

GRACE MEYERS

Christmas in Maine

A Winter
Romance
• 1 •



Christmas In Maine

A Winter Romance Book 1

Grace Meyers



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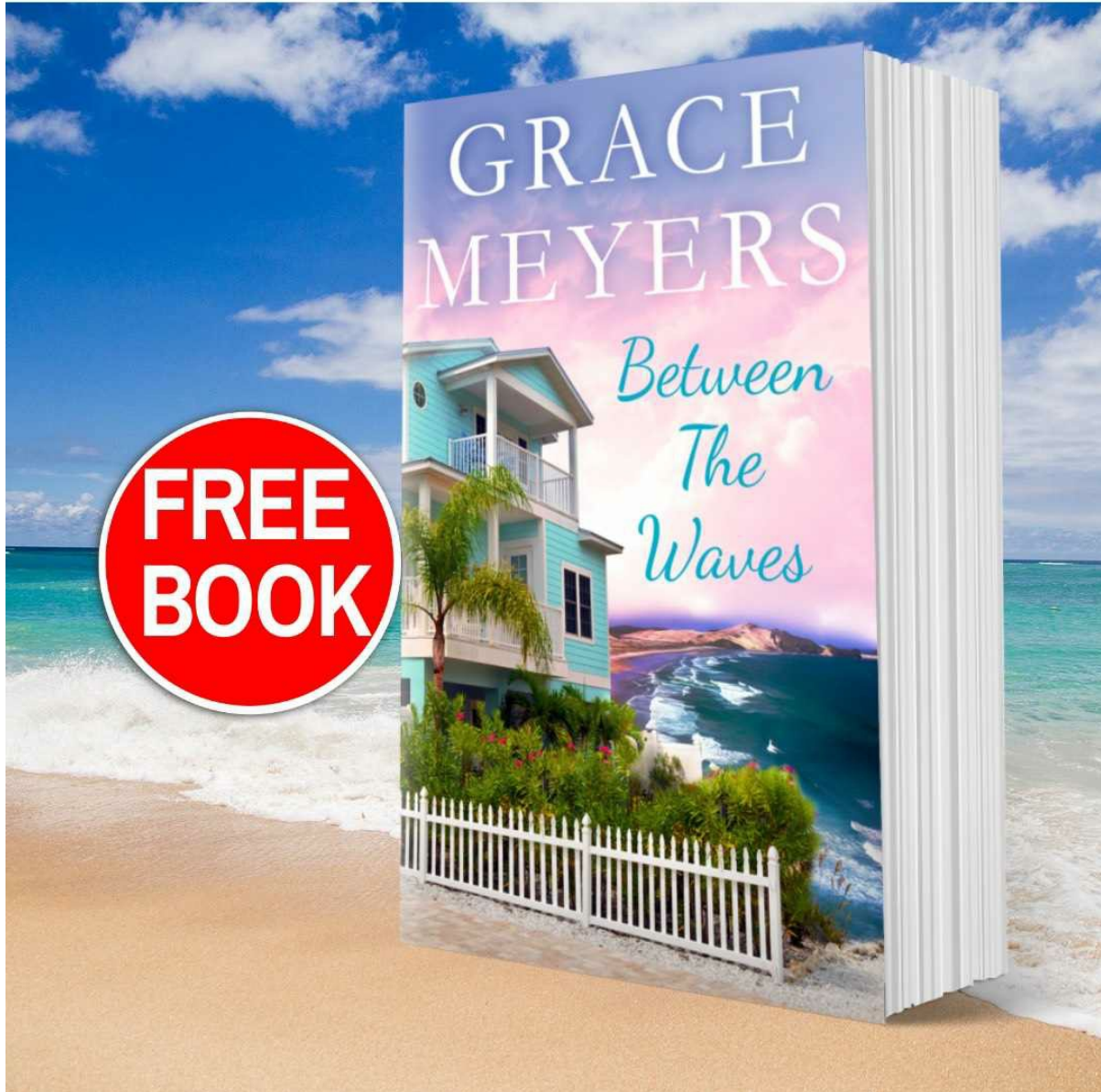
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Chapter 1

Sage



Sage's chest hurt for the tenth day in a row. Nothing would ever take that pain away even though she knew in her heart where it came from. Freeport, Maine, a world away from the life she'd been living for the past seven years had called her name since the moment she'd been left standing at that altar.

Christopher had been the love of her life, or so Sage thought. They'd met at a coffee shop one morning, their coffee cups colliding accidentally as if fate had stepped in. At the time Sage, vowing off relationships forever was reluctant. Still, Christopher persisted and wedged himself into her world.

As the miles ticked by on her lonely road, Sage's teary eyes barely focused. It was the holiday season, Thanksgiving long since abandoned in favor of red and green as the turkeys relaxed only a few weeks until the rush of present wrapping, stocking stuffing and all that was Santa, arrived.

She shed her last tear as she pulled up to her grandfather's cabin, reliving every moment she'd ever spent there in those few moments. As she stared, reminiscing at the gorgeous wood exterior with its shabby, outdated image, her heart melted once again.

"God, I've missed this."

"Missed what?"

A humorous male voice broke through the pleasing fog of her memories.

Livid, but thoughtfully attempting her best holiday cheer after her disaster, she shifted her weight to one hip and turned around. “Can I help you?”

Her only hope was the irritation deeply entrenched in her belly, for everyone would reflect back to the tall, dark, and handsome man standing behind her. “I’m sorry, can I help you?”

Butter, salt, and caramel wafted through the surrounding air, and Sage’s eyes landed lovingly on the bag he held. His wicked smile was a reminder of trouble in the form of a male ego. “I was curious to know what you missed.”

Without so much as another glance, Sage turned to look back at her family’s homestead and grandpa’s secluded cabin and thought. She heard no footsteps, no hopeful sound of his departure after her slight rudeness. Sage was ready to crumble to the ground, spent from the emotional exhaustion.

She had no clue where he’d come from, doubtful any of the cabins that surrounded this property could include the inhabitants of this fine specimen of a man. The weight of her suitcases reminded her for the briefest of moments how handy it was to have a man around. “Since you’re so eager to ask questions, would you mind helping me here?”

A loud smacking sound came out of nowhere, which Sage could only imagine was the man chewing like a cow. When their fingers brushed at the top of her second suitcase, they handled that familiar, heart-stomping sensation she desperately hated.

“I think the place needs some cleaning up, but it’s nice to see someone here for a change. I was thinking I would live forever with ghosts next door.” His chewing was going to drive her crazy.

“Thank you. I can get it to the door from here. Much appreciated.” The mild annoyance laced between her words was usually enough to rid her of any man.

As calmly as she could muster, she walked her first suitcase to the bottom of the stairs and turned back around to grab the other. Suddenly, they ran into each other, his bag of popcorn scattering like candy falling out of a birthday pinata. “Oh!”

Strong arms snaked around her body, keeping her upright. “I got you. You need to pay more attention I guess.”

The scent of buttered popcorn was so strong in the air that Sage was certain she could taste it. Still, the mesmerizing dark appeal of his eyes would have turned any woman’s head. All thought was lost in the moment and Sage could only stare for what seemed like an eternity at his careless smile.

When her senses were kind enough to return, Sage lightly nudged at his chiseled chest—her mind calculating how much taller he was than her, and how much she adored a tall man. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” The humor laced in his words, along with a healthy dose of the same in his eyes was the biggest warning of all as she stepped back.

Sage had the sinking feeling that the only way to get rid of this man was to get personal. Her hand shook a little as she extended it. “I’m Sage, and you are?”

“Travis.” His hand, a buttery mess, was strong and confident.

Sage mindlessly shook her head, speaking the first thought that popped into her head. “Either you really like popcorn or you haven’t eaten in a week. Did you say you’re my neighbor?”

“Yup. That way.” Travis licked his fingers once she let go of his hand and he pointed eastward.

“Ah.” She tried in vain to contain her shiver. Travis, a powerful name for an equally powerful man on a mission to make her afternoon miserable with him living less than a mile from her grandfather’s cabin. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Travis. If you’ll excuse me, I have to go get my suitcases inside. Thank you so much for all your help with this one.”

Gingerly, she reached around him and pulled it along, the heaviness of her baggage weighing on her heart, mind, and body.

Sage reached the top of the stairs and fumbled for the key in her menagerie of keys, key chains, and trinkets shed attached together over many years.

Still, the sound of mindless chewing and crunching, plus the lack of his footsteps leaving, clawed at her. A wise woman once told Sage that if you ignore something, it will eventually go away. She could only hope that statement held true.

Every key she tried with a little jingle did nothing. One after the other, as minutes ticked by along with her patience, none of the keys matched. Her frustration threatened to explode and she tossed the shiny bundle of keys to the ground. “For all that is holy, why can’t I find the key?”

The clip-clop of work boots plodded up the stairs behind her, sending her thoughts scattering as Sage turned again to her neighbor.

That smile, heart-stopping and wicked, annoyed her, yet he said nothing. For all his height, his hand seemed to reach ever so slightly upward toward the top of the doorframe and pulled down a key. “The spare.”

If she could have contained her emotions, her jaw might have remained closed, but the tension inside her, and her lack of self-control were at odds. A quick recovery and the closing of her mouth were all she needed for her to cut loose. Hand on her hip, the silver key on its chain was still dangling from his hand between them. “And how may I ask, did you know where that was?”

In typical male fashion, like so many men she’d encountered throughout her life, Travis dumped the contents of his bag of popcorn upside down into his mouth. Whatever was left from their earlier collision fell only partly into his mouth, the rest scattering like glitter across the cabin’s front porch.

When their eyes met again, Sage forgot to breathe and his seductive eyes were focused all on her. “Everyone has a spare key on their door frame in case they lose the master key.”

The crinkling of paper that turned the bag into a ball sent her nerves off the charts. Not usually the kind of woman who was easily flustered, Sage gripped fiercely onto what was left of her self-control.

She tried to use delicate fingers to take the key from his hand so she could avoid the unwanted energy between them. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Just trying to be helpful.”

There was no way to gracefully end the conversation. So, without so much as a goodbye, Sage turned around, picked up the mountain of keys at her feet, and calmly clicked the lock. She sighed heavily as the door flung open and tugged her ratty old suitcases behind her.

“It’s not much, but it’s home. Thank goodness...”

“Yup, just as I suspected, the inside needs some redecorating too. I bet that railing would look amazing if you sanded it down and restrained it.”

Chapter 2

Travis



Travis's curiosity was getting the best of him, that and the fact that when he'd looked through his binoculars toward the abandoned cabin, he'd seen a beautiful woman.

Not in the market for love, and more likely to turn every human or animal into a best friend, he made it his business to know. He knew how many bears ran through his property during winter. He knew the family of skunks that would have surrendered their black and white fur coats for one taste of his securely locked garbage.

With business slow at the moment, he took it upon himself to investigate, and the perks were mind-blowing. What appeared to be an ordinary woman of the city, at closer inspection, was a woman of class, refinement, and feminine beauty.

Her porcelain skin was flawless for a woman of her age, her eyes crystal clear and bright, and a smile that would stop any man's heart. The lack of a man beside her, and a ring which Travis was oddly drawn to search out, only meant one thing.

Clear as a bell, Travis got the message straight out the gate, Sage was annoyed. Where that annoyance came from, he had no desire to find out. Still, his humor with how easily the little things flustered this woman with the

unusually bizarre name, intrigued him.

The murder in her eyes after he made the simple acknowledgment of the obvious about the cabin's staircase was the final straw.

“Do you think you could keep quiet for five minutes?” Passionate emotion rolled off her lips.

Travis was nothing if not interested in what would happen if he took it a step further. His feet ached in his old work boots as he rocked gently back on his heels. “I didn't think I talked that loud but I'll try to keep my mouth shut. Just being neighborly.”

Instinct took over and his hands came up in mock surrender as she threw him another death glare. “Please do, otherwise you know how to find the door. Between the chewing, boot clicking, nonstop chatter, and bold assessments of what this cabin needs, you're an unwelcome guest.”

Travis let his eyes wander for a moment, and then he regarded Sage again when she wasn't looking. “I take it you're the easily flustered type, and that's why you came here. To unwind and find some peace from your insanely demanding office job. Executive, right?”

That was the straw that broke the camel's back, and Travis knew it the moment, Sage whirled around and stared at him again. Her eyes narrowed, and she stepped forward on her running shoes, a mere inch or two from his face, minus the height difference.

She stood on tiptoe, the scent of her floral perfume momentarily intoxicated his brain now that the bag of popcorn was gone. “No, on both counts, Travis. I'm not an executive, and I'm not here to escape my demanding job. If you must know.”

Every muscle in Travis' body tightened and flexed when she took his arm and turned him toward the door with a gentle nudge. Her voice was exceedingly calm and soft as she spoke. “I am escaping men and all that is masculine as I attempt to rid myself of the last few years of my life before my fiance left me at the altar!”

The last words she spoke came out as a loud roar, right before Travis was ushered onto the porch, the door slammed affectionately in his face.

A mental war began in his head as he stood staring at the wooden door. His boredom and lack of entertainment other than work, in particular the female kind, clawed at his mind.

His thoughtful mind reminded him she'd only just showed up at her family's cabin, and a little space might be in order. Glancing left and right, he

decided letting her be was the best thing he could do for her.

Eventually, he knew he'd be back, his curiosity always got the better of him and like some wayward child, often got him into trouble. As he took the worn steps two at a time, her last words registered in his brain. *Left me at the altar.* "How is that even possible? She's gorgeous and passionate."

Travis stopped short, debating alone in the middle of her driveway. "And probably a little crazy too." His insides stirred with excitement, what one man considered crazy, another considered enchanting. One way or another, Travis was going to find out all the details eventually, even if he had to pry them out of her. While he wasn't in the market for a girlfriend or wife at this stage in life, he had a few lonely guy friends.

He'd barely made it two steps back into his barn when Mrs. Elverson showed up. "I have this huge chunk of tree trunk in my pickup truck. Darren wants you to turn it into something for the front yard. He wants a sign with our house number on it, a bear or maybe a chipmunk family carved into it."

As a wood and ice craftsman, this year could be very busy, with families wanting indoor sculptures of ice for holiday weddings, and remains of the outdoors turned into yard ornaments. Travis dusted his hand off, ridding himself of the buttery feel, and followed closely to Mrs. Elveson.

"Sure, let me see what you got."

The chunk of wood, about two to three feet high and a good two-foot round, would do nicely. "I can turn this into a house number sign, easily. I need about a week, is this going to be a Christmas gift?"

Mrs. Elverson's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "I hadn't thought of it, but maybe. Can you carve out names into it too?"

"Sure can." Travis' gloves gripped tight to the hunk of wood as he slid it to the edge of the pickup truck bed. "I can put the house number and your last name, and design it."

Bouncing up and down like a teenager, Mrs. Elveson tried to contain her joy. "That would be lovely. This has been sitting in our yard for a few years now. All those other projects, the front door sign, that planter for my flowers, aren't really necessary, but this one really needs to be done."

He muscled the wood chunk off the truck and carried it quickly to his barn. Mrs. Elverson was right behind him, talking a hundred miles an hour. "Are you going to have that Christmas party again? I know with your mom..."

The controlled anguish in her words reminded him of the miserable past

year—since his mother's unexpected passing. While his heart was still broken and missing his mother, Travis carried his genuine emotions close to his heart beneath a facade of cheerful humor and curiosity where it was protected.

“I was thinking about having my usual Christmas Party but I’m not sure yet. It’s a lot to plan and I only have a few weeks to do it. I should really hire someone if I plan to do it, but I’m still on the fence. Unless you want to plan it for me?”

A shameless flirt, Travis knew Mrs. Elverson would never take on a project like that. Her age and health issues would never allow it. Still, his charm had the desired effect.

She waved her hand mindlessly in the air. “Oh, I couldn’t possibly do that, *but*, I have a cousin who works in Boston who might spend some time in Maine and put on the best Christmas party you’ve ever witnessed, right after your mother’s.”

Her thoughtful eyes registered something important as she tapped her chin. “I think she’s single too, if I’m not mistaken along with pretty, red hair, about your age too. No kids though, not sure if you're interested in ladies with kids since you don’t have any of your own but...”

Travis made a quick move to pick up the torch and run with it. “She sounds delightful but I’m not sure yet about the party. If I decide to host the party and need help, I know where to find you.”

“Perfect!” Her hands clapped together as she hurried out the door. “Let me know when it’s ready, I trust your craftsmanship. I have to go, I have to put some chicken in the crock pot and he wants donuts, it’s always about those donuts. He’s looking like one.”

Her voice made a fading sound as she retreated around the corner to the front of the barn where her truck was parked in the driveway. Travis studied the piece of wood thoughtfully, ideas racing through his mind.

He got to work right away, finding it best to tackle his projects as ideas formed in his mind. Time was of no issue for him now that his mother was gone. If he wanted to work until 3:00 am, he worked until 3:00 am.

It was a rare night that Travis slept over four hours and an even better day or night when he slept straight through. A lover of life, determined to get the most out of every day, Travis embraced every day with the same enthusiasm as the last. For no other reason than to get the most out of life after his mother’s passing, he knew father time waited for no one.

The sands of time ticked by as he worked to the sound of classic rock

blaring through the open doors of his barn. The echo reportedly traveled far and wide as many residents in Freeport mentioned their love of his musical choice when stopped at the stores in town.

When boredom set in, Travis grabbed a quick sandwich to quell the hungry beast in his belly and thought it was a perfect time to check on his new neighbor. Rather than walk this time, he climbed on his ATV and made his way over to her driveway.

All was silent as Travis hopped off and climbed the stairs two at a time. The door was closed; he had an inner debate, unsure if he wanted to knock or go in unannounced. The door opened, and once again Sage ran headlong into him.

“Oh, my God... what in the world?” Her eyes raised and held his regard, a silent annoyance already festering.

“Hey, pretty lady, I wanted to check on you and make sure you're okay?” The minty scent of her warm breath as her mouth hung open a little, made him smile. “Well, it's nice to know you use mouthwash.”

The eye roll was the icing for Travis right before she turned on her heels and stormed back inside the cabin. “Of course, I'm fine. What is the welcoming committee around here? This was my grandfather's cabin and I've visited before, a long time ago, but nevertheless, before.”

Her back stiff as a rod, she stood stock still. At this point, Travis knew he was pushing buttons but he couldn't help himself when the woman was so interesting and beautiful. “You told me you got left at the altar. Well...” He felt something rude coming on but thought it best to say it anyway hoping to cheer her up. “I hate to say this...”

Sage spun around like a kid in search of her hide-and-seek friends and stared, agitated at him.

“But I'm going to, that man, whoever he was, clearly has no clue he had a beautiful, effervescent woman in front of him. If he's got blinders on, you're better off without him. Good riddance to trash, if you ask me.”

Her eyes were intent on something, a rebuttal, some rude off-handed comment, he knew not. Rather than stand around looking like a fool, Travis wandered the first floor, amazed at how large it was compared to what the outside looked like.

“I have to say, this is a beautiful cabin. How long are you staying in Freeport?”

Silence was the death of any conversation, and since he appeared to be

having a one sided conversation after she said nothing, Travis kept his mouth shut and used his eyes instead.

He didn't hear her, but he felt her, that warm fuzzy feeling he'd always got around a beautiful lady when she was in or near his personal space.

“Thank you for that I guess, I'm still suffering the effects and that's what this trip is about. The thought of spending my first Christmas miserably at home alone was just too much to bear. I had that and a few other reasons for coming to Freeport, but I can assure you I'm no more likely to throw myself in front of a city bus than I am to dive headlong into the Atlantic Ocean, not for a man, anyway.”

“Good to know, smart woman. No man or woman is worth *that*.”

She stood beside him, those sweet, emotional eyes staring up into his eyes and he was lost. Suddenly his chest felt tight, he couldn't breathe and all the wicked, rude, or otherwise sarcastic comments racing through his mind disappeared.

The urge to touch her and let his fingers slide along the softness of her jawline, feel the silkiness of her hair, and forget all else was like a punch in the gut.

Thankfully, his brain registered what his heart and mind didn't. Stop now! A mental shake to the head and he took a few steps backward to put distance between them and that shaky, romantic feeling he dreaded.

Travis cleared his throat. “I moved here a few years ago, my mother and I...” He stared up the shiny wooden stairs to the balcony above, curious. Taking them two at a time, he kept his voice louder than normal to reach her ears. “My mother passed last year, and I've been alone since. I have had this awful Christmas party thing she did every year since we arrived and now I don't know what I'm going to do. Most of my clientele enjoyed it so much they will be heartbroken if I don't do something this year.”

Out of nowhere, Sage slipped in front of him as Travis was turning the corner into the master bath. “You can stop yelling, I'm right here. And what in God's creation are you doing up in my cabin, like it's yours?”

Adorable was all he could think as he looked at her pinched facial features, which until this point had been animated and reflective of her emotions. “Didn't anyone ever tell you that making faces like that wasn't good for your appearance? My mother *always* told me that as a kid. I never forgot it and as you can see, time has stood still on my face. I look much like when I was twenty.”

Sighing heavily, Sage relaxed. “Is that better, since you're full of useless knowledge?”

Travis couldn't resist poking at her forehead like a kid, smiling just to annoy her since he liked her a lot already. “You got that thing, what do the trendy women call it, frownies? I prefer brownies by the way since they are much more enjoyable, but yours is still there, whatever it is.”

Chapter 3

Sage



Mortified, Sage turned away and rubbed at the spot between her eyes as she walked back downstairs.

“Don’t worry, your gorgeous eyes captivate so no one ever notices that. I like that you don’t wear too much makeup. I hate when women paint their faces like clowns thinking we men love that.”

She made it to the kitchen by the time he finished his odd compliment. “I’d like to paint something else, maybe make you look like a...”

“Like what?”

Frozen in place, her insides shook with controlled anger, Sage thought before she spoke. She knew nothing about Travis. He could be the town's mayor for all she knew.

“Were you in the military or something? The way you tiptoe around this cabin it's like you're in stealth mode. At the very least if you're going to insist on nagging me about every detail of my life and mind, please don’t sneak up on me, it’s creepy.”

“Alright! Now we're getting somewhere, you like having me around. I guarantee having me as a neighbor is going to be very interesting for you.”

The sound of cabinet doors opening and closing caught her attention. “What are you doing?” Sage could only hope she wouldn’t go to jail if she by

chance happened to murder someone with her eyes.

“Looking for a snack, don’t you have any food around here? I need something to eat, and running back to my place is out of the question.”

The seriousness in his eyes caught Sage off guard. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, just a slight case of Type One Diabetes and a low blood sugar. I feel a crash coming on fast and if I don’t get something in my belly soon you might want to call the ambulance, although I could die before they get here.”

His matter-of-fact attitude surprised Sage but her mind had already skipped that and she ran in search of the bag of candy she kept in her suitcase for hunger emergencies. “Here, I have Skittles, Starbursts, and some Twizzlers.

Spinning around on her feet, she found Travis sitting on the floor, pale face, sick, and about to pass out. She rushed over without another word. “What can I do?” She handed over the bag of sweets.

“Nothing darling, just sit with me. This too will pass, as my mother used to say.”

Travis started popping candies quickly, while Sage tried in vain to not throw up from worry for the man she’d been so rude to.

He held out his hand and Sage instinctively took it, a helplessness inside her she never experienced. “Sorry, I don’t know what to do to help.”

“This is perfect, Sage. It just makes me feel awful, shaky, and sick like my body is shutting down without my consent and there is nothing I or anyone can do. The sugar is the only thing that helps fast enough.” His charming smile did nothing to help with her worry.

“Okay, well I have more in my car if you need it.”

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. If not for the caress of his thumb against her hand, Sage might have thought he died, until a few minutes later, he pulled her hand to his lips and kissed its top, then opened his eyes.

His voice was hoarse, a hint of embarrassment laced between his words. “I can’t thank you enough, Sage. It’s miserable living this way.”

All her agitation and annoyance with this man was temporarily forgotten; she felt like she could breathe again. “Goodness, you scared me. I thought you were a goner for a moment there.”

“Me too.” He smiled. “But I’m made of stronger stuff than this disease. I’m supposed to carry my diabetes supply kit everywhere I go but since I rarely travel far from home unless I’m headed into town, it usually sits on my

kitchen table.”

Sage felt every muscle in her body relax, now that she knew he was going to be okay. “Well, I bet if your mother were here she’d scold you for that. If you’re going to insist on spending all your time here at my cabin, I might need you to have a supply kit here. And a bag of candy.”

She stared at the wooden plank ceiling of the great room and tried with little to no success to rid herself of the connection they now shared from that tragic moment.

“So what do you do for a living?” His cheeks were rosy again, the color restored, and where there had been a worried frown before, was now a smile.

“I’m an event planner.”

“Oh, really?” Sage knew it was coming. His comment from before flashed in her mind seconds before he spoke up again. “Then perhaps you could help me with my little Christmas Party?”

Feeling a sense of happiness now that she knew he was okay she let it show. “I was kinda hoping to clear my head, being left at the altar can really mess with your heart and mind.”

“I wouldn’t know but maybe if you’re not busy you could help me out with that and I could find a way to help you somehow. I have no clue what I’m doing and it stresses me out just thinking about it but I have a lot of clients, some local and some not.”

Now her curiosity was getting the best of her and Sage had to ask. “What is your occupation?”

“I’m an artist, if you want to call it that. I create wood, ice, and other sculptures.”

“Really?” A thousand ideas ran through Sage’s mind. “So you take wood, ice or other materials and turn them into art?”

“Yes.”

Even though she knew she shouldn’t, her interest in his work and the worry that popped up in her head got the better of her. Thinking about him trying to plan a large holiday event with his disease did not help either. “Well, if you give me a day to get situated here I would love to come and take a look, but I can’t promise anything.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Travis left after that, taking the bag of candy with him so he didn’t have an issue walking back to his place. Sage’s insides twisted in knots, concerned for Travis and fretting for a while until she took a walk and heard whistling coming from the barn.

Quiet as a church mouse, Sage tiptoed back to her grandfather's cabin and continued unpacking, relieved he'd taken his leave and was safe. By the time she was done unpacking and getting situated, exhaustion set in and she took a warm bubble bath.

A mug of cocoa in hand she found the warm fuzzy blanket her grandmother made a long time ago and stared out the large windows at the night sky. All the memories of her failed relationship and being left at the altar flooded back to her in one intense whoosh of emotion. It was back again and Sage was anything but ready.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she scrolled through the few pictures she'd left on her phone, unable to delete every last shred of a relationship that meant so much to her.

The front door flew open as if a strong wind knocked and announced itself, Sage jumped in fear.

"Hey, Sage, I had some ideas about my party, my mother was all about the food, she loved to cook, I don't plan on having you do that." Travis sat down beside her friendly and comfortable, the horrible health scare from earlier completely forgotten.

Sage was so tired and his company was a welcome diversion from the emotional roller coaster she'd just been enduring. "Can we talk about this in the morning, please?"

Shock filled every cell of her body when he took hold of her socked feet and placed them comfortably atop his lap, smiling. "Sure, I can write them down before I leave. I just wanted to get it out of my head and into your hands."

"Okay, well you've done that so now you can..." His finger gripped her feet firmly and then kneaded the sore muscles she didn't know she had. "God, are you a massage therapist or into sports medicine as well?"

Her eyes rolled in the back of her head, the vague blur of his smile her last image as she laid her head back against the couch. Then her mind snapped to attention as red warning flags filled her head. "Hey." She gave her feet a tug. "You don't have to do that? It's high."

Like a Chinese acupuncture specialist, he found a special spot and the ache in her back faded away. "How could you have possibly done that?"

Their eyes met and Sage quieted down, the look in his eyes anything but friendly and a more loving caress touching her face. Her cheeks felt hot and burned with embarrassment to be touched in such an intimate way.

Travis' hands stilled, the grin on his face a mixture of friendly and cautious. "I could tell you were thinking about him and where you went wrong. That is the last thing you should be doing. I wanted to make you stop and feel better, and a foot massage is the only way I could think of doing that."

Slowly, his hand moved again, this time more tenderly and soothing than intense and hard. The tears Sage shed were still warm on her cheeks. She lowered her head hoping to hide them. "I couldn't help it, can't I should say. When I'm alone, with nothing to do and I don't collapse in a heap of exhaustion, it all comes flooding back."

The feeling of someone really listening, someone who didn't know her, and had no vested interest in her life, was easier than any of her girlfriends who'd begged her to talk before Sage left.

"Well, I'm no expert by any means but he didn't deserve you. What happens if you don't mind me asking? Did he cheat on you?"

Sage's mind glazed over the details, not ready to rehash it again for the fiftieth time from start to finish. "You know I really don't want to talk about it. I know you're right but it still hurts. Can we just sit here and talk, maybe about your party? That would be nice actually."

A heavy sigh escaped her lips and Sage pushed it away and sat up. He inched closer. Sage's mixed feelings about the simple gesture that harkened back to her teenage years bubbled up inside her. "You know, please don't take this the wrong way but you are very peculiar, in a likable but odd way."

"Thanks, I take that as a compliment, it means I'm unique. Life is nothing but boring most of the time and being different or out of the ordinary as I like to call it is interesting."

"So tell me about this party."

"Okay, so the day before Christmas Eve I hosted a party for my clients. Nothing crazy, some food, drink, a few gifts and merriment. I like to send out invites the week or two before. Last year my mother planned it from 2:00 pm - 7:00 pm so clients could come any time they wanted, hang out, stay, leave... whatever. It's my way of showing appreciation for their business and getting them involved with each other, to make friends and share experiences about life here in Freeport and beyond, or whatever they want to do. No sit-down dinner, lots of cookies my mother had the kids come caroling at 6:00 pm last year. A client who lives in Vermont showed up and donated a huge chunk of money to the high school drama club for the performance because

they love art and theater. Everyone has a lot of fun; it's festive and then it's over in time for everyone to travel wherever they want to go."

"That sounds simple enough. I've planned a few events and I have a few women who might assist me to make things go smoother for you. Are you against me bringing in some help if I decide to take on the project?"

In the spirit of things, she put her ex and wedding drama behind a brick wall in the back of her head, Sage smiled. A sense of relief washed over her as she acknowledged how she needed to keep as busy as possible even at Grandpa's cabin.

"No issue there, the more the merrier if it makes your job easier and my party a success. What do you mean if you take on my project? I've carried in luggage, offered expert construction advice for free, given free therapy advice, and rubbed your feet like a masseuse, of which there are none in a ten-mile radius."

For the briefest of moments, Sage giggled his face a mask of mock horror at her statement. "Sorry, you offered good advice and my feet feel new. I was just saying that because maybe you won't want to hire me. You don't even know my credentials, I could be a lunatic escaping from an asylum far away."

Travis shook his head wildly. "Nah, no lunatic would look like you. They'd have crazy wild hair and eyes bugging out their head." He silenced himself, in pretend assessment, making Sage laugh more. "Wait! I take that back, you're right. You could be an escaped lunatic from an asylum. Excuse me, I have to go scan the nerves first."

"Stop!" Sage grabbed his hand as he waved it in the air frantically.

"Okay. All seriousness aside, are you a lunatic?"

"No, I'm not but I'm not so sure, you're not!"

"On that note, I guess I'm going to go home, now that we agreed we're both crazy, and the party is on. Tomorrow we can talk more. I have a sculpture to work on." Quick as he'd come in the door, he was standing at it again, smiling. "Good night."

"Wait, you're working *now*?" Sage's disappointment came on faster than she'd thought it would. Their friendship was only just beginning, and she didn't know if she was coming or going with Travis. Still, the eagerness in her heart to continue the friendship perplexed her sharp mind.

"Yes, I sleep a little. I've always had too much energy. You know those people who sleep 4-5 hours a night? That's me, and it's when I do some of my best work, by the light of the moon."

Travis moved out the doorway and he disappeared into the darkness of night.

Chapter 4

Travis



*L*ittle Miss Event Coordinator next door intrigued Travis. He ended up over there more times on the first day than he'd visited the kitchen to grab a snack. There was something enchanting and exciting about her. Dark hair and sultry eyes that flamed with the passion of emotions, good or bad.

She maintained a beauty he'd not seen in many women her age, flawless and youthful, with that glimmer of class and elegance. His mind kept coming back to her and the sound of her voice.

It was 2:00 a.m. and his project for the day was complete, a lot sooner than he thought it would be. Travis' hand was cramped from working with the tools and the list he'd made for her the old-fashioned way, with pen and paper.

In bed, he lay thinking, pondering what she was doing. That fool of a man that left her at the altar was long gone and she was wasting breath and energy on him. Again, the Rolodex in Travis' head rolled round and round as he tried to figure out someone who might be of interest to her.

Mark was dating a lovely Irish woman. Edward the hermit had sworn off women a long time ago after his divorce. He was probably not a good choice since he rarely left the house. Travis paced the bedroom as his mind ran with thoughts.

Half an hour later he'd abandoned the idea of finding her someone to help ease her pain. In the few years he'd been living in Freeport, more than a few people complimented him on his assistance in finding them a compatible partner.

When his dear sweet mother had been alive, she found it most amusing that Travis could find someone for everyone else, but not decide on a relationship or woman for himself.

She just didn't understand, his relationships never amounted to anything meaningful. A few women fell head over heels for him but Travis barely connected emotionally, and one or two that caught his eye had no interest in him. There had only been one significant relationship in his life, and Travis cared not to delve back into that emotional nightmare with any woman again.

Instead, he made it his mission to chase away the blues and loneliness for others he knew was a fun hobby, especially since he got to see the result.

There was no way Travis would sleep with this on his mind. His blood sugar was a little high which would account for the excess energy so Travis gave himself a shot of insulin to bring it down. Waiting was not his strong skill, so off he went in search of something to do.

Nothing sparked an interest in the barn, and Clark, his pet pig, needed to go outside so Travis let him out. "Well buddy, you haven't met our new neighbor, I think you're going to like her. She has this energy, easily annoyed, it's very amusing to watch as I fire her up... but don't tell her."

Clark was a rescue pig, and more than tiny but he tagged along slowly as Travis crossed the distance between her grandfather's property and his own. Clark's little legs moved swiftly as Travis walked. Travis kept his pace easy and slow to accommodate.

He'd met her grandfather but one time when they'd moved in. Travis' mother Ruth had spoken with him on more than one occasion, mentioning how delightfully humorous Sage's grandfather was and possessed a passion for life.

Stealthily, Travis moved up her stairs, whispering to Clark. "Shh, we have to be quiet, no oinking or grunting. I'll let you know when."

No one locked doors in these parts, and even though Sage was from the city, he knew she wouldn't lock her door. A soft click had the door opening a few inches so they could enter. As quietly as a sneaky teenager, he climbed the stairs, Clark at his heels.

The beauty of her room took Travis by surprise as less than twenty-four

hours ago it had been a functional but boring bedroom. The colorful painting on the wall and fake flowers that graced more than a few surfaces changed its appeal instantly.

Equally colorful clothing, scarves, jewelry, and shoes were scattered around the room on surfaces and the floor. Clark had to tiptoe across the room to get a closer look as Travis stood at the edge of Sage's gigantic bed.

The angel sleeping in front of Travis took his breath away; her hair scattered beautifully around her delicate slumbering face. His heart stopped beating and started again, erratically. A tinge of guilt washed over him as he debated what he was about to do.

Travis wanted to talk to her again, her passionate emotions and thoughtful intelligence were more exciting to him than any woman he'd ever encountered. Morning would have been a better time to do that but Travis couldn't help himself.

This moment could easily go many ways, most of them negative, but Travis hoped Clark would make up for her frustration or anger with him. Clark responded on command the moment Travis gave him the signal to make noises.

At first, the feminine form curled up in the bed only stirred a tiny bit as Clark continued to oink and grunt. When that didn't work, he tried to jump on the tall oak bed, unsuccessfully.

Travis' voice whispered as he leaned over. "Here buddy, be easy, don't get in her face. No one likes it when people are in their face."

Clark grunted happily and danced across the lavender blanket that covered her body until he reached her face. Then it began, the grunting and oinking louder. Travis' feet hurt from standing all day but he moved to the door and stood there watching.

Sage's hands wildly moved as if she was swatting at something very annoying. He stifled his amusement. Clark glanced his way as if looking for permission to continue since he wasn't getting the desired effect.

The more he oinked and grunted, the more her hand waved around. Travis could only imagine what she was dreaming about that she wouldn't wake up. Then like a rocket she shot up in the bed and stared at Clark.

"What in the world? Who? Where?" Her eyes surveyed the room slowly and when they found Travis. He saw the anger flash in her eyes. "What in God's creation are you doing in my house and bedroom? And who is this?"

"That is Clark and he really wanted to meet you. He couldn't wait until

morning. He told me he was very excited, and then I remembered I wanted to talk to you some more.”

Anger gave way to groaning, and Clark joined in the chorus thinking she was singing. Happy as the pig he was, Clark climbed on her lap. Her eyes pinned Travis with the most furious glare he'd ever seen in his life. Travis took a few steps back into the hallway.

Her arms curled protectively around Clark. Travis knew that look in Clark's eyes; he was in love and Travis lost his favorite pet by default and his mistake. As Travis glanced down at his feet, struggling with that reality a pillow hit him in the head.

“Get out! And I'm keeping your pig, he's my pet now. Anyone who would walk into another person's house in the middle of the night while they slept and scare them awake deserves to lose such a cute animal.”

Travis messed up and truly did the wrong thing out of enthusiasm and curiosity. It hit him hard. “I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking, well, I was but not correctly. I told you I hardly sleep so I assume everyone is doing the same thing. It was wrong and I should have waited till morning but in all honesty, I just wanted to see you again and talk to you. I don't know why, really.”

He took his leave and let Sage keep his pig. Clark would come home tomorrow when he got homesick, while Travis felt like a fool. All the way home Travis mentally berated himself for acting like a child, curious why he'd gone off the deep end and done it.

His bed called, but his emotions were like pebbles skipping across the surface of his mind in a wild dance. Travis knew in his gut why he'd done it. He'd never been close to women, kept them in two categories: a casual friendship that never amounted to much unless romantic feelings were involved and romantic encounters that almost never included emotional attachment, except for one woman in his past.

Travis' mother had been his rock, the woman he confided in, trusted, and respected. She'd been his best friend and his mother and the one woman Travis compared all the other women in his life to.

Since her passing, things hadn't been the same, Travis was not the same and knew he probably wouldn't be ever again. A longing deep inside him for connections, both physically as a romantic relationship and emotionally as a friend, stirred inside of him day and night.

Most of the time Travis ignored it or buried it under a rock of work and duties to home, Clark, and the community. His lack in that department

bothered him more than he admitted and Sage's arrival stirred it awake.

Now he had someone interesting to talk to, intelligent, beautiful, and exciting.

Travis heard the loud click of the front door and smiled.

"Hello... Travis! Don't make me come and find you, because I will. If you are going to insist on showing up at my house at 2:00 a.m. with your adorable pet, you'd better be prepared to entertain me at your house now that I'm awake."

Sage's voice echoed through the rafters, his insides tingled with excitement that she was in his home. His bones ached from overwork but his mind was wide awake. Every muscle in his body twitched and tightened as he forced himself to get up and head downstairs.

"I'm always up for company. I didn't think you'd be coming by after my stupidity. I see Clark really likes you. Can I get you something to drink?"

Her eyes were tired, she still wore the cute pajamas that peeked out from under the blanket earlier in her bed. A faint smile softened her face as her eyes glanced this way and that. "Do you have any cocoa? It's my absolute favorite drink. If not, water will do since coffee will just keep me awake the rest of the night and I don't think you have any peppermint tea."

"Cocoa it is." Mentally, Travis filed her likenesses and took the cat coffee mug from the cabinet—it was his favorite. He was interested in her far more than he probably should have been for a simple friend. Dismissing that for the moment, he grabbed the packet of cocoa and smiled to himself.

Clark came strutting into the kitchen, a few grunts and oinks for good measure. "Hey, buddy. So what do you think of our new friend?"

He winked and squealed like crazy; it was so hard for Travis to contain his laughter, his belly shook. "Well, I take it you really like her." Clark disappeared again.

"He's so adorable, I always wanted a pet pig but my mother wouldn't let me get one as a kid."

Her silhouette in the open archway between the kitchen and the open floor-plan living room was something he could get used to seeing. As Travis quickly made her cocoa in the microwave, that thought settled in his gut, scaring him a bit.

"Here you go." Their hands brushed again, a light feathery touch that took him by surprise and stirred his senses. Every part of his body felt it when they touched.

For the next hour, they sat and talked about nothing in particular. Clark, the house, the barn, his business and hers, and the upcoming party. The conversation was straightforward, and comfortable, like the ones Travis had with his mother.

Sage yawned. ‘I’m so tired. I should get going. I have a bit of a walk to my place and it’s dark, I might pass out in the cold, a rock for my pillow, the earth as my bed.’”

Travis stilled her as she tried to stand up. “Stay, sleep. I have a few beds in different bedrooms. You’re more than welcome to use one, or the couch here. I’m embarrassed to say I acted like an utter fool and bothered you in the middle of the night. I think I’m just missing my mother, she passed away last year, and we were very close.”

The sympathy in her eyes touched his heart deeply. “I understand, and it’s okay. I was most upset that you just came into my house unannounced, but otherwise, it was fine. But I should really be more upset than I am.”

He hung his head, his mother’s voice echoing in his mind. “Right about now my mother would be annoyed with me, telling me I lacked manners sometimes. You wouldn’t understand, but most people in these parts know each other and they don’t lock their doors. If they do, it’s a clear indication they don’t want to be bothered. Otherwise, they don’t mind. But we don’t just enter anyone’s house but honestly, I forgot myself. I was so excited to finally have a neighbor, your family cabin has been empty for a bit and it gets a little lonely around here. Can you please forgive me?”

The sound of Travis’ foolishness rolling off his tongue took him by surprise. “I promise it won’t happen again. Scout’s honor.” He held his hand in the air, a Boy Scout he’d once been.

“Yes, of course, I forgive you. You really go off your emotions and what’s going on in your head don’t you?”

“I do. It’s not intentional, there’s a lot of business in my head for work so all that creativity never rests. And I forget other people have normal lives.”

Angel eyes stared back at him. “Listen, why don’t we start fresh? Forget all about that. Promise we won’t find you climbing in my window or at the foot of my bed again and we’re good. Everything else is okay.”

“Deal.” They shook, her delicate hand fit perfectly into his hand.

“Good. Now show me to a bedroom before I crash, the stress of the last few days got the better of me and I need rest before you give me a proper tour tomorrow. Then we can start working on the party since there isn’t much

time.”

“Okay, at the top of the stairs, the first door on the left, it was my mother’s and the best room in the house.”

Sage’s legs gave way when she stood up, he grabbed her quickly before she fell back to the couch. “Sorry, I guess I’m a lot more tired than I thought.”

Their eyes met, and she stopped talking suddenly, the air charged between them. Travis’ chest was tight and even though he knew it was wrong, Travis swept her up in his arms and carried her up the stairs.

“You don’t have to...” Her arms circled his neck, and a slight tinge of pink touched her cheeks. “I have eaten little today. In all honesty not much for weeks, it’s been rough. I...”

“Shh, relax, let me get you to bed so you can sleep and we can figure out breakfast in the morning so I can make up for my screw-up in the wee hours of the night. Don’t be embarrassed, we are just friends.”

Her silence, the confused look on her face as he laid her down on what had been his mother’s gigantic bed said it all. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” The sudden rush of odd feelings, a mix of attraction, and fear swamped Travis’ brain, so he quickly stepped back to the door. Clark came bursting through the door like he owned the place and hopped up and down.

Her graceful arms reached down to pick Clark up, their eyes met and she smiled. “Thank you.”

His nerves were on edge, his heart at odds with the rational side of his brain warning Travis as he closed the door and headed for bed. Sleep eluded Travis that night, the sheer knowledge of her presence in his house right down the hall was very unsettling.

Chapter 5

Sage



Sage woke to the smell of hazelnut coffee, Clark still nuzzled in the crook of her arm. Smiling to no one in particular, all the memories of the night before came flooding back as she realized she wasn't in her cabin. "Oh, my..."

With determination, she climbed from the bed and scooped up Clark. "Come on you cutie, we have to get downstairs."

Travis was in the kitchen, two coffee cups in hand. "Oh, wow! You scared the devil out of me! Here, I wasn't sure how you like it so I added a little of each, creamer and sugar. Hope that works."

Clark squirmed in Sage's arms and happily ran off when she put him down. Travis slipped the back door open smoothly so he could go out. "He'll be out there for a while. When you're ready, I can give you a tour of the house, a proper tour as you called it, along with the barn and my workshop."

Sage's hair was a rat's nest, her skin ruddy and oily, she needed a bath and proper clothing. "Can we do this in about an hour? I want to get home and take care of a few things. I have a few phone calls to make and then we can do this."

"Sure. Let me drive you home."

It surprised Sage when he pulled around to the front door in a rusty

pickup truck. “Sorry, I have two other vehicles, my BMW and a motorcycle, but this was the easiest to get to right now.”

“It’s fine. I like old trucks.”

Travis’s hand brushed Sage’s as he opened the passenger side door. “Let me help...”

“Thank you.” Slipping across the worn leather of the seat Sage got comfortable as Travis shut the door.

The morning sun shined bright across the horizon, a chill of air caressing Sage’s cheek through the slightly open window as he drove. “It’s so beautiful here, I always wanted to live here. Don’t get me wrong, I love Boston but Maine is so gorgeous.”

“Yes, it is. Originally I was born in Alabama, but my parents moved back here a few years later. She’d met my father in Alabama and convinced him to come back to her home, nowhere else felt quite like Freeport. Well, we’re here.”

Sage had no choice but to accept Travis’ extended hand as he tried to get out of the vehicle. The last thing she wanted to feel was a physical chemistry between them—fresh out of her broken relationship that ended in standing alone at the altar. “Thank you.”

“No problem. I guess I’ll let you be.”

Travis hurried to his side of the truck and darted out the driveway faster than Sage climbed the stairs. Turning around, it shocked her to see him go, wanting to thank him again for his kindness.

“That man is a strange individual, one minute he’s here pacing around my house at two in the morning, the next he’s gone on the wind on some other agenda. Strange.”

The wind chime hanging from the edge of the porch chimed in the breeze. Sage stared out across the property, feeling a tension deep inside her that resembled fear and anxiety.

The warm shower felt thrilling against her skin, her daily skin-cleansing ritual refreshed and woke her more than the coffee she drank. Two hours later, Sage could tackle the day, and anything her handsome if not slightly annoying and usual neighbor could throw at her.

He’d yet to show his face at her door, which was surprising so Sage walked to his place. The faint sound of machinery grinding, sawing, and working drew her around the house to a large workshop in the barn.

There stood Travis, knee-deep in wood shavings, a large piece of wood in

front of him in the shape of a mermaid. His movements were slow but smooth as he cut, chipped, and shaped the wood.

Sage had no desire to speak or make any other sound to let him know she was behind him. Her eyes were drawn to his work and the creativity it took to make such an unbelievably perfect piece, mesmerized her.

Silent as a mouse she watched his hands move, the tools work and the wood come to life right before her eyes. Time stood still and yet ticked by nonstop. Her only hope was for a chair so she could watch him focus all that overabundance of energy he had on his creation.

An understanding of who Travis was as a man formed in her head. His craft required such tremendous focus, intent, and mental strength it was no wonder he was all over the place and emotionally charged everywhere else. It took so much control to do what he did.

A sense of admiration washed over Sage, and with his sudden glance in her direction, she waved bashfully. "Hey."

Everything stopped, his hands stilled, the tools quit working, his eyes intent on her. "How long have you been standing there?" The smile she received stole her heart for a moment.

"I don't know, I was so entranced by what you were doing I longed for popcorn and a chair." Her feet moved before her mind agreed that was the best thing to do and Sage was standing next to him. Her eyes moved up and down the chunk of wood. "This is so beautiful, where do you get the ideas?"

"Usually the client will tell me what they want, then I'll sketch something and create it from my mind. This guy wanted a mermaid for his front yard with a mailbox attached. I'm not sure where I'm going to put the mailbox yet but I think the mermaid is turning out beautifully."

"She's gorgeous. So you draw everything?"

"Yeah, this way no two are alike. I make both wood and ice sculptures and sometimes I use other materials but those are my primary."

Sages' mind was a blur of inspiration. "You should showcase some of your sketches and work for your clients at this party. You could even open it up to new and potential clients this way they have time to see your skill and what you can create."

"Usually I do, but not much. This year has been hard. Most of my clients have been more than an understanding of the situation with my mother's passing but I'd like to do that. Perhaps you could pick a few things out for me at the end and display them to their best advantage. I usually do that, my

mother wanted no part of that, the business but she respected it and me, so I appreciate any help.”

Sage made notes on her phone as he talked and took pictures. “Okay, show me everything and then we can sit down and I will create everything for you. When I work in Boston, it takes weeks but we don’t have that, so simple is best. I’m thinking of a buffet, people can help themselves. A few tables here and there with a scattering of holiday decor. A table for gifts and gratitude and one for your business cards and website information for potential new clients.”

It was chilly, the air crisp and colder than the last few as winter was quickly approaching. No more would she be able to walk to his house in pajamas as she gripped the edges of her jacket tighter. “How do you *not* wear a jacket or coat? It’s getting cold. Last night was delightful as I walked to your house in the middle of the night but today, wow, and here you have no coat or jacket, just a flannel shirt.”

“Years of getting used to it. Besides, I love the cold, it’s my favorite time of year, the time before Christmas, right after Halloween, and Thanksgiving when the weather is changing. From warm air and cool earth to cool air and cold earth, no snow most of the time but a whisper of winter in the air.”

Sage’s fingers were icy without her gloves but she ignored them and nuzzled a little closer to the wood stove he had blazing in the corner of his workshop. “I bet this helps chase away the cold too?”

“It sure does. My mother would sit beside it sometimes and work or watch me, she was always cold, and she grew up in Maine.”

Sage focused her energy after warming her hands. The buzz of activity racing through her mind as she captured every detail Travis gave took up a lot of time. The extended tour as he called it concluded with snacks on the enclosed back porch overlooking his yard, Clark on her lap.

“Sorry, lately my blood sugar has been running lower than normal, I gotta eat.” A tray of fruit, crackers, and veggies landed on the table with mugs of cocoa. “If this isn’t to your liking, I have some cookies, but don’t tell Clark.”

Clark’s oinking and squealing brought a burst of laughter from them both. “Aw come on Dad, your poor starving baby said he wants cookies.”

The serious questioning look on Travis’ face added to Sage’s amusement. “Yeah, well this is the third time today I had to give him a cookie, he’s going to look like one soon.”

Sage let the feel of the moment seep into her bones, the change of season,

Christmas coming, and a party to put together in no time. It would have been so easy to let her annoyance that Travis was ruining her holiday take over but her heart smiled.

Work was what she needed but Boston was not. She'd come for a change of scenery and a few other reasons, least of all to find peace. That peace could come in many forms and Sage realized work was the best way to find it. She was at her grandparents' cabin, the beauty of nature surrounding her, not a city, and a handsome, talented man needed her help for a party.

“What decorations do you have?”

Clark's little body bounced up and down in a cute dance as he grabbed the little cookies that Travis scattered across the floor. Sporting a few more cookies in his hand, Travis looked thoughtful. “Everything is in the attic above my garage. Why?”

“The first thing on the agenda is decorating. It's fun and it will put you and I in the spirit. I didn't decorate yet as you could tell but *someone*, I'm not sure who has been interrupting my peaceful arrival since I pulled into my driveway.”

A warm fuzzy feeling flowed through Sage's body as she thought of lights, tinsel, red and green, a decorated tree, and angels everywhere.

“Well, that *someone* will find his decorations and we can get started after I'm done feeding Clark all these cookies. Then if you want, I can come help you.”

“I'd like that. But you have to help me find a tree first. Do you cut one down? Our property is protected and there is an abundance of trees in the back.”

“Last year was the last tree we cut down, I won't cut down any more, it was my mother's thing. She loved the smell, feel, and look of a live tree but I hate cutting them down since I already do that sometimes for creating my wood pieces.” It's necessary for my work, unnecessary for me to celebrate. I have a fake one they used a few years ago when my father was too sick to cut one down. It's in the attic too.”

“We always had a live tree.”

Half an hour later Sage and Travis pulled all the boxes out of the attic and Clark marched adorably down the stairs with gold tinsel around his neck.

“This is all you have?”

“Yeah, we had a fire in one shed this spring, it was my fault, an accident, and all the decorations for most of the holidays were lost. This is the old stuff

my parents had for their house. Before my father passed away, they owned a house near here, where I grew up. When he passed, I moved Mom in with me so she wouldn't be so lonely and her stuff went into the attic, but all my decorations went up in flames one night after I had a little too much to drink, and I reverted to my nasty habit of smoking cigarettes. I passed out in the shed, I was missing my parents terribly and it went up in flames. I was lucky to get out alive but I lost everything including a bunch of precious family heirlooms."

Horror gripping at her heart, Sage laid her hand over Travis' as they sat side by side in the living room. "I'm so sorry. How awful and it was an accident, not your fault. Losing a parent isn't easy, and you did the best you could."

Sage could see the pain tightly controlled in his features, a hint of unshed tears in his eyes. It hurt her heart to see him this way. "Family is important to me too, I'm sorry you went through all that and for your loss but we can get more. Why don't we go shopping in town? I bet they have some great stuff. Not to mention the diversion will do us both some good for different reasons."

"I guess you're right."

Mindless of what she was doing, Sage turned over his hand and studied it. "Wow, your hands get really messy from work. Does that come off?" Despite controlling herself, she made a face.

Amusement in his eyes Travis glanced at their hands. "No, that's as good as it gets. I'm a creator but I'm also a working man, this is clean for me with everything I do."

Sage sat quietly for a moment as Travis started emptying the boxes. Until this moment she'd scarcely looked at his cabin except to look at him, Clark, or outside. Everything registered all at once.

"Wow! Don't you ever clean up around here? I didn't even see all this last night or before. With so much clutter, how do you think straight?"

In every corner, on every surface sat piles of clutter, papers, clothing, and bags of treats. Everything was clean, with no garbage or dirty dishes but stuff and lots of it. Not one surface sat empty except the couches and chairs. Tables had knick knacks on them, pictures in frames, and decorations.

It was overwhelming all at once to Sage's organized mentality and she wondered how she'd avoided noticing it.

His humming didn't surprise her, as old habits die hard and he seemed to

make a lot of noise when he worked and he was working on emptying boxes. “I know where everything is right now. You could ask me for last year's tax return and I'd find it in two seconds, not because I'm a neat freak but because I have a system and method to my cluttered madness.”

Sage sat back, feeling a headache behind her eyes, and watched him move. Travis was swift and smooth, every action he took had a purpose as his highly functioning mind worked.

“So I take it you're a bit of a tidy woman? Everything has a place and is in it all the time?”

“You could say that, it's part of my career and what I love doing, organizing things. Do you mind if I straighten up around here? If I sit too long and look at it I'll lose my mind. Absolutely *no* clients come in here do they?”

“No. Never. This is my private space. Work is different from personal for me. My shop is a finely honed machine but my personal life is void of that order.” His chuckle caught Sage off guard.

“Clearly you like it this way.”

“I'm a Virgo. Many of us are notorious for cluttered lives but a mystical knowledge of its order beneath the chaos.”

“Ah, I'm a Cancer.” Sage didn't resist a smile, knowing little about astrology other than her sun sign and what most people regarded Cancers as being.

“Overly emotional and dramatic. I should have picked up on that. It makes sense now, and you're quiet, reserved, and thoughtful.”

“I am not!”

Chapter 6

Travis



“Yes you are, whether you admit it. I get it though, we are astrologically known for being a good pair, Cancer and Virgo. Oddly enough, you and I seem to be at each other’s throats so far more than not.”

Travis’ mind worked on various levels, processing his new work project, and where to go for decorations so he abandoned the boxes. “Come on, let’s get going. I don’t want to unnecessarily spend a lot on whatever I need.”

An hour later Sage was driving Travis nuts with her spending habits. “Come on, you need this garland and those other ornaments. I think two trees, one for each side of the workshop would be perfect.”

“No. One tree. Two is too expensive.”

Her pouty bottom lip caused a stir of physical attraction Travis wished he could squash. It was hard enough to control the stares some of the townsfolk gave as they passed from store to store, eyebrows raised in question.

“Come on, Travis. You can’t be such a cheapskate. This is an investment in your business, a tax write-off and you’ll have the decorations for years if you don’t set your shed on fire again. At least get the decorations and I will give you a live tree or two from my property when we pick mine.”

Stifling the annoyance he felt, Travis agreed. “Fine, but that’s it. We already bought a bunch of other stuff. I’m entertaining clients by not hosting

a benefit dinner for a global charity.”

Her smile caught Travis off guard, and he was unprepared for the emotions it stirred inside him. Attraction, fear, longing for something he couldn't and shouldn't be wanting at this stage in life. “Let's get something at the coffee shop across the street.”

Checkout was easy and expensive but Travis let it be. “Well, now that you've heisted my bank account, we can grab some coffee or whatever and head back to the house.”

“Aw, my treat then. I have to tell you I'm not saving much at saving. I think life is meant to be enjoyed. I have a small savings for emergencies and another for the future but I want to enjoy life, live as if it were my last.”

Travis held his tongue as he watched Sage sip her extravagant peppermint cocoa with whipped cream, candy on top, and a chocolate mint finishing it off.

“We never know when that time will come so every day should be treated because it could be our last. When my father died, I was but a baby. Mom told me he died in a car accident and raised me to appreciate every moment. Sometimes it's hard but I try to make every day count, not every penny.”

“You have a point and that must have been very hard on your mother.”

“I imagine it was, but she is made of iron. She never talked about it that much other than to comment on how much she loved him and how much I remind her of my father.”

“She taught you well, too many people don't look at life that way and miss opportunities. I might be a cheapskate but I know the value of people in my life and show it.”

It was hard to ignore the bit of whipped cream on her nose. “You have something on your nose.” Travis' finger inches from her face he pointed, then touched where the whipped cream had been. “There I got it.”

“Thank you. This is the best cocoa I've ever had. Here, have a taste.” She held the heavily laden mug in front of him.

“I'm good. Thanks, mine is fine.”

Her lip jutted out again, and she pouted. “Please.”

With the impulse inside him, Travis leaned in and surprised her with a kiss on the cheek. He gave them both little time to think about what he'd just done, sipped her cocoa, and handed the mug back to her.

When everything registered, his throat was dry and all thoughts flew out of his head except for the most important ones. How it felt to kiss her, his

need and want for another, the softness of her warm skin, and the shock in her eyes.

His breath was shaky when his lungs unfroze. "I'm ready to go, how about you?"

"Yes. Let's get out of here. We have a lot of decorating to do."

That one, shockingly amazing moment stayed with Travis for hours. They decorated his house and workshop, minus the trees.

"I think we should put them over here, Travis. There is more light, and it's closer to the entrance. Everyone likes to see bright festive things as they enter a room. They can see it, touch it and it's close to them... not all the way across your shop."

"But it's in my way. I want it over here. I have to work here too, not just now but as the weeks go by. I don't need clutter crowding my workspace."

"Your workspace is over there." Sage continued to assemble the garland and lights around the entrance to the workshop, tiny snowmen, angels, Santa, and soldiers of red gracing every space available.

"No. You need to remove that stuff and put it over there." His blood was boiling as he tried to work double-time on having a functioning workshop and a decorative space for the event. "I can't deal with this right now. If you can't take it down, I will and I'll do it myself. For goodness' sake, my mother never gave me this much trouble."

"Fine, you are the one who invited me here to help you, and you almost begged me. May I remind you it was me who was trying to relax peacefully when you thought to interrupt my holiday break."

Sage threw the garland to the ground and stormed out of the workshop in a huff. Travis' regret smacked him in the face when he realized how upset he'd made her.

He gave her time... the last thing he wanted to do was chase her off forever. Something about them together was both infuriating and comforting like an old work boot he couldn't stop wearing. It felt so good to wear it even though it irritated him it was so worn his toe poked out the front.

Dinner rolled around, and rather than buy pizza again and just keep working, he decided a peace offering was necessary. Travis had all the ingredients for his family's famous shepherd's pie so he tossed it together and brought it over when he was done.

Eager to see her, talk to her, and apologize, he almost forgot himself as Clark sat mannerly at his feet. "I guess I should knock."

The smell of brownies wafted through the crack in one window as a candle twinkled on the table. He knocked softly, worried she would still be mad at him and not forgive. The door creaked open and Sage stood holding a wine glass in her hand, a frown on her face. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Uncomfortable and feeling like a fool yet again, Travis leaned back on his boots. “I’m sorry about that. I was acting like an idiot again. I hope you can forgive me. I’m very territorial about my workspace, everything has to be just so.”

“Unlike the rest of your life?”

“Absolutely.” Travis held up the warm tray. “Still, I’m sorry but I made dinner, and Clark and I thought maybe you’d be hungry and want some company.”

Her eyes crinkled at the sides despite a lack of a smile. “Sure.” She moved aside for them to enter.

“I made Shepherd's Pie, I hope you eat that?”

“I do. Here Clark, come on, sit down.”

Travis watched, amused as she set up a high chair with a pillow between them so he could eat too. “This was my high chair for when I visited my grandparents, I found it earlier and I thought to get rid of it since children at this stage in my life are probably not an option. Clark might like it though.”

Dinner was easy and comforting as Travis and Sage fell back into getting to know each other through conversation. Something about being with her took the edge off his mind and helped him feel comfortable in his own skin.

Clark added lightness with his grunting, snorting, and oinking in pleasure or distaste for everything Sage offered after he ate little of the Shepherd’s Pie. “Well, he didn't like the peas or the corn, and he refused the carrots. What should I give him?”

Travis pulled out a bag of his favorite treats. “Here, give him a few of these on the tray. Let’s see what he does.”

Clark gobbled them up like a starved pig, snorting happily.

Travis had one foot in the door and one out when he turned to Sage. “This is going to sound strange but I hope it doesn't freak you out. When I’m with you I feel good, like I can just be and I don’t have to be doing something. Maybe it’s because you're a woman and I miss my mother’s presence so much in my life... maybe it’s just you. Whatever it is, thank you for that.”

“You're welcome.” Her smile, kind and generous Sage surprised Travis when she leaned in and kissed his cheek as he’d done at the cafe earlier.

“You do the same for me, which is very frightening on many levels. But I appreciate it and you. I just hope when we work on your decorations again tomorrow I can stop arguing. I hate arguing.”

Travis fought with himself, his mind, and his heart to regain equilibrium and not read into that little show of affection since he’d done the same. “Me too. By tomorrow the grumpy bear will have moved out. Good night.”

Neither made a gesture to move; she to close the door, he to step off the porch. Tempted by fate and the attraction swelling between him, Travis leaned in and touched his lips to hers.

The tenderness of her hand touching his cheek, stirred something deep and emotional in him. Suddenly, he ended the kiss, confused and nervous. “I should go. Good night, Sage.”

Everything he felt, from confusion to want, was reflected in her eyes. “Good night, Travis, Clark.” Her eyes lowered to the ground where Clark was sitting at Travis’ feet and she smiled and blew a kiss to him, then closed the door.

Travis was up before the sun rose, excitement and eagerness settled in his gut from hours ago. With a loud knock, he stood on her grandfather’s porch. “Come on, open up, princess, we got trees to cut down today.”

Chapter 7

Sage



Sage’s eyes would barely open as she heard the loud thudding of someone knocking on her door. She knew who it was right away and stumbled down the steps to answer the door. “Hold on, Travis, hold on.”

His gleaming smile could have easily competed against the sun and won. “Let’s go, let’s go. You can’t cut down trees wearing pajamas.”

Stepping back, she left the door open so he could enter and grabbed a cup of coffee. “I need a few minutes.”

“I’m thinking either you really like wearing pajamas all day or love to sleep.” His words came together so fast that Sage had a hard time registering what he was saying.

The only thing she got was about liking sleep. “Yes, I love to sleep, lots. I don’t get to do that much when I’m in Boston so I’m trying to catch up.”

Is the event planning business booming in Boston?”

“Yup, I make six figures easy every year, and that’s with paying the few employees I contract work out to.”

The sound of a loud thud, something hitting the floor rang behind her. Sage turned slightly to see what it was, Travis was on the floor out cold.

Wide awake and as quickly as possible she grabbed a bag of candy off the counter and her phone. “Oh, my goodness, Travis. Are you having another

one of those things, low blood sugar? I got candy here.”

His face remained still with no movement in his eyes or otherwise. His body was as stiff as a board. Anxiety and panic took over, Sage reached for her phone unsure of what else to do.

A large hand gripped hers tightly. A masculine voice snapped her out of her panic. “Don’t do that.”

“Oh, my gosh! Travis! Are you okay?”

His body shook uncontrollably. Sage’s phone slipped from her hand and landed on the tiled kitchen floor right before she took the liberty of removing herself, ignoring his amusement. “You’re laughing at me. I don’t think this is funny.”

Tears fell from her cheeks before Sage could stop them. Many scenarios had run through her mind in that moment of fear.

Sage acted oblivious and drank her coffee, watching the bright sun dance in the morning sky. Nothing seemed to quell her anger at Travis. When she turned around to yell at him, he was leaning against the wall, a serious look on his face.

“Sorry. I wasn’t trying to upset you and make you worry. I fell on the floor, shocked by how much you make in the city at event coordinating, and tried to make you laugh. Obviously, it went terribly wrong.”

“Yes, it did. I thought you were going to...” She couldn’t even say it. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. You were concerned for me and I made a joke of it. I’m sorry.” His arms snaked around her, and the feel of his strong, muscular chest was too hard to ignore. The need to be close and comforted took over.

Sage laid her head against his chest, his hot breath blowing against the top of her head. She cried, and cried, not even knowing why she cried. Still, Travis held her, his arms held tight to her and yet he said nothing.

After the wave of frightening emotions was gone, Sage felt embarrassed. “I’m sorry, how foolish of me to wet your shirt with my tears over a joke.”

The gentleness of Travis’ touch as he lifted her chin with his thumb made Sage shiver. “Don’t be sorry, your heart was in the right place.”

The stillness of the moment swept over Sage, his thumb cradling her chin, their eyes connected. Swallowing the tightness in her throat, she stepped back. Travis did too.

“Yup, Cancer, always overly emotional. Thank you for that, Sage.” Coughing in between words, he cleared his throat and moved to the doorway.

“When you're ready to go, I'm going to be out here waiting. Take your time.”

For the next hour, they tramped across her family's land, slowing down from time to time so Clark could keep up and once to check on Travis' blood sugar. The back of the property was laden with hundreds of evergreen trees, at one time it had been her family's dream of starting a tree farm.

“It's over here somewhere. I know the way. I can't believe I haven't found it yet.”

“Found what?” Travis was lagging behind, carrying Clark in his arms so they covered ground faster. He seemed tired to Sage yet his blood sugar was in the normal range.

“My family tree, the very first one my grandparents planted on this property when they bought the house. It was to be the first of many as Grandpa thought it would be a family tree farm. This tree was the only original one that took and lived while the dozen others that year all died. It became the foundation of our family's future farm.”

Sage looked in a circle from left to right, front to back, and found nothing. “I know it was right here.”

“So this was a tree farm and your first tree was about here?”

“Not a tree farm, the plan was a tree farm, but it never took root. But that tree became the foundation of our family. Every year we'd use it as a guide to find a different tree after we continued to plant others, but my grandparents vowed to never cut the tree down.”

An odd look passed over Travis' face as he looked around in the same circle.

Sage ignored him and continued her mission. “I am going to find this tree if it takes all day. I just need to find it and pay tribute to my family. On the tree is a family photo of everyone and it's decorated for Christmas year-round. Over the years, my mother and I, and anyone else who wanted, would attach little notes or tiny ornaments. It also served as an outdoor tree for the animals.”

Sage thought hard, she was close, she could feel it, the line of trees standing ahead of her was familiar. Her grandfather had planted those trees long ago as a border to the property beyond. The tree would be closer to her, rather than farther.

The mistletoe that clung to a tree to her left also told Sage she was getting closer. The treeline stretched a good couple hundred feet in either direction as the property was its widest at this point.

Moving to her left and going off instinct, Sage found the clearing where the tree should have been. She turned in a circle again. “I know this is the place.” Her eyes drifted across the landscape of trees, searching for the Balsam Fir. “Oh, my goodness! No!”

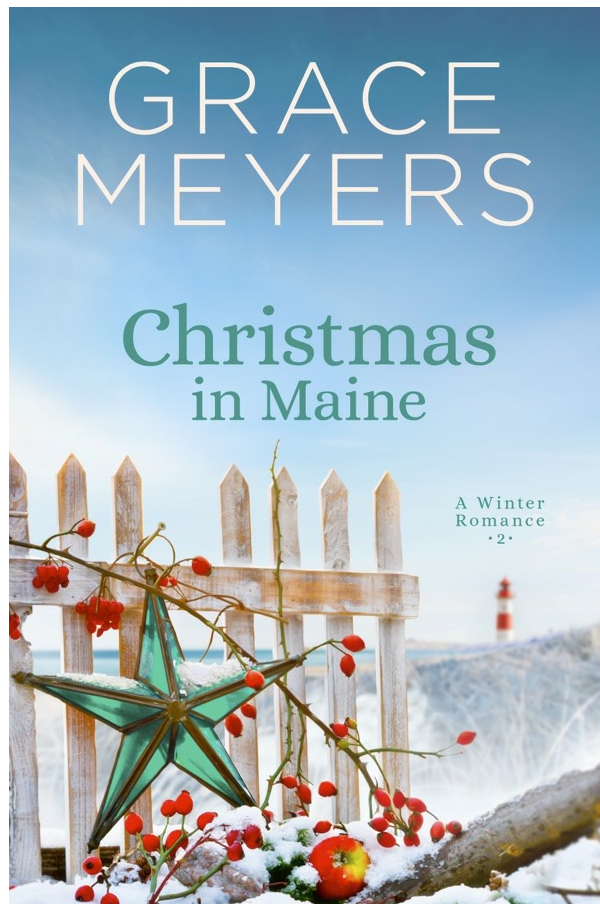
Sage fell to her knees in front of the spot where the tree should have been. Hands pressed to her face, covering her eyes, she wept. All the joy she’d felt every Christmas season finding this tree and placing a homemade ornament on it, was all gone. “How can this be?”

Looking right, then left, Sage realized more than one tree was missing, close to a dozen were gone from the property, all cut down to a tiny stump at the bottom.

“This land was protected. How could someone do this? It’s all gone Travis, it’s all gone...”

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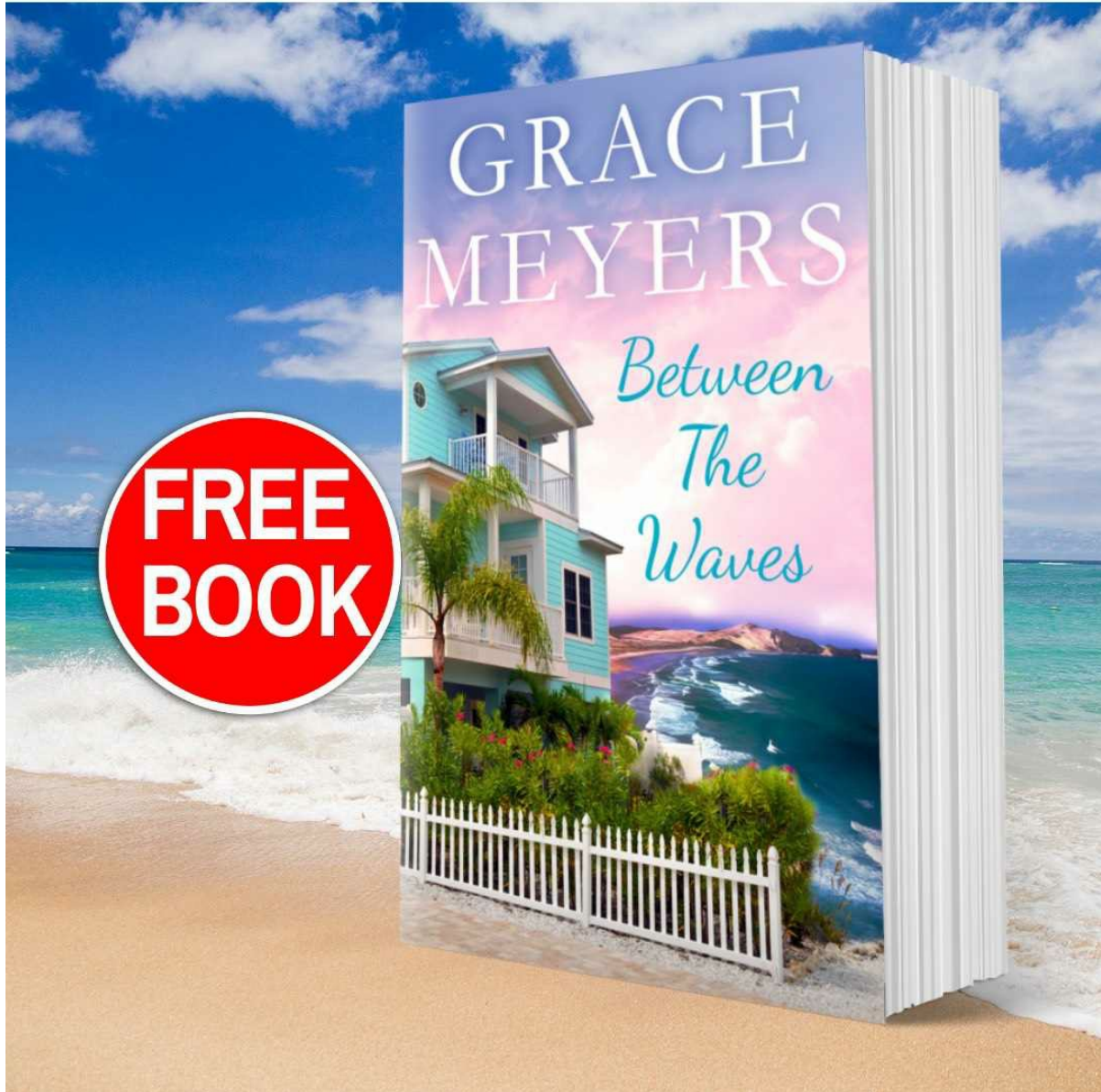
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