relieved smile. "I would love to be there with you and your family. I love you, and if it's not too weird to say, I think I love your family too."

The happiness that erupted inside me was unlike anything I'd ever felt. It was like a spark catching fire and burning through my veins until all my being seemed to be made of nothing but joy. Unable to contain it any longer,

I pulled Ezra close and kissed him again, pouring all my feelings into it so he could understand how much he meant to me without having to say a single word.

“I love you too. Forever.”

EPILOGUE

CARSON

CHRISTMAS MORNING BROKE WITH A KIND OF ANTICIPATION EVEN MY OLD Grinchy self couldn't deny. The world outside was a still, frosty canvas, but inside, the house was alive with the heat of a roaring fire I knew Dad already had stoked in the living room, the scent of cinnamon wafting from the kitchen, and the sound of my family's laughter. I rolled onto my side, not bitter about spending the night before in my childhood bedroom. It was a ridiculous tradition since we all lived in town, but it was something that made Mom happy, so we'd always humored her.

I woke up early, despite the late night, my body buzzing with an unfamiliar eagerness. Slipping out of bed, careful not to wake Ezra nestled in the sheets like a gift I was still unwrapping, I took a moment to watch him sleep. The rise and fall of his chest, the way his lashes cast tiny shadows on his cheeks—it was a sight I'd never tire of. It had only been a couple of weeks since that first night we spent together, but since then, we'd been in the same apartment every night. Sometimes his, most of the time mine, but the important thing was that we shared our space.

“Good morning,” Ezra said as his eyes fluttered open. I turned to see his hand outstretched, beckoning me back into the bed. As wonderful as that sounded, we needed to get downstairs before Mom sent Henry to wake us. I wasn't sure who was more excited about opening stockings this year. Henry because he couldn't stop talking about Santa or Mom because she finally had grandkids to spoil.

Still, I couldn't resist the urge to claim a languid Christmas kiss. I leaned in and kissed Ezra, allowing the warmth of his lips to draw out the last of my morning drowsiness. The desire to crawl back into bed for just a few minutes

was strong.

“Merry Christmas,” I whispered. He returned my smile with one of his own, eyes still sleepy but twinkling with joy.

The house was already humming by the time Ezra and I padded down the stairs, hand in hand, in our matching, ridiculously festive pajamas—a gift to everyone from Billy and Michael, who thought it would be a fun new tradition. Surprisingly, I’d embraced the idea wholeheartedly. The tree, a towering thing of beauty, was surrounded by gifts, but it was the family gathered around that was the true present.

Billy and Michael were the picture of domestic bliss, their boys itching to tear through the wrapping paper with the fervor only children possessed. Even James, who could have played it off as him being too cool for Christmas morning excitement, looked ready to burst. Michael caught Billy’s gaze over the top of Henry’s head, and the silent exchange was a testament to their years of love, a subtle dance they performed flawlessly. I took a moment to wonder why no one had realized sooner that this was where they’d wind up.

Danny and Blake were a quiet force, the give and take of their relationship evident in the soft, unspoken communication between them. Blake adjusted the blanket over Danny’s shoulders, a protective gesture that was received with a contented smile.

Mom and Dad were, as always, the heart of it all. Their love was the kind that had weathered storms, a beacon for all of us boys. They shared smiles like they shared secrets, and I found myself grateful for the blueprint they provided.

“Coffee, Carson?” Mom offered, pulling me back into the room as I stood lost in thought.

“Yeah, thanks,” I replied, accepting the steaming mug. “Smells amazing in here.”

“The coffee cake will be ready in about ten minutes.” She winked, and I knew it would taste like all the childhood Christmases I’d locked away.

Turning to Ezra, I saw the same wonder in his eyes that I felt in my chest. “Enjoying your first Langsford Christmas?” I asked him, squeezing his hand.

He laughed, a sound that was quickly becoming my favorite tune. “It’s everything I ever wanted and more, Carson. I love you,” he said, leaning into me so naturally that it felt like he’d always been there.

“I love you too, Ezra. Forever,” I assured him, feeling the weight of those

words in the best way.

It was time for the family picture, a tradition as steadfast as the holiday itself. We all shuffled together, a mosaic of pajamas and bed hair. I wrapped my arm around Ezra, pulling him into my side. The camera flashed, and I knew it was a moment we'd look back on for years to come.

Before we tucked in for coffee cake and breakfast casserole, I stood, raising my mug. "To family, love, and the magic of Christmas," I toasted, looking around at the faces I loved most. "Especially the magic that's just beginning for us," I added, my gaze lingering on Ezra.

"Hear, hear!" the chorus rang out, and as we sat to eat, I felt a sense of completeness.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur of food, jokes, presents, and the easy comfort of being surrounded by family. At some point, Ezra's hand found mine, a silent acknowledgment of our shared joy.

As the festivities wound down and the house grew quiet, I found myself reflecting on the journey that had brought us here. The skepticism and the walls I'd built around my heart seemed like a distant memory. I was different, we were different, and it was all because of the man who now stood beside me, looking out at the snow with a contented sigh.

"Thinking about next Christmas already?" I teased, wrapping an arm around his waist.

Ezra turned to me, a playful glint in his eyes. "Maybe. I have a feeling it's going to be even better," he said, standing on his toes to kiss me.

"With you? No doubt," I murmured against his lips, knowing without a shadow of a doubt that every Christmas from here on out would be a celebration of us, of this love that had taken me by surprise and given me everything I never knew I needed.

And as the embers in the fireplace glowed a little brighter, I knew that this—us, this moment, this feeling—was the true meaning of the season.

WONDERING what it is about Kevin that has Anson willing to ignore *his* grinchiness in order to plan a great party for the kids at Harmony House? [Pick up Anson's Ambition](#) to find out who the real matchmaker is...

NOW THAT EZRA'S discovered how good sex can be, there are so many more adventures in store for them! [Sign up for my newsletter](#) to see how much spicier their next Christmas will be!

A NOTE FROM QUINN

If you enjoyed *Carson's Comfort and Joy*, I hope you'll [consider leaving a quick review.](#)

I would love it if you let your friends know so they can experience Carson and Ezra building a life together as well! I have enabled lending on all platforms in which it is allowed to make it easy to share with a friend. If you leave a review for *Carson's Comfort and Joy* on the site from which you purchased the book, Goodreads or your own blog, I would love to read it!

Email me the link at [**quinn@quinnwardwrites.com**](mailto:quinn@quinnwardwrites.com)

ABOUT QUINN

Quinn is a non-binary ace author of LGBTQ romance. Despite growing up in a liberal area of the Midwest, they always thought there were limited identities a person could claim, but none of them fit. It was partly through the LGBTQ book community online that they began to realize there was more to life than being cisgender and straight, gay, or bi.

Throughout everything, the one constant in Quinn's life has been writing. It's the piece of their life they've never questioned. It's their safe harbor, sometimes their escape from everything that's worrying them.

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