

# Fall in Kentbury.



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**CLAUDIA BURGOA**

*Fall*  
*in*  
*Kentbury*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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that include thought provoking subjects.  
If you would like to see a list of  
them, please check the link below with  
more information.

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Happy Reading,

Claudia

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# Chapter One



## McKay

“HERE’s to the shittiest week of *your life*.” Lou, my older sister, raises her margarita glass, the corners of her mouth turning up in a wry smile.

The low hum of laughter and clinking glasses surrounds us as we sit in a crowded bar. I’m not sure coming here tonight was such a good idea, but I didn’t have much else to do. I force my lips into a tight smile and lightly clink my glass against hers. “And just as the holidays are coming up. Joy,” I add flatly.

There won’t be couple Halloween costumes, Thanksgiving with the family, nor a white Christmas tucked in Switzerland. Okay, the last one was my idea—a way to avoid my parents—but I hoped my boyfriend would agree.

Honestly, I should be at home right now, hidden away in the darkest corner of my bedroom, a tub of ice cream my only companion as tears flow freely while I grieve for the grandmother I barely knew. Plus, mending a broken heart. But I’m not filled with grief since my mother didn’t nurture my relationship with Grandma Pili. And there’s certainly not sadness that Reginald Maloni Olsen the Fourth so abruptly ended our relationship.

Though, I’m pissed he did it during my grandmother’s funeral.

“So, are you ready for a trip down to see Grandma Eugenia?” Lou asks, ice cubes tinkling against her margarita glass. Her eyes flash with curiosity as she takes a sip.

“This is completely unfair. Why is it that I, the youngest, have been chosen for this honor?” My words drip with disbelief and irritation. Five siblings, yet the shitty jobs always fall on me.

Lou shrugs. “Simple hierarchy, my little one. Plus, it’s not like you have anything to do.”

The last comment feels like a jab to the throat. Seriously, did she have to go there?

“It’s not my fault that my job went poof.” I make a gesture with my hands, as if I just performed a magic trick and made something disappear into thin air. “Gone forever.”

My gaze drifts to my empty glass. I point at it, silently requesting a refill from the bartender. Of everything that’s been happening in my life lately, losing my job cut me the deepest. It wasn’t my dream job, but I’d worked for my father since my junior year of college.

I spent nine years of my life trying to show him I could be an asset. But the moment his bottom line teetered on the brink of red, what did he do? He eliminated positions and fired about a thousand employees—including his youngest daughter—me.

A bitter laugh escapes me. “Who knew saving a sinking ship meant throwing your own daughter overboard?”

The bartender refills my glass. I lift it and swirl it a couple times, staring into its amber depths, hoping to drown my anger, so I can continue doing my parents’ bidding without snapping.

If Dad had listened to little McKay, his company wouldn’t be in trouble. But I’m not one of his sons. My parents cling to archaic norms where a woman’s only worth lies in marriage and motherhood—in other words, they’re misogynistic assholes.

Obviously, my parents and I don’t see eye to eye. Ever since I can remember, I’ve been the misfit. Soon, Mom will start parading eligible suitors before me, prized stallions vying to replace my ex. Ideally, some heir with old money, a spotless reputation, and bulging accounts—the perfect match in their eyes. I smirk cynically. As if that would ever make me happy. I wish they could understand my aspirations are not theirs.

In fact, I wish I had aspirations of my own. I’ve been so wrapped up in meeting their needs, trying to make them proud, that I don’t even know what I want to do with my life. This

Vermont trip suddenly doesn't seem like such a bad idea. It can be an escape from my parents' rehearsed lectures and expectations.

As for my job situation, obviously I want to work, but what am I supposed to do now? I'm no longer the SEO for one of the top 500 companies. Honestly, I don't want to continue doing the same thing anyway.

The possibilities of a new future brighten my mood. I picture the peaceful Vermont countryside. Well, I've never actually been there, but I'm sure it's just like in those Hallmark movies—trees, snow, and hot cocoa around every corner. I wish Father had taken us to visit my grandparents growing up. But he doesn't have much contact with anyone in his family. As far as I know, he just calls his mother once a year and has his assistant send presents for the holidays.

I'm pretty sure my father loves just three things: my mother, money, and ... well, I hope us children too. His disdain for his own mother makes me wonder if she's as cold as he is. Will she even care to leave her small town to be closer to her son?

He wants Grandma to sell all her properties to a friend, so he can use the money to save his company. The corner of my lip lifts as I wonder what would happen if, instead of being my parents' puppet, I warn Grandma about their motives.

"Whatever you're thinking, don't," Lou warns, narrowing her gaze at me.

I bat my eyelashes innocently. "Excuse me?"

"I know that smirk," she says. "Just remember, if you don't go to Vermont, they'll send me instead. And I'm not leaving my children at the mercy of our crazy mother while my husband is working."

Lou's phone pings mid-rant, lighting up her face with a radiant smile. "It's Tony," she exclaims, voice brimming with so much joy you'd think they just started dating.

Seeing her excitement stirs an ache inside me. Will I ever find someone who loves me like Tony loves her? They've

been together since college but still act like besotted newlyweds. I watch as Lou giggles looking at her phone, eyes sparkling as she texts with her other half. I can't help but envy their relationship.

"Off to your husband and children," I quip playfully, waving a hand dismissively.

Lou shakes her head, brow furrowed in concern. "You need me."

"That's nonsense." I cross my heart like I used to when I was a child and she was babysitting. "I promise to be on my best behavior. You don't have to worry about me." I shrug with feigned nonchalance, masking what could be my best move yet.

"But you were dumped, and now you're unemployed," Lou says, squeezing my hand, eyes searching mine.

"I'm fine," I assure her. "It's not like life has ended. If anything, I don't have to deal with Reginald and the crappiest sex of my life anymore." I take a long sip, finishing my drink. "I might find someone who's actually good in bed and can give me an orgasm. Or two."

Lou cringes, leaning in to hiss, "Use your indoor voice, please," under her breath.

I erupt in uncontrolled laughter, the sound bubbling out. Okay, I might be a little tipsy and should restrain myself. But instead, I impulsively gulp Lou's drink in one swallow.

No one can blame me for drinking myself stupid. I have a lot to think about this weekend, and I just don't have the bandwidth for any of it. I'm twenty-nine without a clear direction on what I want to do with my life, and a family that's too self-involved to even see that I'm a little lost. I know Lou is trying to help, but she's more likely just trying to make sure I don't shirk my duties and leave everything to her.

A reckless idea occurs to me: what if, instead of going to Vermont to convince my estranged grandmother to leave, I'm the one who disappears?

I could sell my condo and leave Boston, sever all ties. Become someone new out west. McKay Margaret McFolley could vanish into anonymity.

Lou gently shakes her head, wordlessly disapproving as the bartender closes our tab with her credit card. “Don’t tempt fate,” she orders sternly. “Go home.”

A sigh spills from my lips. “Alright, fine, I won’t do anything crazy,” I concede, a small grin tugging at the corners of my mouth.

Lou responds with an exaggerated eye roll, knowing her little sister might do something reckless. She slips away, rushing through the busy tables and out of the bar.

Alone now, I turn to the bartender. “You know what I need?”

He quirks an eyebrow.

“To get laid.” The words leave me recklessly before I clap a hand over my mouth, eyes wide. Seriously, what is wrong with me tonight? I should go home and sober up before I do something stupid.

As if summoned, a man slides onto the stool beside me. “Well, hello there,” he says, his voice low and gravelly.

I’m momentarily stunned by his rugged handsomeness—sun-kissed hair. He’s casual yet sexy. His brown eyes meet mine, sparking a jittery feeling in my stomach. A subtle smile teases at his lips, sending my pulse racing. Tall and muscular with broad shoulders and biceps straining against his shirtsleeves. His self-assured stance radiates a quiet strength that makes my knees weak.

The smirk, though ... that smirk seems to promise something more. Maybe this will be the rebellious thing I’ll do instead of telling my grandmother to ignore her son. But can I jump into bed with a stranger?

One reckless night to break free from expectations? Or will I listen to my doubts and go home alone?

## Chapter Two



## Bishop

MY WEEKEND HAS TAKEN an unexpected turn. What happened to the good old bachelor parties from my twenties? We used to barhop from dusk till dawn, soaking up the Vegas lights and the teasing temptations of the strip clubs. It was a carefree time of indulgence and fleeting connections, igniting as quickly as they fizzled out. A weekend of reckless ecstasy always ending with a goodbye and a smile.

But that was then. Now, at thirty-five, every bachelor party I'm invited to ends up being a bust. Take last year for example. Last year, my best friend Landon was finally marrying my little sister. I wasn't expecting a strip club extravaganza, but at least a night out in New York or Boston. Instead, we went camping. Don't get me wrong, it was an enjoyable time, but still not what I had envisioned for a proper bachelor party send-off.

This weekend was my college roommate's bachelor party. I was certain we'd be barhopping or revisiting our favorite old strip club. Hell, it used to be his go-to spot back in college. But nope. We ended up at some complex with axe-throwing, mini-golf, and laser tag. The whole thing had a Chuck E. Cheese vibe, right down to the pizza slices.

I have to ask again: what the fuck happened to the good old-fashioned bachelor parties that pushed boundaries and blurred the lines between good and fucking amazing? The kind filled with reckless indulgence and carefree bliss?

Maybe I'm just getting old, but it seems those days are gone for good.

Frustration knots within me as I leave the complex. I don't want to return to the confines of my hotel room yet. Tomorrow, I have to drive back home, and I want to release some of this pent-up energy before then. I venture out for a

stroll through the bustling streets of Boston, hoping the city lights and energy will spark something in me.

A quaint bar and grill draws me in, maybe for a drink, a bite ... and hopefully, someone I can meet for the night.

As I slide onto a stool, the woman beside me yells, “To get laid.”

My ears perk up. That’s exactly what I need—a night with someone new, no strings attached. Just a fun connection, nothing more.

“Well, hello there,” I greet her with a grin.

But the words die on my lips as I take her in. My heart stutters. Her beauty hits me like a punch to the gut. Delicate features framed by waves of dark brown hair. Large, hazel eyes regarding me with a twinkle of mystery. Her full lips parted slightly as she studies my face.

There’s an undeniable charm to her, an elegance that’s both timeless and youthful. It’s not just about her looks. It’s the confidence with which she occupies her space, the intelligence evident in her eyes.

She’s somehow familiar. She has a face I’ve seen before but can’t quite place. It’s not just that, though. Her presence is magnetic, and I find myself inexplicably drawn to her.

*Get it together, Hops.* I clench my jaw, willing my thudding heart to slow down. She’s just a woman in a bar. I came here to let loose, not lose my head over some stranger.

“Hi,” she finally speaks, her voice as soft and hypnotic as her presence. For a moment, the din of the bar fades away, and there is only her—those mesmerizing eyes locking with mine, full of mystery. A shiver runs down my spine. Fate brought us together tonight, and I intend to make the most of it.

The spell is broken as the bartender approaches. “What are you having?”

I glance at her empty glasses—a margarita and a tumbler. “I’ll take a scotch on the rocks. And for you, darling? Another scotch?”

She sways slightly on the barstool. “You spread on a cracker,” she mumbles under her breath.

My smile falters. The enchanting haze of our meeting shatters. Though I’d love to oblige her wishful thinking, she’s clearly not in a state to consent.

The evening I had envisioned is over.

Over.

I scan the bar, searching for a friend or someone who might be responsible for her. “Are you here alone, darling?” I ask gently.

She glances hazily around the bar. “Yeah, my sister left me to go to her amazing husband and the terrors.”

I furrow my brow in confusion. “The terrors?”

“My niece and nephew,” she whispers, leaning in close. “They’re cute but destroy everything they touch.”

I laugh under my breath. “So your sister just left you here alone after you had”—I gesture at the empty glasses—“all that to drink?”

She waves a hand dismissively. “I’m a big girl. I can just get a ride whenever.”

I study her glazed eyes and wavering balance on the barstool. “And where is home, exactly?”

“Not far,” she mumbles evasively.

Something tells me she might not remember much about tonight, let alone make it home safely. Thinking of my own sister, I decide to take charge of this woman, at least for now.

“Well, why don’t I make sure you get home okay?” I offer.

She gives a sloppy grin. “You’re hot, but what if you’re a thief or murderer or something?”

I chuckle. “You really need to lay off the true crime shows.”

She jabs a finger at me. “Still, I don’t know you. You’d have to at least buy me dinner before taking me home.”

“Fair enough.” I extend my hand with a smile. “Bishop Harris, pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“McKay McFolley,” she responds. When our hands meet, a spark of electricity shoots up my arm. Her touch ignites something primal within me, radiating outward until my whole body thrums with awareness.

I clear my suddenly dry throat. “Why don’t you let me know where to drop you off before I head back to my hotel?” I catch the bartender’s eye. “I’m taking her home. Here’s my ID, so you know who I am.”

He glances at it and jots something down before handing it back with a grumble. “Don’t know why her sister ditched her like this.”

I have a few guesses, but getting McKay somewhere safe is my priority.

“Come on, darling, let’s get you home.” I help her stand, keeping an arm around her waist for support.

She blinks up at me as we walk outside. “Wanna buy my condo? It’s close by.”

I laugh under my breath. “You’re in no shape to be selling real estate right now.”

She pouts. “But we’re still having sex after dinner, right?”

I guide her outside and ask for her address, but instead she shows me her ID. I punch it into my phone and realize that we’re close by. I decide we can walk, hoping the night air will help sober her up a bit.

“Do you have condoms?” she asks loudly.

A woman shoots me a dirty look as she passes us. I’m relieved we’re not back home in Kentbury where everyone is all up in each other’s business.

“We probably won’t be needing those to get you home,” I say, hoping that’s the end of the conversation, but of course she doesn’t drop the subject.

“But we’ll need them later for sex,” she insists, swaying into me.

I feel my face getting hot. “I don’t believe we agreed to that, darling.”

“We don’t have to, it’s destiny.” She waves a hand dramatically. “I told the bartender I needed to get laid, by a guy who could give me a real orgasm or two. My ex didn’t know how to handle things right, if you know what I mean.”

I cringe, avoiding the curious stares of passersby. “I’m pretty sure everyone on this street knows what you mean.”

As we reach a stoplight, she asks loudly, “Do you make sure to please the women you sleep with?”

The couple next to us stifle laughter behind their hands. I can feel my face burning. I must be atoning for some sin in a past life.

“I don’t believe we know each other that well yet,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Oh, where are my manners? I’m McKay, but you can call me Mac.” She sticks out her hand with a sloppy grin, seemingly oblivious to my mortification. I don’t think she even remembers what happened at the bar, or that she showed me her ID.

I shake it briefly, praying she won’t recall any of this tomorrow morning. With any luck, I’ll never cross paths with her again after tonight.

The light changes, and we continue on. She rambles drunkenly about her parents, her ex-boyfriend, and her grandmother. She has to be in some small town by Monday to destitute her grandma ... but she might just run away to another country instead. There’s no way she’ll be an accessory to her father’s hideous plan.

The grandma will just end up in some assisted living facility, alone in the middle of a city she doesn’t know. Though, there’s a part of McKay that wonders if her grandma is just as soulless as her father. At least this woman isn’t cold

like them, but maybe she should just move to some other place and start fresh.

I can't imagine what that's like. My family is everything to me. Maybe it has to do with the fact that my father tried to be a mother and a father while working hard to keep our household together.

Obviously, my weekend hookup dreams have gone up in smoke, replaced by this sobering dose of karma. Now, my only mission is to get McKay home safely, so I can make my escape from this mess.

## Chapter Three



# McKay

LAST NIGHT WAS A TOTAL DISASTER.

One minute I'm saying goodbye to my sister, the next I'm making a complete fool of myself in front of an unfairly hot guy. My brain knew everything coming out of my mouth was idiotic, but I just couldn't stop talking. I blame the toxic mix of tequila and my sister Lou, who just abandoned me as if I didn't matter.

There's no other reason I'd act like such an ass.

And the guy was kind enough to walk me to my house, listen to my babbling, and then leave a glass of water next to some ibuprofen with a note: *Take two and don't drive until Tuesday—go west and leave your grandmother alone.*

God, I can't believe I spilled my entire pathetic life story to a complete stranger.

What the hell happened to me last night? This so isn't like me.

After downing the water, I pour some OJ, cringing at the fuzziness of last night. Normally, I'd never chat up some rando at a bar. I'm an introvert among all the introverts. Thank God, I'll never see that guy again. What was his name? Devon? Dustin? Something with a D. Or was it a B? Doesn't matter anyway.

When I check my phone, there are several texts from Lou reminding me that I have to be in Kentbury later today. Dad left me a voicemail authorizing me to use the emergency credit card for the trip. I don't need his money—or his blessing to act accordingly to get things done.

What I actually need from him is ... honestly, I don't even know—love, recognition, support. The basic parental stuff that he should provide for free, but he's never bothered to give.

I remember my drunken epiphany from last night about severing ties with my family, who don't seem to give two shits about me. Could I really find a new family out there?

It seems impossible, but I'm willing to try and figure out my own future for once. There were so many things I wanted to be before college, but I couldn't pursue them because of dear old Dad's master plan for me.

Well, screw his plan. I'm done living for his expectations and approval. It's time I figure out what I really want and go after it, no matter how scary or crazy it seems. I've got some thinking and soul-searching to do.

But what if the first order of business is heading to Kentbury to meet the grandmother who couldn't bother to raise her son with some decent morals? If she'd instilled some basic human values in my father, maybe my life wouldn't be such a mess.

I grab my to-do list and start making a plan:

1. Contact the realtor to sell the condo.
2. Pack everything I need in my car.
3. Go to Kentbury and get answers about Dad's emotional constipation. (There has to be a reason why he's soulless.)
4. Decide where to move next.
5. Find happiness.

I read it over three times. This is exactly how I'll take control of my future. McKay Margaret McFolley is grabbing life by the horns from here on out. No more passively going with the flow. I'm charting my own course and won't stop until I find the happiness I deserve.

With new determination, I start packing. Kentbury, get ready for a new McKay—one who doesn't give a damn what anyone thinks. I have some questions for Eugenia McFolley and won't leave without answers. This trip is just the first step in taking charge of my destiny.

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AFTER SPEAKING to the real estate agent, I hesitate, fingers drumming on the kitchen counter. I take a deep breath and decide to hold off on selling until I'm back from Kentbury. I pack light, tossing just a few essentials into my duffel bag, and set off early Monday morning and relax for the rest of Sunday.

The three hour drive stretches past four as I take the scenic route, windows rolled down and music turned up. My hair whips wildly in the autumn breeze as the winding roads lead me through a countryside painted in brilliant fall colors. Vibrant red maples and golden oaks line the route. With the crisp air on my face, I belt along to my nostalgic 2000s playlist—Britney, \*NSYNC, and the Backstreet Boys. The sugary pop tunes take me back to childhood as the miles roll by under sun-dappled trees. I drum the beat on the steering wheel, lost for a moment in the past.

It's so unfortunate that no matter how hard I try I can't nail the choreography of "I Want You Back"—not like I could since I'm driving—but I still belt out the lyrics at the top of my lungs since it's my favorite song.

I quickly turn down the music and sit up straight when the GPS announces, "Take the next exit toward Kentbury."

The last thing I want is to make a bad first impression on my grandmother and give her a reason to kick me out before I get the answers I came for. Whether she decides to leave her house to move in with her son ... well, that's none of my business anyway.

As I drive through the charming small town, I'm falling in love with the quaint storefronts and picturesque houses. A smile tugs at my lips when I pass the bakery with the punny name, Kneady Kentbury Bakes. The displays of fresh-baked goods in the window draw me in. Farther down the block, the cozy bookstore looks inviting too. Wreaths, pumpkins, and corn husks decorate the shops, getting me into the autumn

spirit. The brilliant fall foliage contrasts beautifully with the décor. I wish my father had brought us here when I was little.

My stomach knots with anxiety as I wonder if coming here was a mistake. What if my grandmother turns out to be a horrible person? No, I tell myself, I'm only here for a couple days. I just need to get the information I came for.

My first stop is the bed and breakfast, where thankfully they had one room left. As I pull up to the stately Victorian house, the aroma of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies wafts through my open window, beckoning me inside.

“Good afternoon,” the woman behind the counter greets me with a warm smile. “You must be McKay.”

I raise my eyebrows in surprise before I even get a chance to respond with, “Yes, that's me. How did you know?”

“You're the only guest checking in today,” she replies. “I'm Knightly Miller, but everyone calls me Lee. If you need anything during your stay, just let me know.”

I hand over my credit card and ID. Soon after, she passes me my room key and documents back. “Have a lovely stay.”

“Thank you,” I reply. I hesitate before asking, “Do you happen to know where the McFolley farm is located?”

Her smile fades as she frowns. “I had a feeling you might be related to Genie McFolley.”

Genie McFolley? I guess that's short for Eugenia?

“Um, yes. She's my grandmother,” I say, chewing my bottom lip anxiously.

She studies me for a moment, her eyes scanning my face. Then she says, “Her house isn't far from here. I can give you a map with the town's amenities and include her address.”

Knightly pulls out a glossy brochure and starts scribbling on it with a pen.

As I glance around the cozy reception area, I spot a table set with coffee, water, and a plate of freshly baked cookies. “Are those cookies from the bakery down the street?” I ask.

“Oh no, we make all our baked goods in-house,” she replies matter-of-factly. “Dinner is served at six, and we have breakfast available starting at eight in the morning.”

I nod, trying to hide my nerves. My stomach is knotted with anxiety about meeting my estranged grandmother for the first time. I resist the urge to grab one of the tempting chocolate chip cookies to calm myself. Maybe I’ll stop by the bakery after I’m done with the first meet up.

“Thank you for the information,” I say to Knightly as I take the brochure from her and hoist my duffel bag strap higher onto my shoulder. “I’ll probably just head to my room for a bit to freshen up.”

“Of course, take your time getting settled,” Knightly replies warmly. “Your room is just upstairs, first door on the right. If you need anything else, please let me know.”

“Thanks again,” I say with an appreciative smile. I turn and make my way slowly up the creaky wooden stairs, nerves still churning in my stomach. I find my room and unlock the door. After setting my bag down, I take a deep breath. Just a quick rest, and then I’ll head out to finally meet my grandmother. I say a silent prayer that our first encounter goes okay before heading to the bathroom to splash some water on my face.

## Chapter Four



## McKay

ACCORDING to the map Knightly gave me, everything in town seems to be within walking distance. I change out of my comfy leggings and sweatshirt into a nicer pair of jeans and a sweater before heading out. Although wandering the charming bookstore, other shops, and the quaint bakery would be more enjoyable than showing up unannounced at my grandmother's house, I know I need to tackle the most difficult part of this trip first.

I allow myself a few minutes to gaze longingly into the window of the charming vintage record store, thinking of how much time I could spend sifting through their merchandise. As I pass through the center of town, the aroma of fresh bread and pastries floats out from the bakery, drawing me in. I wave at the friendly older woman behind the counter before forcing myself to keep walking.

I continue on until I reach the small cottage at the end of Autumn Ridge Street. Vibrant red and orange leaves blanket the front yard, contrasting the faded white siding and dark green shutters of the house. A creaky-looking wooden porch wraps around the front, complete with a porch swing and rocking chairs ideal for warmer evenings. As I walk up the stone path to the front steps, I take a deep breath, my heart racing with nerves at the thought of coming face-to-face with the grandmother I've never met.

Though I'm nervous, I gather my courage and knock firmly on the faded green door. I shift my weight back and forth, listening closely for any sounds of movement inside. All I hear is a sorrowful meow from a cat somewhere in the house. After a minute, I knock again, a little louder this time, but still no answer.

Well, so much for tackling the hard part first. I double-check the address my dad gave me to the one Knightly jotted down, confirming I'm in the right place. I soon realize that the

owner of the bed and breakfast gave me a completely different address. Or maybe Grandma Eugenia is out running errands? I decide to head back into the center of town and ask in one of the shops if they know where McFolley's farm is located.

As I walk back, I wonder if there's been some kind of mix-up. Maybe Knightly had thought I was someone else's granddaughter when she gave me directions here. It only takes me about ten minutes to get back to my car at the bed and breakfast. I punch the latest farm address I was provided into the navigation system and follow the robotic voice guiding me out of town.

When I pull up to the address, however, there's a large sign out front that reads "Harris Orchard." My shoulders slump in frustration and confusion. Where is my grandmother's house? Did my father send me on some kind of wild goose chase? I'm beginning to think this won't be as straightforward as I'd hoped.

I follow the signs and park in the visitor area, then head into the small gift shop.

"Good afternoon. Welcome to Harris Orchard," a cheery female voice calls out. "I'll be right with you."

A moment later, a young woman in her early twenties with funky purple hair and colorful tattoos covering her arms bounces up to greet me.

"Hi there, I was wondering ..." I glance around with uncertainty. "Do you happen to know where McFolley's farm is located?"

She tilts her head, brow furrowing. "McFolley's? I don't know that place, sorry."

I sigh. "My dad said it was around here somewhere."

"I wouldn't know." She gives an apologetic shrug. "I'm sorta new around the area and just started working here a few weeks ago. I'm going to college in the next town over, but I'm originally from Nebraska."

I nod, pressing my lips together anxiously. "You're a bit far east," I try to joke, not showing my disappointment. I was

really hoping someone local would be able to point me in the right direction.

“Yeah, I’m a little far from home,” she confirms with an easy laugh. “But it’s such a small town, I don’t miss my family too much.”

She glances around the shop. “Can I interest you in some fresh cider or maple candy? We’ve also got t-shirts and other souvenirs.” She gestures to the wall displaying an array of logo merchandise.

“Maybe on my way out, after I’ve finished my ... business,” I reply evasively, sighing.

“I wish Mr. Harris were here, he would be able to help you.” She taps her chin in thought. “Actually, he might be in the brewery. Let me send him a message.”

She pulls out her phone, fingers flying across the screen. After a few moments, she says, “Yep, he’s back there. Just head over to the next building and slide the door open. He’ll probably know where you’re trying to go. You’re sure it’s not the Harris farm that you’re looking for?”

“Positive,” I confirm with a nod.

I follow her directions to the brewery building. As I approach, a tall, ruggedly handsome guy with broad shoulders and muscular arms comes through the door. His tight t-shirt clings to his chiseled chest and ripples with each movement, showing off his gym-honed physique. His five o’clock shadow accentuates a strong, square jawline that could cut glass. A baseball cap sits casually atop his thick dark hair.

“Oh, what a pleasant surprise,” he says with a heart-melting grin, his deep, velvety voice sending shivers down my spine.

I freeze, eyes widening. “Excuse me?”

Then it hits me—I’m pretty sure this Greek god of a man is the charming guy I met in Boston. The bar guy with the panty-dropping smile who heard all about my pathetic week and my grandmother. But I could be mistaken though, right?

“Um, I know you, don’t I?” I ask hesitantly, taking an instinctive step back.

“I thought we agreed you’d be heading west and leaving your poor grandmother alone,” he says in an accusatory tone.

I scratch the back of my neck awkwardly. “So … how much did I tell you when we met at the bar on Saturday?”

“Enough to know that Genie doesn’t need you barging in here,” he replies sternly.

“Genie?” I ask, furrowing my brows in confusion. “Her name is Eugenia.”

“We, the people who actually care about her, call her Genie. You should go back home and leave her in peace.”

I shake my head. “Somehow I remember you being nicer that night …” I trail off, unsure how to finish that sentence.

“Well, I would be, if you weren’t here to take advantage of your grandmother,” he retorts.

I hold up my phone defensively. “According to my dad, her farm is supposed to be here. But this is Harris Orchard. Know anything about that?”

“Plenty,” he says vaguely with a careless shrug.

I roll my eyes in frustration. “Do you know another word that’s not plenty?”

“Probably,” he replies sarcastically.

“Listen,” I explain, holding my hands up placatingly, “I just came here to meet my grandmother and maybe understand why her son turned out the way he did. After that, I’ll be on my way.”

He crosses his arms over his broad chest. “What if she doesn’t want to talk to you?”

I mirror his stance defensively. “Is that why she didn’t answer when I went to her house earlier?”

He cocks an eyebrow. “How do you know where she lives?”

“Knightly at the bed and breakfast gave me the address,” I say, meeting his scrutinizing gaze.

He drags a hand down his face with a groan. “Of course she told you. That’s my sister for you.”

“Your sister?” I ask in surprise.

“Yeah, Knightly Miller is my sister,” he grumbles.

I consider this new information. “Well, if you’re so protective of my grandmother, she can’t be as bad as my dad. Otherwise, you wouldn’t care so much.”

He narrows his eyes. “How would you know?”

“You seem like the kind of guy who fights for what’s right,” I reply evenly.

“Can I strongly suggest you leave town?” he asks pointedly, jaw clenched.

I cross my arms. “As soon as I speak to my grandmother, I’ll be gone.”

“So you can drag her back to Boston with you?” he accuses with a scowl. “I don’t think so.”

I glance around the charming orchard and shake my head. “No, I just want to understand why my family turned out the way they did. If she’s a good person, it’s probably best that she stays far away from my dad.”

He considers this. “And will you be staying away from him too?”

“Probably,” I say with a sigh. “I have to figure out how to sell my condo without him finding out though.”

At his questioning look, I explain, “He helped with a small part of the down payment and co-signed the loan. So untangling ourselves financially might be tricky.”

He nods slowly, then says in a judgmental tone, “In other words, he’s supporting you financially and you can’t handle life without him.”

“Nope, I already paid him back—with interest,” I reply defensively. “He just never removed his name from the deed. So technically he could claim half the sale even though I’m the only one making the mortgage payments.”

He gives me a patronizing, pitying look that makes my blood boil. Clearly, he thinks I’m either spoiled or stupid.

I lift my chin. “I can make it just fine without his help, you know.”

He just shrugs, I guess he doesn’t believe me, but I don’t care.

“Well, Mr. Harris, if that’s all, I think I’ll go back to my grandmother’s and try getting her to open her door,” I say, turning on my heel.

“I’m warning you, leave her alone,” he calls after me sharply.

I toss a glare over my shoulder. “Worry about your own business and stay in your lane,” I snap. His condescending attitude is really getting on my last nerve. For some odd reason, he causes me to react out of the norm. I stomp away fuming, more determined than ever to speak to my estranged grandmother and get the truth, no matter what this arrogant guy says.

## Chapter Five



## McKay

INSTEAD OF GOING BACK to my grandmother's, I stop by the charming bakery to pick up some pastries, hoping they might help improve my mood. As I enter the cozy little shop, the rich, sweet aroma of freshly baked goods envelops me. Inside, rustic wood counters display mouthwatering arrays of croissants, muffins, scones and more.

Behind the counter stands a sweet old woman with silvery hair swept up in a bun. Her eyes crinkle at the corners as she smiles warmly at me, reminiscent of the stereotypical kindly grandmother.

“Hello, dear, what can I get for you?” she asks. Her voice is gentle and soothing, instantly making me feel at ease in the cozy bakery.

I take a deep breath, letting the charming ambiance melt away the residual tension from my encounter at the Harris Orchard. I return the woman’s warm smile as I look over the cases filled with tempting, buttery, flaky pastries.

The scents of cinnamon, nutmeg, and toasted pecans waft through the cozy bakery. “Hello, I think this is my new favorite bakery, and everything looks delicious,” I say. “What do you recommend?”

“This time of year, customers love our pumpkin cookies and cider muffins,” the woman behind the counter says with a cheerful smile. She gestures to the baked goods artfully arranged in the case. “Though you really can’t go wrong with our croissants either.”

I tap my chin, considering all the options spread out before me. “Do you serve coffee here too?”

“Oh no, for that you’ll have to pop over to the coffee shop just down the way,” she explains. “But my friend Beverly sells my pastries there too, so you can enjoy them together.”

I furrow my brow curiously. “How come you don’t have a coffee machine here?”

“It’s just me and some part-time help running this little bakery,” she says with a laugh. “I don’t think we could handle a full coffee operation too.” She gestures down the street. “My friend Beverly is the real barista. She makes a killer latte and serves my pastries at the café.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she holds up a hand graciously. “I know what you’re going to say. You’re not the first tourist with big ideas to reinvent things around here.” She winks. “Wouldn’t want to put my friend out of business, now, would I?”

The woman reaches into a box and pulls out a piece of parchment paper, using it to pick up a freshly baked croissant. “Here, this one’s on the house.”

“Oh, you don’t have to,” I protest, but she insists, placing the flaky pastry in my hand. I take a small bite, the crisp outer layer giving way to tender, buttery layers inside. The croissant melts in my mouth.

“This is incredible,” I exclaim after swallowing the first bite. “What’s your secret?”

“Just an old family recipe,” she says with a smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Well, I hope your children and grandchildren are already learning it because this is amazing.”

At that, her expression falls. She busies herself wiping down the counter, a sadness coming over her weathered features. I feel a pang of regret for bringing up what must be a sore subject.

An uncomfortable silence descends between us. I feel a twinge of sadness for this kind woman. Will I end up alone like her someday? My own family is so self-involved, I doubt they’ll ever care about me. And what if I never find someone who loves me? Is that what happened to this woman?

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you sad,” I mumble apologetically.

“Oh, just feeling nostalgic is all,” she replies with a delicate sigh. “My husband and I had always dreamed of having a big family, but after our first child I wasn’t able to have any more.”

I stare at her, unsure how to respond. Her words hit close to home, echoing my own worries about the future.

Clearly wanting to change the subject, she asks brightly, “What brings you here to Kentbury, dear?” As she speaks, she slips through the swinging door into the kitchen.

I follow with my eyes, as I gather my thoughts. Should I confess the real reason I’m here?

When she returns, she hands me a glass of water. “Here you are, dear, in case you’re thirsty.”

“You’re too kind, thank you,” I say sincerely, taking the glass. Since she opened up about her family, I decide to share a little too.

“I’m actually here because … well, I want to learn more about my past,” I explain hesitantly.

“Your past? Are you from Kentbury originally?” she asks.

“No. No, I’m not,” I answer quickly. Then I reconsider. “Well, I mean, not that I know of, but I think my father might’ve been born in this town. Though, I’ve never been here before, but after seeing how lovely it is, I do wish my parents had brought me as a child.”

“It is beautiful in the fall,” she agrees wistfully. “Though truthfully, it’s wonderful here all year round. I’m glad you decided to come connect with your roots, wherever they may lead.”

She gives me an encouraging smile. Despite the brief sadness earlier, her warmth and kindness bolsters me.

“Well, to be honest, my parents kind of sent me here originally,” I confess with a grimace. “But I didn’t really want to come for their reasons. I don’t think they have the best intentions, you know?”

The woman nods understandingly, her kind eyes encouraging me to continue.

I find myself opening up and telling her how over the past few days, I've come to realize my parents don't seem to grasp the meaning of family. Not like what I've witnessed with my friends—the love, support, and kindness they share with their loved ones.

I let out an exasperated breath. "I mean, what kind of father fires his own daughter? He thinks I'm just going to find some rich guy who'll marry me, and immediately start popping out babies."

"What do you want?" the woman asks gently, her head tilted.

I chew my lip, considering the question. "Is it pathetic if I say I don't really know?" I ask with a self-deprecating laugh. "I'm almost thirty, and I'm just realizing now that working for my father was a dead-end job. It's not that I don't have ambitions, I just always assumed I'd move up in the company and become someone important within the organization."

"You still have your whole life ahead of you, dear," she says encouragingly, patting my hand. "There are always ways to work around any problem."

I nod, feeling a bit more hopeful. "You're right, I'll figure it out. I just want to understand first why my dad is so heartless. Maybe it's because his own parents were the same way?" I speculate with a sigh.

The woman chuckles and shakes her head. "You think it's his parents' fault?"

"I don't know, I'm probably just grasping at straws," I say with a frustrated sigh. "Did I even tell you what my dad wants me to do here?"

The woman shakes her head, brow furrowing. "No, you haven't mentioned that yet."

"He wants me to convince my estranged grandmother"—I lean closer and whisper—"to move to Boston so he can sell off her properties."

She clicks her tongue disapprovingly. “Why didn’t he come himself if it’s so important?”

“Dad always sends me to do his dirty work,” I reply bitterly. “I’m the youngest of five. Everyone else has ‘more important’ things to do.”

I throw my hands up in exasperation. “But I really don’t want to uproot my grandma just so she can rot alone in some assisted living facility. I just want her to explain why my family is so dysfunctional. Then maybe I’ll head out west and find a place where I can belong.”

“Well, if you don’t have anywhere to go, you’re welcome to stick around here for a bit,” she offers kindly. “I could use an extra baker, even if I can’t pay much.”

I pop the last delicious bite of croissant into my mouth and smile. “I’d love to learn how to make these amazing pastries, though you’ll have to be patient with me—baking really isn’t my strong suit.”

“You just need a good teacher, dear,” she says with an encouraging wink. Then she adds, “So who’s this elusive grandmother you’re trying to find? Maybe I could take you to meet her.”

I hesitate before answering quietly, “She’s kind of hiding from me, I think. The guy who runs Harris Orchard already warned me away from her.”

“Oh, Bishop. I wouldn’t worry about him, he’s just a big softie,” she scoffs. “I can take you to meet your grandma, what’s her name?”

“Eugenia McFolley,” I reply, watching her closely.

She studies me for a long moment, then shakes her head sadly. “I’m so sorry Ulysses didn’t show you the love you deserve, sweetheart. But while you figure things out, you’re welcome to stay with me as long as you’d like.”

My eyes widen in surprise. “You know my father?”

She reaches across and pats my hand gently. “I’m Eugenia, but you can call me Genie or Grandma Genie, dear.”

## Chapter Six



## Bishop

MCKAY'S CAR disappears down the road in a blur, leaving me clenching my fists in frustration. I should call my cousin, the town sheriff, and see if he can give McKay a speeding ticket or better yet, get her out of Kentbury before she reaches Genie. And though I have plenty of chores to do at the orchard before the Fall Festival starts, I decide to take matters into my own hands before McKay's presence becomes a big problem.

I leap into my truck and peel out, tires spitting gravel as I race toward the bed and breakfast, hoping to catch McKay there. Instead, I find Knightly in the kitchen, apron stretched over her swollen belly.

"Shouldn't you be at home with your feet up, Lee?" I ask as I stride through the doorway, scanning the room. "You should leave the cooking to André."

Knightly rests a hand on her bump and rolls her eyes. "I'm pregnant, not sick. This little one won't be here until February." She turns back to the stove, dismissing me with a wave of her hand.

I step closer, jaw tightening, hands curling into fists. Why is she always so fucking stubborn? Landon should be taking better care of my sister, but knowing her, she won't listen to him either.

"Have it your way," I mutter through gritted teeth.

She glances at me over her shoulder, one eyebrow raised. "Why are you here in the middle of the day?"

I meet her gaze, eyes narrowing. "You gave Genie's address to one of your guests."

"Yeah, her granddaughter," she states with a big grin.

Why is my sister so trusting?

“That woman is here to drag Genie to Boston and take over her properties,” I hiss, leaning in.

Knightly’s forehead creases in a frown, spoon pausing mid-stir. “And how exactly do you know that?”

I open and close my mouth, hesitating. Heat crawls up my neck as memories of the weekend flash through my mind. “It’s not important,” I mumble, looking away.

“Somehow I don’t believe that.” She folds her arms across her chest, eyes narrowing.

I rake a hand through my hair, struggling to rein in my frustration. I don’t want to discuss how I met McKay—Knightly’s either going to laugh or have some other reaction I’d rather avoid.

“We can discuss it later,” I say, unable to meet her scrutinizing gaze. I just need her to drop it for now. “Can you just tell me where McKay is?”

Knightly purses her lips. “Are you asking me to help you track down my guest?”

My sister is part of Kentbury’s underground network. With a few quick texts, they can locate anyone in town in seconds.

I give Knightly my most innocent, pleading smile. “Would you mind?”

She narrows her eyes, unmoved. “You need to tell me a lot more than ‘she’s trying to turn her grandmother destitute.’”

“That’s enough,” I say firmly, then soften my tone. “What would you do if someone was trying to take everything from Dad?” I ask, trying a different angle.

Knightly slams her spoon on the counter. “Neither of us would do that,” she snaps.

Obviously not. We’re all extremely protective of Dad. If anything, my siblings and I compete over who gets to care for him as he ages. Not that he needs us—at seventy, he’s still strong and healthy.

“Well, remember how Genie looked after us when we were young?” I ask. Knightly’s expression softens slightly at the memory. “It’s our duty to look after her now,” I press on urgently.

After Mom died, the whole town rallied around Dad to help care for us three young kids. Knightly was just a baby, Damian was five, and I was barely three years old. Now it’s our turn to make sure Genie is cared for.

Knightly sighs, shoulders slumping in resignation. “Fine, but don’t be an asshole.”

I hold up my hands innocently. “Wouldn’t dream of it, but I’ll do it if she forces me.”

After a few moments, Knightly’s phone buzzes. She glances at the screen and winces. “McKay’s already at the bakery with Genie.”

I throw my hands up in frustration. “This could’ve been avoided if you hadn’t—”

“I only gave her Genie’s home address,” Knightly interrupts, glaring at me. “McKay seemed nice. A little shy but pleasant.”

I let out a derisive laugh. “You obviously don’t know her.”

Knightly plants her fists on her hips in challenge. “And you do?”

I meet her gaze. “Better than you.”

McKay isn’t shy at all, but I guess she likes to come off that way to people who haven’t dealt with her before. Well, I’m ready to expose who she really is and get her out of this town for good.

“Thank you for your help,” I call over my shoulder as I hurry out the door. I’m tempted to grab one of Knightly’s freshly baked cookies but stop myself. I know Genie will have homemade pumpkin cookies at her bakery.

I jump into my truck and peel out of the B&B’s gravel driveway, tires spitting stones as I speed toward the town

square. I spot McKay's car parked in front of Genie's bakery. Clenching my jaw, I slam my truck door and stride inside.

Genie looks up from behind the counter and smiles warmly. "Bishop. I'm so glad you could meet my granddaughter, McKay." She gestures to the woman sitting at a table with a cup of tea. "Isn't she just lovely?"

I level a cold stare at McKay. "She needs to leave. Now."

Genie's smile falters as she glances between us worriedly. "Hopefully, she can stay for a little while ..."

Mckay sets down her cup gently, meeting my glare with a sly smile. "I was just telling Grandma here about my job back in Boston. I'd love to hear more about this charming little town of yours. She mentioned something about the Fall Festival."

I clench my fists, struggling to contain my anger. How dare she act so sweet and innocent? I know exactly why she's here, and I won't let her manipulate Genie.

I cross my arms defiantly. "So, she's told you all about her job, has she?"

Genie's face falls, disappointment weighing down her features. "Can you believe my own son fired her?" She shakes her head sadly. "I wish I could say I raised Ulysses better than that, but unfortunately, I can't."

Mckay turns to Genie, brow furrowing. "What do you mean?"

Genie gives her a mournful smile. "It was a long time ago. When my husband Linus died, his parents fought for custody and won. They knew all the right people and took Ulysses from me." Her voice catches. "I don't think he ever forgave me for losing him, but I didn't have the same financial resources. They didn't let me call him. I wrote so many letters trying to stay in touch, but he never responded."

"I'm so sorry," McKay says gently. "He's never talked about his childhood or parents at all. I know you exist from the gifts and occasional calls, but that's it."

“He’s never called me himself,” Genie says sadly. “Only his assistant reaches out once a year to make sure I got the Christmas gift.”

McKay scoffs in disgust. “That sounds just like him.”

Genie grasps McKay’s hands warmly. “I’m so glad I finally got to meet you. How long can you stay in town?”

I step between them, gently prying their hands apart. “She’s leaving now,” I state firmly, holding McKay’s defiant gaze.

“But she needs a job and a place to stay,” Genie protests, not seeing what her granddaughter is up to. “I have a spare guest room.”

I whirl around to face Genie. “She’s only here to run you out of town and sell your properties,” I insist, desperation creeping into my voice. How can Genie not see through her act?

McKay gives me a challenging look. “Speaking of properties, where is the McFolley family farm? I stopped by, but it’s gone.”

I glance at Genie because that’s her story to tell, not mine.

“Well, I should close up the bakery for now,” Genie says decisively. She turns to me with a smile. “Bishop, why don’t you help McKay check out of the B&B, then bring her to my place? That’ll give me time to get the guest room ready.”

“That’s really not necessary,” McKay protests. “I don’t want to be a bother.”

At the same time, I state firmly, “She’s leaving town. Today.”

Genie waves her hand dismissively. “You two are being silly. She’s staying, and that’s final.” Before we can argue further, she disappears into the back room.

I clench my jaw as McKay grabs her purse and saunters toward the exit. This isn’t over yet.

Outside, McKay pauses by her car. “I don’t understand why you’re barging into something that’s not your business. Just stay out of it.”

I stalk close to her and wrench open the door. I lean down and meet her challenging gaze. “Unlike you, or your father, I care about the people in this town. I don’t buy your act, but I’ll make sure you don’t get away with ...” I trail off because I can’t understand why she’s here.

She chuckles. “Just stay away, okay? I’ll be here for a while.”

“Just so you know, you won’t be staying long.”

McKay just smiles smugly. “We’ll see about that.”

As McKay climbs into her car, she brushes against me, and I catch a whiff of her floral perfume. I have to admit, even though she’s infuriating, she smells amazing. She smiles up at me, those big hazel eyes fluttering, and for a second I imagine leaning down and kissing those full, smirking lips.

I mentally shake myself. What am I thinking? She’s trying to swindle Genie out of everything she has. I can’t let myself get distracted by McKay’s beauty or charm.

Clearing my throat, I shut the door firmly and walk toward my truck. As we pull away, I keep my eyes fixed straight ahead. I won’t let her get to me. She’ll be out of Kentbury soon enough.

Soon.

Enough.

## Chapter Seven



## Bishop

IT DOESN'T TAKE me long to help McKay check out from the B&B. Once I'm done, I immediately go back to work. There's no point in hanging around while Genie bonds with her long-lost granddaughter. I worry about what might happen if McKay convinces her to leave, but I doubt much damage can be done in one day. Against my better judgment, I have to set this aside. I have a lot to do before the Fall Festival. Thankfully, Bethany, the events coordinator at Harris Ski Resort, handles most of the planning. I don't know why I agreed to continue this tradition, but at least I have help.

Still, while I'm busy at the farm repairing the fence around the alpaca enclosure, I can't stop thinking about McKay. There's something about this unforeseen reunion that doesn't feel right. Technically, I don't have anything to lose, but I don't have to like it, do I?

It's around nine when I finally get home, my stomach growling. In the kitchen, I grab some bread, turkey, and cheese and throw together a sandwich. I add a few slices of tomato and spread on some home-made mustard, my mind wandering as I think about everything that went down today. After twisting the cap back on the mustard, I snag a beer from the fridge before collapsing onto the deck. I've barely taken a bite when Damian shows up, his brow all scrunched up.

“Where have you been?” He tries to look stern with his arms crossed, but it comes off as petulant.

I raise an eyebrow, biting a grin back. “You checking up on me?”

He scoffs, scuffing his boot against the deck. “You missed dinner at Lee's. She's worried you're going to scare off Genie's granddaughter.”

“And you came to ...” I trail my voice but wait for him to finish the sentence. I take a long swig of beer, waiting for him

to continue.

“Landon doesn’t want us to upset Lee,” he mutters, staring at the ground.

“So you came to warn me, huh?” I say, keeping my tone light despite his meddling. Landon might’ve mentioned something, but Damian is very protective of our little sister.

He gives a half-hearted shrug. “I don’t really give a damn about this situation.” Damian’s eyes flick to mine briefly before darting away. “Why is it even a situation?”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Damian has always been emotionally clueless. As Lee says, his emotional intelligence is that of a teaspoon. There’s no way he’d understand why McKay’s presence is problematic. I can already imagine him blurting out something obtuse like: “Genie’s not your family.” Relationships outside his little bubble are incomprehensible to him.

“You don’t have to worry about it,” I say tiredly, hoping to end this pointless conversation. “I have everything under control.”

He sets his jaw stubbornly, skepticism brewing in his eyes. Some things never change.

I sigh, softening my tone. “What’s on your mind?”

“The last time you had things ‘under control,’ you lost the vineyard,” he says accusingly.

I clench my jaw, biting back a scathing retort. Fuck, we’ve been over this a thousand times. “I didn’t lose the vineyard. I just decided not to buy it. Now can you please leave?”

“It was supposed to become part of the Harris estate. Now it belongs to Landon and Holden Miller,” he presses, a hint of his old resentment creeping in.

I let out a sharp laugh. “Landon, our brother-in-law and best friend? Wow, I can’t imagine what it would be like to become your enemy.”

“And Holden, don’t forget Holden owns it too,” Damian adds pointedly from above me, his jaw tightening. Some

things never change.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. How could I forget their mysterious feud? They used to be inseparable until Holden went off to college and they inexplicably stopped speaking. Damian still refuses to share what happened between them. But it'll be interesting to see how they interact when forced together again once Holden returns next year.

"You need to let things go," I say wearily.

Damian's eyes flash with anger. "This is just like everything else. You don't give a fuck about anything."

I bite my tongue to keep from snapping back. He couldn't be more wrong, but it's pointless to explain that other things matter more to me. I choose to focus my energy on the small brewery, the orchard, and the farm—more than enough for one person to manage.

That's exactly Damian's problem. He wants to control everything, as long as it means bossing people around. The only thing he actually enjoys doing is working at the ski resort, which he's damn good at. I just wish he'd leave the rest of us be.

"There's more to life than the bottom line," I tell him before taking a large bite of my sandwich. "Try having a life."

"It's not like you have a family like Lee," he says dismissively, but I see a flash of envy in his eyes that disappears just as quickly as it showed.

"Are we going there?" I ask, swallowing. He's older than me, yet I don't see him settling down anytime soon. "You're still sleeping around with the guests."

"I find it relaxing," he says with a careless shrug.

"Until you knock someone up." I give him a pointed look.

"That was Landon, not me. I'm careful," he states, glancing around shiftily.

The doorbell rings, and Damian slips out the back as I go to answer it. My breath catches when I see McKay standing there, looking beautiful in a cozy sweater and jeans that hug

her curves. Her chestnut hair falls in loose waves over her shoulders. I have to tear my gaze away, reminding myself I need to keep my distance, no matter how strongly I'm drawn to her.

"Hello?" I stare at her, caught off guard. "Are you lost?"

She shakes her head, chestnut waves swaying. "Grandma sent me with cookies." McKay lifts her hand, and I see she's holding a bag of pumpkin cookies, my favorites.

"Thank you?" I say uncertainly, eyebrows raised.

"Earlier, I told her how we met and she wanted me to come thank you for taking care of me when I needed it." She presses her lips together bashfully. "Actually, I really appreciate what you did that night. I'm not usually like that, you know?"

"What exactly are we talking about?" I dare to ask, rubbing my neck awkwardly. "You drank a lot, came on a little too strong while we walked toward your house, and then there was the striptease."

"I stripped?" she squeaks.

"Nah, but you talked a lot."

She scoffs. "If I tell you I'm an introvert, would you believe me?"

I burst into laughter, head shaking in disbelief.

"I can't remember how much I told you, but it had been a hard week. It seemed easy to start drinking and get tipsy while I was with my sister. But then ... tipsy became drunk. I couldn't stop myself from blurting everything. That's really not my style. I generally prefer to keep to myself." She looks down, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Well, I'm glad I'm the one who took you home and no one took advantage of you."

Her cheeks flush pink. "Also sorry for being so forthcoming. I'm never like that."

“You never spread ... anyone on a cracker?” I ask teasingly, enjoying watching her blush deepen.

She bites her lip, eyes darting away shyly. “Not really.”

“And your boyfriend never gave you orgasms, huh?”

She shuffles her feet, cheeks now scarlet. “Ex-boyfriend. And yeah, I never ... he was bad in bed. It was like having a pap smear.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk.” I shake my head, arms crossed over my chest. “Why are you here, in Kentbury? I thought you said you wouldn’t come.”

She fidgets with her fingers, eyes downcast. “I’ve come to the conclusion that my family is too self-centered. I wanted to figure out why Dad is so heartless. I thought my grandmother could answer a few of my questions.”

“And did you get your answers?”

McKay nods, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Some, yeah.”

“Now you’re leaving.”

“I don’t have a plan just yet,” she says softly, peeking up at me. “And it would be nice to learn more about the only good person I’m related to.”

I rub the back of my neck uneasily. “Listen, your grandmother matters to us. If you’re here to—”

“I’m only staying a few days or weeks,” she interjects. “My ulterior motive is to get to know her and learn how to bake. She’s not what I expected, you know?”

“Just don’t cause any trouble while you’re here,” I say, unable to keep a small smile from tugging at my lips.

She raises an eyebrow. “Trouble? Me?” She places a hand on her chest in mock offense. “I’m nothing but an angel.”

“An angel who can’t hold her liquor, apparently,” I joke.

She laughs, the sound warm and melodic. “Good point. I solemnly swear not to overindulge again while I’m here.”

Her smile makes my heart flutter despite my attempts to keep my distance. As we continue chatting on the doorstep, I can't help but feel a spark of anticipation for what's to come during her stay, however short it may be. There's something special about this woman, and I want to find out what it is.

## Chapter Eight



## McKay

MY MIND IS STILL REELING after the emotional conversation with my grandmother, dredging up my father's painful childhood, and how it shaped the flawed man he's become. Sympathy wars with frustration inside me. Dad lost so much, yet chose to carry on that cycle of dysfunction. And my poor siblings are already mirroring him, absorbing those twisted lessons.

"Are you okay?" Bishop's gentle voice cuts through my turbulent thoughts.

I force a smile, even as my stomach knots. "Yeah, just trying to think of somewhere I can go to unwind at this hour. There must be something like a bookstore or a coffee shop open, right?"

He chuckles softly. "This is a small town. Almost everything is closed before eight. Though ..." He taps his chin thoughtfully. "You could always try the ski resort. If I remember correctly, their room service is open until midnight."

I can't help but laugh at the implication. "Getting a room just to binge on desserts and hide from my family seems a bit dramatic, even for me."

One of Bishop's eyebrows quirk up teasingly. "That's very specific."

"Lou does it at least twice a month to recharge," I explain with an eye roll.

"Remind me who Lou is again?" Bishop asks curiously.

"My sister. She's the second of five, I'm the youngest."

Bishop shakes his head in amusement. "Five kids and only one turned out to be a somewhat decent human being."

"Hey," I protest lightly. "I'm a good person."

“I’m only teasing,” he assures me with a grin. “I really don’t know you that well yet. From what you’ve said, the person I met this weekend seems different from the real you.”

I sigh. “I want to think there’s more to me than just being shy and introverted. But who knows, maybe without my shell I’d be just as loud and chatty as the rest of them.”

“So the rest of your siblings make a habit of stealing candy from children?” Bishop jokes.

I smack his arm playfully. “Stop it. They’re not monsters. Just ... misguided scrooges. They’re a little too obsessed with money and status.” I bite my lip. “I guess I’m the black sheep who wants more out of life than possessions and pedigree.”

Bishop smiles warmly. “Nothing wrong with that. I’d take a kind heart over a fat bank account any day. Don’t let them make you feel otherwise.”

“Yep,” I answer lightly, deciding not to burden him with my siblings’ failed marriages and questionable life choices.

Bishop tilts his head toward the inside of his cozy cabin. “Would you like to come in for a bit?”

I hesitate. “Oh, I wouldn’t want to impose ...”

“You wouldn’t be,” he assures me. “I could use the company.”

His warm brown eyes are so inviting, I find myself unable to resist. And despite knowing I should head back to my grandmother’s, I nod. He opens the door wider, and gestures for me to enter.

I step over the threshold into the warmth of the rustic yet homey space that makes me feel at ease almost immediately. This feels nothing like the cold mansion I grew up in. Bishop’s home is full of life.

“This is a really nice place,” I remark as I follow him inside. “You live here alone?”

“Yep, mi casa es su casa,” Bishop says warmly. “Make yourself comfortable.” He waves a hand toward the cozy

living room. “Can I get you something to drink? Water, beer . . .”

“Ooh, what kind of beer?” I ask curiously.

He grins. “Actually, never mind. I remember you can’t handle your liquor,” he teases.

I make a face at him. “Ha, ha, very funny.”

With a playful wink, Bishop heads to the fridge and returns with two chilled bottles. As he twists off the caps, a proud smile tugs at his lips. “I brew these myself,” he explains.

I take a sip of the beer, the crisp amber liquid pleasantly surprising me with subtle citrus notes. “Oh wow, this is really good,” I say. “So what exactly is it that you do in the orchard?”

“*I own the orchard,*” he replies, settling into an armchair across from me. “I make craft beers and hard ciders, among other things.” He smiles sheepishly as he rubs the back of his neck.

“Is that why you bought my grandmother’s farm?” I guess.

Bishop nods. “Yeah. We already had one orchard, but I wanted to expand it. I sold part of another business to my brother so I could buy your grandmother’s farm, though she only agreed to sell it to me under one condition.” He pauses. “That I would keep the annual Fall Festival going. It’s a tradition that means a lot to this town and her.”

“So what does your involvement with the festival entail?”

“Well . . .” As Bishop speaks, I close my eyes and let his words paint a picture in my mind of this tradition coming alive on the orchard grounds.

Children’s laughter rings out as they race through hay bales stacked into mazes, while rides lumber through the orchards full of families nestled together.

I can imagine the crunch of fallen leaves underfoot as Bishop, and I stroll along hand in hand, admiring the trees erupting in brilliant shades of amber, ruby, and gold. The crisp autumn air carries the sweet, tangy scent of fresh-pressed cider

and the warmth of crackling bonfires at night when the adults can taste the different types of hard cider he produces along with some guest companies who'll join this weekend.

Bishop's voice fills with fondness and nostalgia, conveying his deep love for these traditions and the community, sounding just like my grandmother earlier today. Seems like Kentbury is a lot more than just a town. It's a real home for many.

For some inexplicable reason, I find myself leaning closer, envisioning wandering the lively fair with him, huddled close with mugs of steaming cider to ward off the autumn chill. A sense of belonging washes over me, one I've never felt so strongly before. I want to stick around for more than just a few days, but obviously I can't. There doesn't seem to be a place in here for me.

Then where is it that I belong?

## Chapter Nine



## McKay

THOUGH I'M TEMPTED to stay for hours more, talking with Bishop about everything and nothing, I call it a night after finishing one of his delicious homebrews.

Bishop walks me back to my grandmother's house, our footsteps crunching on the quiet, moonlit roads. Anticipation simmers inside me, wondering if he'll make a move before we part ways. But as we near the front steps, I give an awkward little wave and hurry inside, not trusting myself around this man who stirs up such unfamiliar feelings in me.

Despite my fatigue, sleep evades me as I lie restlessly in bed, mind spinning with thoughts of Bishop. By three-thirty a.m. I surrender and get up to start my day, heading downstairs to help my grandmother in the bakery as planned.

"Morning," she greets me warmly as I enter the cozy kitchen. Her searching gaze sweeps over me. "You look tired, dear. Did you get any sleep at all last night?"

I give a noncommittal shrug, avoiding her too-perceptive eyes as I tie my hair into a ponytail.

"I noticed you came home quite late," she continues, her voice is soft. "Wouldn't have anything to do with a certain young orchard owner, would it?" The teasing draws a smile to my face.

"Well, in theory, you did send me to Bishop's," I reply, fidgeting with my hair. "But I was too wound up to sleep after our talk, and he was kind enough to tell me more about the festival and the town's history. Did you know he's one of the last descendants of the founders?"

My grandmother nods knowingly. "I hope you have some energy left, dear, you'll need it this morning." She claps her hands together briskly. "Ready to head to the bakery?"

I take a deep breath, sending up a little prayer that I don't mess this up. "More than ready."

We leave the house and stroll down the quiet streets as the first hints of dawn lighten the sky. Our footsteps echo on the cobblestones.

"Do you walk every day?" I ask.

"Unless there's snow on the ground," she confirms. "Then one of the boys usually comes to pick me up—Bishop, Damian, or Landon."

At their names, she launches into telling me more about the Harris family. Steve and his three children: Damian, Bishop, and Knightly. They own the ski resort, the orchard, and the B&B. Their mother, Rose, passed away when the boys were just toddlers, and Knightly was a baby, leaving Steve to raise them alone. Landon is Lee's husband, but he's been part of the family since they were children.

My grandmother's voice fills with affection as she describes their roles in Kentbury. I can tell this town and its people mean everything to her, and I feel myself falling under the same spell of belonging.

By the time we reach the cheery bakery, I'm fully immersed in my grandmother's world. I just hope I can do her and this place justice for as long as I stay.

The bakery kitchen envelops me in warmth and the sweet scent of sugar as my grandmother ties an apron around her waist and hands me another one.

"Let's start with something simple: chocolate chip cookies," she declares, patting the industrial mixer. "Those are great for beginners, and people can never resist the classics."

She opens a faded box labeled "Recipes" and pulls out a slightly yellowed, flour-smudged index card. Handing it to me, she says, "We'll make two batches. Follow my lead but be sure to measure everything precisely as the card instructs."

"The key is not to overmix once you add the flour," she advises, demonstrating how to gently fold it in. I'm surprised

we're using our hands and not the industrial mixer. "Just until everything is barely combined."

I copy her movements, feeling the dough come together silky and smooth beneath my fingers. Next come the chocolate chips, which I take care to disperse evenly through the mix.

"Grease those trays while I check that the ovens are ready for the first batches," she says over her shoulder, already moving toward the large industrial ovens.

With practiced, efficient motions, Grandma rolls the dough into balls and arranges them neatly on the baking sheets. "A little space between lets them spread just right," she explains, and I follow her instructions.

As the first batch bakes with the sugary aroma wrapping around me like a hug, she pats my shoulder. "You're a natural, dear. With my recipes and your hands, we'll make a baker of you yet."

"I don't know about natural, but I'm ready to try the next recipe," I reply with a hopeful smile.

My grandmother beams and gestures me over to a large mixing bowl. "Next up, pumpkin cookies. My most popular fall treat. Are you ready?"

"As ready as this rookie can be," I say, rolling up my sleeves with determination.

Over the next few hours, we work our way through the day's baking orders. Trays of muffins and scones for the local coffee shop, bags of chocolate and oatmeal bites for the ski resort, and plenty of stock to fill the bakery shelves.

By 8:00 a.m., Grandma flips the sign to 'Open' and customers start trickling in. I'm manning the register when the door chimes and a woman enters holding the hand of a small, bubbly, pigtailed girl.

"Good morning, Lucy," my grandmother greets warmly, bending down to the little girl's height. "And who do we have here?"

“This is my niece, Anna,” the woman replies, smiling down at the little girl clutching her hand. “She’s visiting for the week along with her parents and baby brother.”

My grandmother grabs a fresh snickerdoodle cookie from the display case and hands it to Anna with a playful wink. “Well, welcome to our little town, Miss Anna. This one’s on the house.”

Anna’s eyes widen in delight. “Thank you,” she exclaims through a mouthful of cookie.

As Grandma chats with Lucy, I help box up the order, a warmth blooms in my chest that I haven’t felt in years. For the first time in a long time, I feel at home—like I truly belong here.

Yet as soon as the thought crosses my mind, worry sinks in. What will happen to me when it’s time to leave Kentbury and my grandmother behind?

I know she doesn’t really need my help here. This bakery and community are her whole world. Even if my father or brothers came to convince her to move to Boston, she would never agree to leave this place. She has everything she needs right here—her livelihood, caring neighbors, and a cozy home.

I also know my father only cares about Grandma’s properties. He wants to sell them to a developer friend, so they can turn the land into flashy, modern complexes. Hopefully, once he realizes she doesn’t actually own any of the lots he wanted, he’ll quickly lose interest in this quirky small town.

“Everything okay?” my grandmother asks, noticing my pensive expression after Lucy and Anna leave.

“Oh yes, of course,” I assure her. “I just really love how friendly and close-knit everyone is here. Back home, I don’t even know my neighbors’ names, let alone chat with them like old friends. There’s something special about this town.”

My grandmother smiles, her eyes crinkling in the corners. “That’s the magic of Kentbury,” she says with a wink.

I sigh wistfully. “I’m really going to miss it when I have to leave.”

“Who says you have to go anywhere?” my grandmother responds, arching her brow.

I fiddle with a loose thread on my apron. “There’s nothing here for me long term.”

My grandmother clasps my shoulder reassuringly. “Stop worrying about the future, dear, and enjoy right now. You’ll find your place eventually, even if it’s far from Kentbury. Just trust that everything will work out in your favor.”

I nod, though I wish I could share her optimism. She makes it sound so straightforward, but I’ve never felt like I truly belonged anywhere before.

What is it I’m really looking for? And could this quaint little town possibly be the place I finally call home? The questions nag at me as I glance out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of Bishop walking down the street. Though we spoke last night about his life, he didn’t mention his schedule.

“You know what you should do?” my grandmother suggests, her eyes lighting up. “Help Hops with the Fall Festival preparations.”

I furrow my brow. “Who’s Hops?”

“That’s Bishop’s nickname around here,” she explains with a chuckle.

The endearment makes me smile. It piques my curiosity so I ask, “Why did you sell him the farm on the condition that he continues the Fall Festival tradition anyway?”

My grandmother smiles fondly. “Because I knew he was the perfect person to take good care of the land, but who’ll also carry on with the tradition. But I think he could really use some extra help this year.” She taps her chin thoughtfully. “Why don’t you go over to the orchard after lunch and see if he needs an extra pair of hands?”

I bite my lip warily. “Are you sure you won’t need me here?”

“Oh, nonsense,” she says, waving her hand. “I’ll be just fine, you already helped me with all the baking. Now go on

and have some fun and make sure he's doing exactly what's needed, so everyone has fun this upcoming weekend."

My nerves and excitement battle within me, but I can't fight the pull I feel toward Bishop and his world. I just pray I don't make a complete fool of myself like I've done since the first day we met.

## Chapter Ten



## Bishop

I'M PERCHED HIGH on a ladder, snipping away at reluctant maple branches. They rustle and resist beneath my shears, but then the world blurs for a second as a glint of chestnut hair catches the corner of my eye. I pause, balancing carefully on the rung to squint down at the orchard.

Below, McKay hesitates among the rows, doe-eyed as she takes in the maze of trees. A gentle exhale escapes me involuntarily at the sight of her. There's a gravitational pull I can't explain, something deep and intangible drawing me to this near-stranger. A crooked smile tugs at my lips, unbidden but genuine.

Slowly, I descend the ladder, leaves crunching under my boots as I approach. "Well, hey there," I call out, swiping the sweat from my brow. McKay turns, relief flooding her face when she spots me.

"Lost or just admiring the view?" I ask lightly, a teasing lilt to my voice. Her answering grin tells me it's both.

The sunlight creates a halo around her, making her hair look like the changing leaves—fiery, passionate, and alive. I'm not sure what it is about McKay that attracts me. She's like the first breath of crisp fall air after a stifling summer—refreshing, grounding, reminding me of cozy firesides and the warmth of home, even when the world grows cold.

"My grandmother suggested I come to help you with the Fall Festival preparations," she says, biting her lip nervously as I approach. Up close, her hazel eyes are even more stunning, flecks of gold sparkling in the afternoon sun.

I lean against the ladder casually. "You're not intruding at all. I can always use the company out here. It gets pretty quiet when it's just me and the trees."

"Why am I not surprised to find you up in a tree?" she teases, her voice a soft murmur mingling with the distant

birdsong.

“I prefer it more when I’m brewing cider or beer,” I confess, arching an eyebrow suggestively. “That’s an art. I’d be happy show you how sometime.”

Her cheeks turn a pretty pink that makes me wish I could whisk her back to my place and have my way with her. The palpable tension between us is growing with each passing day. There’s undeniable attraction, though I don’t think I’ll ever be ready to admit what’s happening between us out loud. This is the story of my life: falling for someone clearly out of my league who enjoys the lifestyle and luxuries of big cities. I’m just a simple man.

“So, you want to help me with something else instead?” I ask, arched brow belying my casual tone.

McKay smiles then, relaxing a bit. “Well, I don’t have much experience with festivals, but I’m happy to help however I can.” Her voice feels like a caress against my skin.

She looks so earnest standing there bathed in dappled orchard light. Wisps of hair dance around her face, catching the breeze, and it takes all my willpower not to reach out and sweep them back behind her ear.

“Thank you so much for the offer, but everything’s set for the festival,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck. “Bethany’s got it handled.”

McKay clears her throat, unable to hide her disappointment. “Oh, well I’m glad you have it covered then.” She shifts her weight awkwardly, not meeting my gaze.

I narrow mine, studying her reaction. Is she jealous thinking there’s something between me and Bethany?

“Knightly suggested I use the event planner for the ski resort, so I don’t fuck up the festival,” I explain, wanting to make it clear there’s nothing beyond professionalism with my employee. “If you want to help Bethany, she’s probably at the resort having lunch with her husband.”

“Oh,” McKay says, noticeably relaxing her stance. A tension I hadn’t realized was there seems to seep from her

shoulders.

Before I can stop myself, I reach out, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. It's an innocent gesture, yet the air crackles with electricity at even this faint touch. McKay's eyes dart to my lips for the briefest moment before she whispers my name. "Bishop ..."

The longing in that single word makes my heart thunder in my chest. Unable to resist any longer, I draw her closer, murmuring her name like a prayer. "McKay."

Her breathing grows shallow, hands trembling ever so slightly. This is the moment I've been waiting for since we met. Though it feels far longer.

"Can I?" I rasp, voice thick with desire.

McKay gives the subtlest of nods, eyes shining. That's all the consent I need to close the distance between us at last.

Cupping her face gently, I tilt her chin upward. Our lips meet, soft and questioning at first, cautiously testing this new boundary. Then, as if a dam breaks, pent-up desire surges through me. I deepen the kiss urgently, unable to get enough of her sweet taste, the plush give of her lips against mine.

The world fades away as I lose myself in this moment. Time seems to stop, granting us a stolen interlude. McKay responds with equal fervor, her fingers weaving into my hair, pulling me impossibly closer. I pour all my unspoken feelings into the kiss, wishing to freeze this perfect moment in amber.

When we finally pull back for air, foreheads touching as we gasp raggedly, the enormity of what just happened washes over me. Our mingled breaths speak words we cannot yet say aloud. I caress her flushed cheek reverently, knowing I am utterly lost to this woman. There is no going back now, but there's also no future for us.

"That ..." she begins, voice shaky, eyes still glazed with desire.

"Was just perfect," I complete her thought, unable to keep the grin from my face.

McKay smiles brightly, hazel eyes dancing with mischief and joy. I chuckle and pull her close, savoring the feel of her in my arms.

The thought of eventually letting her go already pains me. One day, maybe I'll find a woman who sees me as enough, who will stay instead of disappearing back to her big city life. But for now, I know how fleeting this is. We only have a few days, weeks at most, before she'll leave.

I push the inevitable heartache aside, focusing only on this moment together. I'll deal with tomorrow when it comes. Right now, I just want to memorize every detail of her. The flutter of her lashes, her quickened breath, the sweet taste still lingering from her kiss.

## Chapter Eleven



## Bishop

MCKAY STAYS with me for the rest of the day. Since we're busy, I'm able to keep my hands—and lips—to myself, though barely. By dinnertime, I decide to invite her back to my place. I'm not sure what can happen between us, but I do want to spend more time with her.

Since I don't have much in the fridge, I pull out a lasagna from the freezer that Knightly dropped off last week. Yes, I know, my sister babies me a lot. But I could never take that joy away from her, so I let her mother me. Hey, I'm just being a good brother.

"This is delicious," McKay says between bites. "But do you ever cook for yourself?"

"I know how, but it's only me so I really don't do it often," I explain to her. "How about you?"

"I can survive in the kitchen, but I'm more of a takeout pro," she admits sheepishly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Before my dad fired me, I was working sixty to eighty hours a week."

"And he still fired you?" I ask incredulously.

"He cut my position. Claimed it didn't make sense to keep me on when someday I would get married and stay at home with my children," McKay explains bitterly, shaking her head.

"Right, I forgot your dad is a misogynistic asshole," I reply with a scowl.

"I wish I could defend him." She sighs, pushing her empty plate away. "So what about you? What will you do after the festival ends? Is there something planned for Christmas?"

I shrug. "The big holiday events happen at the resort. My siblings handle all that now." I dust my hands together. "Stopped being my problem when I sold Damian my share of the business."

“Why would you do that?” McKay asks curiously.

“I’m a simple man, I like what I do. Plus, Damian is better suited for it,” I say, taking her plate to the kitchen. I don’t add how suffocated and adrift I felt trying to run an empire I never wanted.

McKay follows me, leaning against the counter. “I think you do plenty here.”

“Not many would agree with you on that,” I reply wryly, rinsing the dishes.

“So tell me, why is a great guy like Bishop Harris single?”

I pause, shoulders tensing. “The women I’ve dated were just passing through. Never stuck around long,” I say tightly. Can’t blame them for seeing this small-town life isn’t enough.

“Oh,” McKay murmurs, glancing away. The unspoken implication hangs between us. She’s no different.

“I didn’t mean you,” I add quickly. “Just … you get the idea.” I turn to face her with a sigh, knowing I’ve killed the light mood.

Still, I decide to elaborate. “A couple years back, my live-in girlfriend wanted me to sell everything and move with her to LA. Needless to say, we broke up, and she left.”

“You didn’t love her enough to do that. I’m sure that with the right woman you’ll do just about anything,” McKay states.

I shake my head. “More than I just can’t see my life outside of Kentbury. As I said, I’m a simple guy.”

“Have you tried living somewhere else?”

“College. I went to Boston and stuck around a couple years after graduating. Worst years of my life.” I grimace at the memory. “I’m not made for big cities.”

“At least you know what you want in life,” McKay says wistfully, a note of longing in her voice. “Must be nice to feel so sure of your path.”

She gazes out the window, brow furrowed, lost in thought. I sense her turmoil, that inner struggle to find meaning and

purpose. Impulsively, I reach out and give her hand a comforting squeeze.

“You’ll find your place,” I assure her gently. I wish I could convince her to do it here, but the last thing she needs is someone trying to influence her. She has to find herself. “Just give it time.”

“Grandma said the same,” McKay replies, her gaze distant. “This place feels like home, but at the same time, I know I’m only saying that because I’ve never really belonged anywhere before. It’s like when someone says ‘I love you’ for the first time, and you think they’re your forever, just because you’ve never heard it from anyone else.”

We moved toward the living room, and I bring wineglasses and a new bottle. “So you’re saying you need to find yourself first before you can give your heart fully to a place or person.”

“Exactly.” She looks at me gratefully. “Kentbury is amazing, but it’s the first town where people have been warm and welcoming. What if there’s somewhere I fit even better than I just haven’t found yet?”

I could argue that there’s no place like my hometown, but that would be biased. I’ve made mistakes before, trying to convince women to stay. This time, I’ll keep my desires to myself. I can enjoy McKay’s company for however long she’s here without expectations. She’s smart, funny, beautiful … it’ll have to be enough.

For now, I just fill our glasses and steer the conversation to lighter topics. The future can wait a little longer.

## Chapter Twelve



## McKay

THE HEADY SCENT of fallen leaves and ripe apples envelops me as I step into the orchard. Laughter and lively chatter fill the crisp air while costumed children dart past, faces painted with autumn motifs. The surroundings burst with vivid hues of orange, gold, and brown.

“Ready for the maze?” Bishop’s deep timbre vibrates near my ear, his warm breath on my neck prickling my skin. I turn to face him, the dipping sun framing him in a golden halo, making him seem almost ethereal.

His hand brushes mine, a featherlight touch that sends awareness skittering up my arm. I’m attuned to his every movement. “Lead the way,” I reply, my voice coming out breathy.

Bishop’s fingers entwine with mine, radiating heat that seeps into my skin, grounding me. We approach the looming hedge entrance, and he shoots me a grin that sets butterflies fluttering in my stomach. “Race you to the end?”

I huff a laugh, playfully bumping his shoulder. “You’re on.”

As we weave through the maze, I’m hyperaware of him beside me. Our arms brush occasionally, and he reaches out to sweep back my windswept hair, letting his fingers linger. Each subtle touch conveys longing, an unspoken promise.

The simmering tension thrums between us. I’ve never felt more alive.

After what feels like hours, we finally emerge from the maze, both laughing breathlessly. “That was exhilarating,” I admit, cheeks flushed from the exertion and his intoxicating proximity.

Bishop leans in, his gaze darkening with an emotion I recognize but dare not name aloud. Our moment is broken by

the distant peal of children's laughter, reminding us we're at a crowded festival. "Hayride next?" he asks, voice a low rumble that thrums through me.

As we climb onto the hayride, families chatter excitedly around us. Bishop and I sit thigh to thigh, the subtle contact igniting a heat more potent than any raging bonfire.

The ride meanders through the orchard, families reaching out to snag ripe apples. When Bishop hands a shiny red apple to a pigtailed little girl, her gleeful squeal makes me laugh. He seems to have a soft spot for kids that shows in the gentle, attentive way he interacts with them.

I sneak a glance at his handsome profile, backlit by the setting sun. The image sears itself into my mind: his windswept hair, day-old stubble, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes.

As the ride ambles on, our fingers entwine loosely, hidden in the hay. No words are needed. The connection between us conveys everything left unsaid for now.

"There's a certain magic about fall, don't you think?" I muse, trying to temper the building tension.

Bishop leans in, his lips a hair's breadth from my ear. "The magic isn't in the season, McKay. It's in the company."

My breath hitches at his meaningful words, my pulse quickening.

We move from the bustling grounds to an open space lit by twinkling fairy lights. Long tables display amber-filled glasses, each labeled with a distinct cider name. Dusk lends an intimate, ethereal feel.

"Ever tried hard cider?" Bishop asks playfully, the soft lighting accentuating his sharp features.

I nod, lips suddenly dry. "A few times. But I have a feeling tonight will be different."

His eyes lock onto mine, dark and knowing. "I'll make sure of that."

We approach the first table, and I watch, amused, as Bishop puts on an exaggerated serious face—sniffing the cider critically, swirling it, then taking a careful sip. His shift from playful to pensive contemplation makes me laugh. “It seems the cider passes the Bishop test,” I tease.

His lips quirk up. “Just wait till you try it.”

I take a sip, the flavors bursting—sweet yet tart, with a sharp bite. “Wow,” I murmur appreciatively.

We make our way through the tables, each cider offering a unique experience—some fruity and honeyed, others dry with an earthy finish. With every taste, we share impressions, sometimes agreeing, sometimes debating the notes.

As we chat and sip, soft music flows over from a nearby band. An impromptu dance floor has formed, couples swaying to the melodies.

Bishop sets down his glass and grins, extending his hand. “Care to dance?”

I pretend to think before placing my hand in his. He leads me out as the band plays a lilting tune. Pulling me close, his hand warm on my waist, everything else falls away.

The world narrows down to just us two swaying together. The solid warmth of his body against mine, our synchronized movements, the way his hazel eyes stay locked on me. It creates an intimate bubble separating us from the crowd. We move as one, each step and spin perfectly in sync, like we’ve danced this way forever.

His fingers tighten at my waist, erasing any space between us until I can feel the steady beat of his heart against my chest. We get lost in the music, the moment, each other.

The song ends, but we remain suspended in our embrace, the crackling electricity palpable. The chatter and laughter around us fade into the distance.

Breaking the silence, Bishop whispers, “This day with you ... it’s been ...”

“Magical,” I finish for him, my voice barely above a whisper.

He nods, his gaze dark and full of unspoken promise. Promises I hope he can keep. That this connection between us is more than the kiss we shared. “Yeah. Exactly.”

The night stretches on, but in our own private world amid the lanterns and starlight, we’ve forged a bond that seems built to withstand anything.

We continue swaying, lost in the soft guitar and violin strains. The world narrows down to just us two. His hand at my back gently draws me closer until his woodsy scent surrounds me.

As the music slows to a languid tempo, our dance becomes a gentle sway. His forehead comes to rest against mine, our breaths mingling in the cool night air. His eyes search my own, looking for something—permission, perhaps.

It’s strange how time seems to slow in moments like these. Every detail stands out sharply—the solid warmth of Bishop’s body pressed close, the gentle glow of the fairy lights, the distant hum of voices, and the soft, tentative pressure of his lips finally meeting mine.

It starts as a featherlight brush, hesitant, as if he’s testing dangerous waters. But as I lean into the kiss, it deepens, sweet like the cider yet urgent with restrained desire.

My fingers weave through his hair, pulling him close as his hand moves to cup my flushed cheek. The world falls away, leaving just us two suspended in this stolen moment.

When we finally part, breathless, the power of it resonates. His passion-darkened eyes hold mine, speaking without words. The kiss has said it all, conveyed what we’ve left unspoken.

My traitorous heart wants to stay in his arms because it has found something my soul craves. But my pragmatic mind knows this idyll is only temporary. Soon, I’ll be gone, my bags packed and his orchard in the rearview mirror.

For now, I push that inevitability away and savor the lingering taste of him on my lips, the thrill coursing through

my veins. Tonight, under the starry skies, anything seems possible. I can believe in the impossible.

At least, for tonight.

One.

Night.

## Chapter Thirteen



## Bishop

IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH to convince McKay to come to my place after the Fall Festival. I'm just thankful that I had plenty of people volunteering to clean up. Once we're inside, I shut the door with one hand and pull her by the waist with the other. "It was so fucking hard to behave in front of everyone. I want you so much."

I slant my mouth on hers and kiss her hard, so fucking hard I steal all the air from her lungs but surrender mine in exchange. When I'm done, I'm breathing harshly.

She blinks, dazed, catching her breath, cheeks flushed with heat. Her eyes, misty yet filled with mischief, meet mine. "I don't know how to take that." She smiles wickedly. "But you can always show me."

A smirk pulls at my lips, fingers gently tilting her chin upward, demanding her full attention. "You think you can handle what I have to offer?" The challenge hangs between us.

Her hands, warm and steady, press against my chest, feeling my heart race beneath. "You've been teasing me. I want to see that it's been worth the wait, Mr. Harris."

She grabs the back of my neck and crushes her mouth against mine. There's no sweetness to this kiss, only raw urgency and days of pent-up tension.

McKay's fingers skate down my chest, working deftly to rid me of my jeans. She pauses, our eyes locked in a smoldering gaze, as she peels my shirt away. Her touch, like tiny sparks, lights a fire, sending waves of anticipation coursing through me. Every second without her touch feels like an eternity. With a swift motion, my jeans are pushed down, my hard cock springs, and an appreciative gleam enters her eyes.

She grazes her fingers teasingly, eyes twinkling with mischief. "You're definitely ready to play."

I arch an eyebrow. “Are you planning on having a playdate with my cock?”

The glint in her eyes and that self-assured smirk tell me more than words ever could.

“We’ll see, Bishop.” Her tongue darts out, moistening her lips, the gesture oozing anticipation. “Lead the way to your room.”

Without a word, I gesture toward the staircase. Swiftly, I discard my shoes and pants and then follow her. Entering the dimly lit bedroom, she activates the low lights. Their muted glow is just enough, casting shadows that dance along her form as she seductively unbuttons her jeans and sways her hips. Pulling off her tan turtleneck, the absence of a bra isn’t a surprise. I’ve been staring all day at her hard nipples, almost cutting through the fabric of the sweater.

My cock jerks as her jeans slide down, her unwavering gaze holding mine captive. The soft contours of her silhouette pull me in, leaving me mesmerized.

Without a word, I close the distance between us, the rest of the world blurring into insignificance. The anticipation thrums, tangible, and when my lips finally find hers, everything shifts. Every unspoken emotion pours between us in that one electrifying kiss. Her eager response has her pressing into me, fingers tangling in my hair, ensuring no space remains. The plush feel of her lips, paired with her hot, ragged breaths, sends my pulse racing. A primal need consumes me as my hands glide over her, exploring each curve with reverence.

Breaking the kiss momentarily, I’m met with a flicker of surprise in her eyes before I pepper her neck with heated kisses. Every sigh escaping her lips, each shiver under my fingertips, amplifies the burning desire coursing through me. I’ve never wanted someone as much as I want her.

We’re ensconced in our bubble, where time stands still. Nothing exists beyond this room, beyond her touch, beyond the raw emotion drawing us even closer.

Without breaking our connection, I lift her effortlessly, her legs automatically curling around my waist. Setting her down with utmost care, I pause and take a moment to drink in the sight before me. The magnetic pull of her gaze draws me in, and I'm willingly ensnared. The sensation of her fingertips skimming down my chest ignites a fire, leaving a trail of smoldering desire.

Slowly, I trace my tongue across her collarbone, leaving soft kisses on her stomach as I descend. Her skin prickles with every touch, every whisper of breath. Grasping the delicate fabric of her panties, I draw them down, revealing her in all her vulnerability.

She inhales sharply, a deep breath as our eyes lock, hers wide and filled with anticipation. My mouth moves lower to her inner thigh, and my tongue glides along her skin. Her body quivers with anticipation as I inch closer to her swollen folds. I slide a finger to the tip of her clit, rubbing it slowly.

McKay's eyes flutter as she groans.

"I can't wait to feast," I say, burying my face between her legs and kissing her before I begin to taste her.

I lick, nibble, and play with her clit before sliding a finger inside of her. She says my name on a groan. "Bishop." It sounds like a prayer, a plea, everything I need to continue fucking her with my fingers and my mouth.

My cock is getting hard. So. Fucking. Hard.

I want to be inside of her. No. I need to be inside, branding her, making her mine.

But all I do is continue worshiping her. Every gasp and sigh from her lips heightens the tension coiling within me. Feeling her body tremble and arch into my touch builds an overwhelming urge to be even closer.

I want all of her—to feel her pussy around my cock. To be lost in her completely. The desire is almost unbearable. My hands and lips continue their unhurried exploration, touching, tasting, and cherishing her.

McKay's back arches, her entire form vibrating from the overwhelming pleasure, and just as she teeters on the edge of release, I stop.

"Don't stop," she gasps out between ragged breaths, her fingers twisting in my hair.

I murmur reassurances against her heated skin, my hands and lips still blazing a thorough trail across her trembling body.

"I need you," she breathes out, the raw yearning in her voice fueling the fire within me.

Teasingly, I run my finger along her slit until I find her small opening, then blow a soft stream of air that makes her tremble. My control is hanging by a thread, but I want to watch her become unhinged in front of me. Draw every last gasp and moan from those perfect lips.

"Don't tease me," she demands, her voice a blend of frustration and longing.

"You tortured me for the past week. I think it's fair that I return the favor."

"How did I torture you?"

"I've craved this moment since our very first meeting." I lap her clit again. "To worship your body. To hear you scream my name ... to learn what makes you tremble and drives you wild."

She shivers when my tongue makes contact with her clit. I'm doing it fast enough to push her close to the edge again. She's panting, pulling my hair. When I stop, she glares at me. "Why? I'm so close."

"I want to be inside you when you come for the first time," I say.

"I never come with penetration," she says, winded.

"You've never been with me," I claim, but then I realize I'm missing one big detail. "Fuck."

She looks puzzled. "What?"

Rummaging through the nightstand, I mutter, “Condom.”

McKay reaches for the condom in my hand. She opens the foil and is about to roll it along my length when I stop her.

“Why not?”

“If you touch me, this is over before we even start.”

She hands it to me, propping herself on her elbows as she watches me roll on the condom. I kneel on the bed, in front of her and part her legs, holding my cock, and place it right at her entrance. Slowly, I sink inch by inch inside her. She feels so fucking incredible. She’s a different kind of woman. A woman who listens to me and is willing to share who she is with me. I can’t explain what I feel for her because the insatiable need to devour her increases the closer I get. There are so many feelings floating around us and inside me.

Her hazel eyes lock with mine, our hearts pounding out a frantic rhythm in tandem. I drive into her urgently, seeking her release, desperate to watch her come undone. The pressure builds within me, but I hold back my own climax through sheer will, determined to bring her over the edge first.

I feel her inner muscles fluttering around me, her breath catching on increasingly loud moans. She trembles and shakes right on the precipice. With one final deep thrust, she shatters, crying out her ecstasy. I capture her mouth in a searing kiss, swallowing her sounds of pleasure.

It’s not a gentle kiss.

I’m branding her, possessing her, making her irrevocably mine.

As our tongues collide, I’m overwhelmed by an intoxicating mix of emotions—lust, passion, and something far more dangerous I refuse to name.

I pour all of it into the kiss, losing myself completely. And as I pull away just enough to catch my breath, I realize, with a shattering clarity, that by making her mine, I’ve willingly become hers.

The realization sinks into my bones and deep in my soul as my own delayed climax finally crashes over me. I break the kiss, pressing my forehead to hers, our panting breaths intermingling.

No words are needed.

What we've shared transcends anything that can be said.

But soon, she'll be leaving, returning to her world while I remain in mine. I don't want to be another who tries to change her path. And yet, it's fucking terrifying realizing that I did something so stupid and beautiful.

I fell for her.

Can I simply enjoy what we have without wanting more? It's a risk, letting someone in so deeply. But as I gaze into her eyes, I know—she's already demolished my walls. This amazing, maddening woman has consumed me, heart and soul.

And in the end, I'll have to let her go.

## Chapter Fourteen

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## Bishop

WE MAKE LOVE a couple more times before we fall asleep. The next morning I wake to find McKay still cradled in my arms. I hold her gently, not wanting to disturb her peaceful sleep.

As I watch her, I can't help imagining a life where she stays here with me. It'd be blissful at first, but soon the boredom and restlessness would set in for someone like her. There's not much to hold someone like McKay long term in a small town like this.

Eventually, she'd resent me for keeping her from the fast-paced life she's used to. She'd leave without a backwards glance, while I'm left picking up the pieces of my foolish heart.

McKay stirs, pressing soft kisses along my jaw. "What are you thinking?" she murmurs sleepily.

I capture her lips desperately, wishing I could freeze this moment, the raw vulnerability in me rising to the surface. A part of me wants to plead with her not to go, to whisper that I'm slowly, inevitably falling for her.

More like I'm falling madly in love with the way she smiles when the autumn wind playfully tosses her hair, casting hazelnut streaks across her face. As she laughs because she's enjoying being herself, unburdened and unmasked. I'm falling for the impossible, and there's no way I can stop my heart and my soul from something that feels like madness. She's so out of reach.

In this very moment, I want to tell her that I hope she falls. No, it's more than a wish. It's a profound need for her to fall. Tumble into this feeling.

Fall freely without expecting me to catch her, but to jump with her. Assure her that even though it'll be terrifying, we'll have each other. That if we let our hearts entwine, nothing will matter, because we'll be okay.

It'll be the two of us, falling again and again for the rest of our lives.

But I don't say a word.

I just kiss her, hoping this will fill the hole that her leaving will create.

"What if I take you with me?" she suddenly asks after we part.

"Where are you going?" I ask, playing dumb.

"My grandmother's. She must be worried about me," she answers, and somehow, I can breathe when I hear her response.

"Are you planning on staying in Kentbury?" I dare to ask, hoping she'll stay.

She shakes her head. "No. This place is lovely, but I don't want to stay in the first place that made me feel whole. There are other places I haven't seen just yet, and I don't want to close the possibilities. Plus, I have to pack my things, sell my condo and figure out my future. It wouldn't be fair to me or anyone to make a thoughtless decision."

I kiss the top of her head.

"How long will you stay?"

She shifts, laying her head against my chest. I can feel the rapid beat of her heart. Time stretches, filled with the hush of our mingled breaths. Her fingers trace invisible patterns on my skin, and then, pulling herself on top of me, she meets my gaze with a smile and says, "I think until today."

A pang of surprise and an unvoiced protest surges within me. "That soon?" I ask, raising an eyebrow, trying to hide the disappointment.

She nods, biting her lower lip. "Yeah. The sooner I go, the faster I might figure out what I want from life."

The sound of my heart cracking is deafening. Thankfully, McKay can't hear it. I knew this wouldn't last, yet I still

surrendered far too much of myself. It's okay, though. I'll be fine without those pieces since I've taken some of her.

But how does life go on when she'll always occupy a part of my soul?

She begins to rock herself on top of me, placing my cock at her entrance and lowering herself slowly. No condom. There are no barriers between us, only skin on skin. And it's okay. We discussed that the third time, we were making love. We're both healthy, and she's on the pill. I'm not worried about the consequences, but what else will she take while we fuck? She might as well leave me trembling, naked, and vulnerable in her departure. I just hope that I'll survive without her.

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A FEW HOURS LATER, McKay is gone. If Genie tried stopping her, she clearly failed. That evening at my family's usual Sunday dinner, I feel hollowed out and adrift. I go through the motions, helping my niece with homework, raking leaves outside, and helping in the kitchen as always. But my smile feels forced, my laugh muted. I nod along, pretending to listen. My thoughts keep straying to McKay. A piece of me is missing. The food I swallow tastes like ash. I've never felt so alone, even in a crowded room.

When I get home, I can still feel her presence. It's calming and yet suffocating. I grab a beer and head outside, surprised to find Damian waiting on the deck, the firepit already burning.

“What are you doing here?” I ask flatly.

“You were off today,” he says, studying me with concern.

“Let me guess: Lee sent you?”

Damian shakes his head. “I came on my own. Didn’t need her ordering me around this time.”

I scoff, knowing we both tend to indulge our bossy sister. It makes her happy, and we love to see her happy.

“What’s going on with you?” he insists, taking a swig from his beer.

“Did you already raid my fridge?” I deflect.

He grins wryly. “Wasn’t gonna listen to you sob sober.”

I bristle. “Who says I’m upset?”

“Genie’s granddaughter left you,” he states matter-of-factly.

I shrug, feigning nonchalance. “She didn’t leave me. It was just time for her to head home.”

“McKay was different,” he states. “We could all see it while you two worked at the orchard or during the Fall Festival. Just as we can see that your heart is broken.”

Gotta love small-towns, everyone is always watching. I stare at the ground, my jaw clenched. “I knew the score. I’ll be fine,” I reply tightly, willing it to be true.

He nods, and we stay in the backyard without saying a word. The pain will pass, but the memories will stay, and that should be enough.

## Chapter Fifteen



*November*

**Mac:**

I saw the Oktoberfest pictures. I had no idea it was a much bigger festival than the fall one.

**Bishop:**

It's becoming one of the biggest festivals in the Northeast. You should swing by next year.

**Mac:**

I might if I'm around.

**Bishop:**

Where are you?

**Mac:**

Still in Boston, I didn't think I would be suing my father.

**Bishop:**

:raised-eyebrow: emoji

**Mac:**

He doesn't want me to sell my condo. Paul, one of my brothers, had a similar issue and is helping me. It seems like I'm not the only one who doesn't like my dad.

**Bishop:**

Is he still pissed at Genie?

**Mac:**

Yep. He claims that all those properties should've been his. I had no idea that the rest are conveniently tied into a trust.

**Bishop:**

We just helped her with that, in case your dad wanted to come and fuck with her.

**Mac:**

Thank you so much for looking after her.

**Bishop:**

Have you spoken to Genie?

**Mac:**

Of course. Grams and I text daily and call each other at least twice a week.

**Mac:**

She's the one who keeps me updated about all things Kentbury.

**Bishop:**

Wow, the gossip now reaches Boston.

**Mac:**

Exactly. How are things with your family?

**Bishop:**

It's the same. We're getting ready for Thanksgiving. Where are you spending it this year?

**Mac:**

Paul and I are going to volunteer at a shelter.  
How about you?

**Bishop:**

I'm spending it at my sister's. If you want to visit,  
we always have plenty of food.

**Mac:**

Thank you, but we'll stick to our original plan.  
Take care.

**Bishop:**

Same.

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DECEMBER

**Bishop:**

I met Paul. He seems like a douchebag. Are you  
sure he's not an asshole?

**Mac:**

He's a recovering asshole. :laughing: emoji

**Bishop:**

That explains so much. He hung out with your grandmother for the most part. Damian showed him the town—as Genie requested. He mentioned something about going to South America for the holidays.

**Mac:**

Are you asking me if I'm going with him?

**Bishop:**

Are you?

**Mac:**

Yes, we found a place where we can volunteer. It's our last trip together before I head west.

**Bishop:**

What happened with the sale of your condo?

**Mac:**

Dad gave up, and I was able to sell it—twenty percent above the asking price. Can you believe it? I could even buy a van and start the van-life.

**Bishop:**

Would you?

**Mac:**

Nope. I'm not really a camping person. My definition of camping was a tent in the middle of the living room with my friends.

**Mac:**

Somewhere, I have the feeling your silence means that you're judging me. Are you an outdoorsy kind of guy? Of course, you are. In my defense, my parents' definition of slumming it is staying at a four-star hotel.

**Bishop:**

I'm judging you. You're a snob.

**Mac:**

No, I was raised by parents who live in a different reality. In a few months, I might surprise you, though.

**Bishop:**

How?

**Mac:**

Well, as you know, we're going to South America to volunteer. We're not staying at the Ritz-Carlton, but tents and sleeping bags. Wish me luck.

**Bishop:**

When are you leaving?

**Mac:**

Next week.

**Bishop:**

Text me so I know you're okay.

**Mac:**

I'll try, but remember I'm going to be away from civilization.

**Bishop:**

I'm impressed, City Girl.

**Mac:**

Don't call me that.

**Bishop:**

It's a perfect nickname. You can only survive in the city.

**Mac:**

No. I was able to survive a week in Kentbury.

**Bishop:**

That's not long enough.

**Mac:**

It was enough to make me realize there's more out there.

**Bishop:**

You're looking for more?

**Mac:**

More like I'm trying to see the world before I decide to stick to one place.

**Bishop:**

I thought you mentioned you've traveled the world with your family.

**Mac:**

Like a tourist. I don't know the real world, though.

**Bishop:**

So you're finding yourself.

**Mac:**

Yep, I'm falling in love with the world and myself.

**Bishop:**

Good luck.

**Mac:**

I don't think I need luck, but thank you. Talk to you soon.

**Bishop:**

Take care of yourself, City Girl.

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JANUARY

**Bishop:**

Lee had her baby. Mom and baby are doing well. Landon is over the moon, just like Cassie—she loves being a big sister.

**Mac:**

I thought she was due in February.

**Bishop:**

My nephew decided to arrive a couple of weeks earlier. He's going to be just like his mother.

**Mac:**

And you're going to love him for that.

**Bishop:**

Obviously.

**Mac:**

Thank you for letting me know about the baby  
and congrats Uncle Hops.

**Bishop:**

Take care, City Girl.

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FEBRUARY

**Mac:**

I'm finally back in civilization.

**Bishop:**

I was starting to worry about you.

**Bishop:**

How was your trip?

**Mac:**

Educational.

**Bishop:**

Did Paul survive?

**Mac:**

He did. It was an experience that we might  
repeat someday.

**Bishop:**

Really?

**Mac:**

Yep, it was fulfilling.

**Bishop:**

Do you know what you want to do with your life?

**Mac:**

Paul is starting a non-profit, and I'm helping him for now.

**Bishop:**

So you're back in Boston? Did you decide to stay there?

**Mac:**

We're here temporarily while he decides where he wants to live. Once he does, he'll sell his place and move.

**Bishop:**

Sounds like you two are a little lost.

**Mac:**

I'm pretty sure there's a saying that losing yourself is the best way to find what you're looking for.

**Bishop:**

I don't think that's a saying. You're just making shit up.

**Mac:**

If I am, let me be.

**Bishop:**

So how long will you stay with him? Or are you going to move wherever he moves?

**Mac:**

Nope. He's coming with me.

**Bishop:**

Where are you going? I'm confused. You said you were staying with your brother.

**Mac:**

Yes ... and no. His house in Boston is our home base, but we'll be driving around the country. I mean we've traveled the world with our parents, but they never showed us this place.

**Bishop:**

So you're going on a road trip.

**Mac:**

Indeed. At least while I decide what to do with my life. Working for Paul will help, but I have to find my place, you know?

**Bishop:**

If you ever want to help me manage my business, you're welcome to join me.

**Mac:**

Would you give me that job? You really love the orchard.

**Bishop:**

I love the operation side, not the admin side.

**Mac:**

Huh, I would've never guessed that. So you'll be in the field while I'm at the office, and then we can have lunch together?

**Bishop:**

That could be one scenario.

**Mac:**

There are others?

**Bishop:**

I could eat you for lunch.

**Mac:**

What if I need a break in between lunch and dinner?

**Bishop:**

A break? Like for a nap or something?

**Mac:**

No, so I can eat you. :wink: emoji

**Bishop:**

Oh, I see ... we'd have to come up with a schedule that allows us to entertain each other, huh?

**Mac:**

Exactly.

**Bishop:**

Are you really going to work for me? This is a small town, Mac. You like big cities—thrive on them.

***Mac:***

It's a quaint, warm, and beautiful town. Just because I'm drifting a little right now, so I can find myself doesn't mean I don't want to go back again.

***Bishop:***

But the job wouldn't be temporary, Mac. I want someone to be here full time, committed, and willing to ... give everything to it.

***Mac:***

Somehow, I feel like we're not talking about the orchard or brewery anymore.

***Bishop:***

I have to get back to work. Keep me updated about your whereabouts.

## Chapter Sixteen



*MARCH*

***Mac:***

Thank you for taking Grandma to the airport.

***Bishop:***

No need to thank me. I'm glad she's taking a vacation.

***Mac:***

I'm not sure if four days in The Keys should be considered a vacation, but I hope this is the start of a new tradition.

***Bishop:***

What kind of tradition?

***Mac:***

Family vacation.

***Bishop:***

Is it still just Paul? Genie hopes to meet her other grandchildren soon.

**Mac:**

I think that's all for now. The others are still a bunch of assholes. You can only convert so many, you know?

**Bishop:**

What about your sister?

**Mac:**

She's not talking to me. It seems like this whole meeting with our grandma and not getting the land affected her more than I thought.

**Bishop:**

How so?

**Mac:**

Her husband was going to be one of the architects in charge of the development. They think this is all my fault.

**Bishop:**

Sorry.

**Mac:**

:shrug: emoji

**Bishop:**

Are you telling me it doesn't hurt?

**Mac:**

It does, but I can't make people talk to me or be nice to me. It's their prerogative.

**Mac:**

I've learned that you can't make people love you —not even your family.

**Bishop:**

It's a hard lesson.

**Mac:**

You've experienced the same?

**Bishop:**

Not with my family, but with someone I fell in love with.

**Mac:**

Oh, someone broke your heart? I had no idea. Is that why you're single? Was it the one who left for LA?

**Bishop:**

I fell, she didn't, and no, it was someone different.

**Mac:**

Sorry to hear that. Are you still in love with her?

**Bishop:**

Why would you ask?

**Mac:**

Well, I'm still thinking about your job offer, but if you're in love with someone, I don't see the point.

**Bishop:**

You're interested in the position?

**Mac:**

Is it available?

**Bishop:**

Only for you.

**Mac:**

How long will it be open?

**Bishop:**

Probably forever.

**Mac:**

I could've stayed in Kentbury then, but I would've missed connecting with my brother and learning more about myself.

**Bishop:**

Do you still need more time?

**Mac:**

I think so. Is that okay?

**Bishop:**

Of course it is.

**Mac:**

But you haven't answered if you're still in love  
with this woman who broke your heart.

**Bishop:**

I probably broke my own heart.

**Mac:**

Why would you say that?

**Bishop:**

It's a long explanation I'd rather give you when  
you return.

**Bishop:**

You are coming back, right?

**Mac:**

My plane is about to take off, talk to you later.

## Chapter Seventeen



## Bishop

### *September*

Everyone believes that fall rolls over around the end of September. That's actually a myth. It's when the leaves shift from vibrant green to burnt orange, crimson red, and buttery yellow as the month begins. The air grows steadily crisper in the weeks leading up to when those leaves carpet the ground.

Fall is one of my favorite seasons, right behind winter when I can ski daily. Though no matter the time of year, the animals need tending every morning. Maybe I should take Damian's advice and hire some farmhands. That would free me to focus on the brewery full-time.

If only McKay were serious about working here. I wish things between us were different, that she realized how much I love her, and that we're meant to be together. Knightly said I should go find McKay, tell her how I feel, and stop torturing myself. But I can't. She has to decide what she wants first. If it's not me, I'll cope.

"There's nobody in the office," a female voice calls out.

I check my watch. It's seven a.m. sharp. "No one's in until nine, please come back later," I reply on autopilot.

"Well, I'm just here to drop off my résumé," the voice continues, now very close. I freeze, recognizing it instantly this time. I turn to find McKay standing mere steps away.

"Mac," I manage, drinking her in. She's even more beautiful than I recalled—longer chestnut hair, brighter hazel eyes.

"Hey, Hops," she says, waving.

I arch an eyebrow, wondering why she's calling me Hops.

Before I can ask, she says, "You never told me how you got that nickname."

I shrug. “It started when I opened the brewery. One of the seasonal workers started calling me that, and it stuck.”

She nods, and just now I notice she’s holding two paper cups.

“Where’s this résumé you mentioned?”

McKay shrugs coyly. “I might’ve left it in the car.” She offers me one of the cups she’s carrying. “But I brought coffee, so you can see I’ll have coffee for you every morning if you hire me.”

“Is that so?” I ask, intrigued.

“Part of the service,” she says with a playful smile. “I can grab them after working at the bakery.”

I raise my brow again. “You’re working for Genie?”

McKay smirks. “Someone has to take over when she retires. Paul and I might run it.”

“Paul’s here too?” I ask, trying not to sound thrown.

“You’re asking a lot of questions instead of interviewing me,” she teases, eyes glinting.

I take the coffee, moving closer. “How many hours can you work for me?”

“Enough to keep things working well. Though, as I mentioned, you have to share me with my grandmother.”

“I accept that. The salary is competitive, and we have room and board, too,” I offer with a grin.

McKay bites her lip. “You only have one bedroom, though.”

Our eyes lock, the playful pretense fading. Is she really back for good? I’m almost afraid to hope.

“We can share,” I suggest tentatively.

Her smile falls away. “Are you still in love with that woman?”

I nod, heartbeat quickening. “It’s impossible not to be. One day, she just entered my life without notice and stole my heart.”

Probably my soul, too.”

McKay looks down. “I can’t compete with that.”

Slowly, gently, I set the coffee cup aside. Then I draw her close, tilting her chin up to meet my earnest gaze.

“You don’t have to compete, McKay. Don’t you see? You’re the woman I’m talking about. From the moment we met, you captivated me and consumed me. I tried to resist falling for you, but it was hopeless.”

I press my forehead to hers, voice husky with emotion. “I’m still hopelessly, desperately in love with you. Only you.”

McKay’s eyes shimmer with tears as she lets out a shaky laugh. “I was hoping you’d say that,” she whispers. “Because I’m in love with you too.”

Unable to resist any longer, I capture her lips in a searing kiss, pouring every ounce of my longing into it. She’s back, she’s home. And I’m never letting her go again.

## Epilogue



*DECEMBER, one year later ...*

The bakery kitchen is filled with the scents of sugar, cinnamon, and fresh bread as everyone works on orders for the holiday rush. Christmas is just two weeks away, our busiest time of year.

“Did you hear? I make better croissants than you,” Paul says with a smug grin, setting down a tray fresh from the oven.

“It’s not a competition,” I reply defensively, kneading dough for gingerbread men before I head out.

“Sure, sure. But I’m better at it,” he teases.

I remove my flour-dusted apron with a sigh, the bakery heat becoming stifling. “You’re annoying. The dough is ready for you. I have to get to the office.”

As I head to the back door, I add over my shoulder, “If someone wants a cake for the holidays, remember you have to say no. You’re still learning to decorate cakes and André doesn’t have time to do it. He’s swamped preparing for Christmas and the end of the year celebrations at the ski resort.”

Paul's grin widens. "But that'll annoy the fuck out of Damian."

I roll my eyes, but can't help smiling. In the past year, Paul has changed a lot. Not only did he move here with me, but he's becoming part of Kentbury too. Bishop and most of his family like him, but for some reason, my brother and Damian can't get along.

Overall, I'm glad that Paul is finding his place. He's even friends with Landon and Holden Miller. We keep hoping the rest of our family will visit and fall for this place like we did. Grandma's happy we're staying close.

When I arrive at the orchard with coffees in hand, Bishop is setting up the Christmas tree I bought last week to decorate it. I don't have anything against natural pines, but I want the one in my office to be pink. That way, the house tree can be however he wants—our relationship is still growing, but we keep compromising.

"Hey, Hops," I greet him.

As he turns around, a glint catches my eye—a small red box nestled under the tree.

"Ooh, we already have presents and haven't decorated it yet," I say, clapping enthusiastically.

Before I can react, Bishop picks it up, then drops to one knee.

My breath catches as he opens the ring box, the diamond sparkling.

"McKay," he begins, voice husky with emotion, "this past year with you has been the best of my life. You've become my best friend, my confidant, and my partner. I can't imagine life without you."

He takes my hand, his brown eyes brimming with love. "I love everything about you. Your laugh, your voice, and the way you make the ordinary feel extraordinary. I don't want to waste another minute without making you mine forever. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

A flood of emotions overwhelms me, making my vision blur with tears. Breathing deeply, I manage to whisper through the lump in my throat, “Yes. Of course I’ll marry you.”

In one swift motion, he wraps his arms around me, lifting me off the ground. As the world whirls, he stops only to claim my lips with a kiss, deep and filled with promises. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, but after meeting this man, I wanted to become better, to find happiness. I found myself and along with that, I learned how to love.

And I’m so happy I fell in love with him, and that every day I fall more and more.

## Dear Reader

Dear Reader,

Happy Holidays!

Thank you so much for taking time out of your life to read Christmas in Kentbury. I had lots of fun asking my reading group what they'd like to see in a holiday book. They chose a single dad, friends-to-lovers romance. I hope you fall in love with Lance and all the characters as much as I did.

Are we going to revisit Kentbury? I hope so. I fell in love with the town, the Harrises and also the Millers. Mrs. Bowman knows so much about the town. I'm not sure when this will happen but maybe early next fall you might be able to visit them again.

After you're done reading, I'd appreciate if you leave a review on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Goodreads, or Bookbub. And if possible, spread the love around by sharing.

Subscribe to my [newsletter](#) to find out about upcoming releases, extra scenes, and special offers.

Sending you hugs and all my love,

Claudia

# Christmas in Kentbury



## Knightly

“Did someone check-in last night?” Marcy asks as we peer through the crack in the door, staring at the unconscious body splayed over the Egyptian cotton comforter.

I look at her with a questioning gaze. “No, this room should be empty.”

“Well, tell it to that guy’s ass,” she says.

Some say *crisis* is my middle name. Actually, it’s Rose. But if someone is in a crisis, I’m the go-to girl to solve most of the problems. I live in a small town where everyone knows... well, everyone. We don’t lock our front doors, and that includes the main door of the Bed & Breakfast. For starters, it’s a hotel so we have to keep the doors open. Also, no one trespasses in Kentbury.

“We should call the sheriff, or maybe your brothers,” Marcy, the housekeeper, suggests.

Calling the authorities will start a rumor and before I know it, there’ll be a crowd outside my business. I don’t have time to deal with that aftermath. My brothers never show up when I need them, so I’m not going to bother with calling them either.

“Lance’s on his way,” I say, holding onto the wrench that I found in the garage on the way here with both hands.

When I fully open the door to the Royal room, I see the intruder, just like Marcy described him.

Clothes scattered carelessly around the room. Who is he? A serial killer, a stranded traveler, or just a drunk who decided to crash in my B&B to avoid an angry wife.

My shoulders tense, and I hold my breath. Maybe I should call the police. Terror surges through my body, but I relax when I feel a big hand squeezing my shoulder.

“It’s okay,” Lance, my best friend, whispers behind me.

“Is it?” I huff, upset at myself for having such an overactive imagination.

“You had a one-night stand, and you want me to kick him out?” His light blue eyes flicker with humor.

“Ah, he thinks he’s funny.” I groan as my eyes sweep over his tall, muscular figure.

People call me to solve their crises and I call him to solve mine—not the sheriff who happens to be my cousin or my brothers who never respond on time.

Lance Miller and I have known each other since before I could walk. Rumor has it that our mothers had been best friends since they were children. I wouldn’t know, mine died shortly after I was born. He’s my brother’s best friend as well as mine. Though, sometimes, like right now, he can be a little obtuse. And if I don’t stop him, he’ll crack a few more jokes before he actually does something about the intruder.

“Hey, don’t shoot me, Lee. I’m just trying to understand the big emergency,” he says. “I take it he’s not a guest. So, who is he?”

“We have no idea who he is. Marcy came to make sure the room is ready because we have guests coming in later today. She *found* him like that.”

I scrunch my nose and stare at the bed. The guy is lying down on his stomach. His arms set above his dark brown hair.

Lance frowns, taking the wrench away from me. “How many times have I told you that these are tools, not weapons?”

I refuse to explain to him how the wrench could do some serious damage. Lance always manages to make me edgy. As frustration boils in my belly, I focus on his industrial boots and hold my breath, trying to avoid his intoxicating scent. It’s that woodsy aftershave he loves so much and traces of engine oil. It’s so him. I wish I weren’t so attracted to this man. Briefly squeezing my eyes shut, I gather all my strength to pretend he’s not affecting me. That my gut isn’t clenching because my ovaries are about to explode.

There's a saying that practice makes perfect. I keep practicing and yet, it gets harder to feign that I'm not in love with Lance Miller. Eighteen years of faking that I'm immune to the wide-set jaw, strong cheekbones, dark brows, and full lips can't go to waste.

Do I care about the way his white T-shirt stretches across his chest?

Nope. I don't care about his taut body.

I refuse to acknowledge any emotional or physical attraction to this man. Never mind that every time his light blue eyes focus on me, my heart flutters fast inside my chest.

"Hmm," he says, as he enters the room and I follow him with my eyes. "Bring a bucket filled with cold water and ice."

"Why would I do that?" I sneer. "It'll ruin the bed."

"Wouldn't you like to see Bishop cry like a little girl?" He pokes the guy with the wrench.

"Wake up, Harris." Lance's rough voice booms around the room. "Why are you here?"

"Ew, Hops?" I turn around, disgusted by the sight of my brother's naked body.

Perfect, just great. I just saw my brother's bare ass and if this is any indication, he must've been kicked out of his place.

"Five more minutes, babe," Bishop grumbles.

"Handle your friend," I say to Lance as I walk away. "I need this room, *now*. We have paying guests arriving soon."

"You owe me, Lee," Lance calls after me.

"I don't owe you *shit*," I mumble but I'm sure he doesn't hear me since I'm almost at the bottom of the stairs.

"You said a bad word," Cassie, who sits on the foyer couch, chides me.

"Clean those ears," I say playfully. "Your hearing is faulty."

“Ha, I heard you all right. You said *shit*,” she repeats, giving me a mischievous smile so much like her father’s.

“What have we told you? That’s not a ladylike word, Cassandra,” Lance reprimands his daughter.

“I just repeated what Lee said, Daddy,” Cassie tattletales on me.

“I didn’t know you brought her along.” *Or I would have watched my fucking language.*

“It’s Saturday and I can’t stay at home *alone*.” She rolls her eyes. “I’m not old enough. He’s going to have me do homework in his office while he works on a car.”

“You can always hang out with me,” I suggest.

“You’re such a bad influence, I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Lance jokes.

“She doesn’t say shit much, only mouths *fuck* a lot,” Cassie says.

I glare at her. “I thought we were friends.”

“He says bad words too. You should make him put a hundred dollars in the swear jar every week,” she accuses her dad, and I’m pretty sure she’s having a blast with us.

“We need to talk.” Lance’s voice is a little more stern than usual.

I can’t help but laugh when I realize he’s biting back a smirk.

“Oh my,” I say, clutching my necklace. “You’re breaking up with me? I thought we had a good thing going between us. Was it my scones? I thought you loved maple scones.”

“Do you have any?” He gives me a boyish smile.

“Nope, today we have cranberry scones. I can make you some coffee and you can tell dear Knightly what’s bothering you.”

“Can I have pancakes for breakfast, please?” Cassie requests.

“You haven’t had breakfast?” I frown.

“It’s barely eight o’clock, and you called with an *emergency*. Of course, she hasn’t had breakfast yet.”

Cassie points at her dad. “He promised you’d make pancakes for us.”

“He did, huh?” I take her hand the same way I used to when she was a tumbling toddler. “You’re going to help me, though,” I say. “If we’re lucky, Gramps might share some of his liquid gold with us.”

Her light blue eyes widen, then crinkle with excitement. “Do you think we can make maple candy?”

“How about tomorrow?” I offer. “Today’s a pretty busy day.”

“How so?” Lance looks around the empty dining room.

“There’s a bride-to-be coming to check out the place with her parents and her in-laws.”

“Here? Not the lodge?”

“Ski resort,” I correct him.

Last year, Damian, my oldest brother, decided to rebrand our businesses, and he started with the lodge. We now call it the Ski Resort at the Harris Estate. He also changed the furniture and renovated the entire building.

Damian wishes he could renovate the Victorian home where we run the B&B, but I won’t let him. It’s a historical building that’s been in the Harris family for five generations. We own the land where the farm, the orchard, the gift shop, the house, and the lodge stand, and have since the late eighteen hundreds.

“This bride wants to find the perfect spot for the wedding. A guest referred the B&B and the farm. Not that Dad will let that happen.”

“The farm isn’t a wedding destination,” my father’s voice booms through the kitchen before he even steps foot inside it. “That’s what the lodge is for.”

“Ski resort,” I correct him, gritting my teeth.

“Mr. Harris.” Lance nods.

“Grampa Harry,” Cassie says as she runs to Dad.

“I didn’t know my little girl was here.” He hugs her and twirls her around the kitchen.

“Can we make maple candies?” she asks.

I glare at Lance for this one. She’s just as stubborn as her father. They take the word no as a challenge. Their motto is *I’ll make it happen*.

“Sorry, sweetheart, but we can’t today. We have a full house, and we have to be scarce from the premises.” Dad frowns, he’s pretty upset at the possibility of offering new venues.

Financially, it means that we can book two or three events at once. If Damian buys the vineyard next door, the possibilities just continue growing. Dad doesn’t see it that way.

“Can I come with you?” Cassie grins at him.

“I’ll be at the *ski resort*,” Dad says, proud that he said the right name this time. “If your father lets you, we can ski all morning. Then, I’ll take you to the dining room for lunch and maybe some hot chocolate. We can spend the rest of the afternoon watching movies.”

“And eating popcorn?” she suggests, planning her entire schedule for the weekend. I’m almost sure that later she’s going to ask if she can stay at my house so tomorrow morning, she can go skiing again after brunch.

“If that’s okay with you, sir,” Lance agrees.

“She’s always welcome to hang around with us. You guys are like part of the family, Lance,” Dad mentions and looks at me. “What’s for breakfast?”

*They’re not family*, I want to clarify. Not because I don’t want them to be, but because, well, they’re just friends. This is the kind of situation that I hate, when I feel too comfortable

with Cassie and Lance. I want them to be my family. My husband, my child, and my future. Sometimes it seems like I mean a lot more to Lance and other times he reminds me I'm just one of the guys.

Bishop has encouraged me to talk to Lance and find out where I stand. Damian insists that I should move on with my life. They're Lance's best friends and know him as well as I do. Maybe they're right. Either way, I know that Lance and I will never be a couple. I have to grow out of my teenage crush and find a way to fall out of love. If only I knew how.

I glance at Lance who is looking at his phone. His deep dimple shows as he smiles at whatever he's watching. Maybe he's scoring a date for tonight. My heart shrinks with disappointment. Yet, my pulse races as his light blue eyes find me. I melt when he winks.

"That new picture you added to your Instagram of you and Bob during your morning jog is cute."

I bite my lip, staring at his mouth, craving it, and wishing to know how he kisses. My gaze lowers to his sculpted chest and tattooed arms. He's dreamy. No wonder women flock to him like bees to flowers. I know one thing that they don't: Lance Miller doesn't do relationships.

Lance looks around the kitchen. "Where is the mutt?"

"Bob isn't a mutt, Daddy. He's a Newfoundland. It took us a long time to find him, remember?" Cassie corrects him.

They gifted him to me a couple of years ago for my thirtieth birthday.

"He's at the barn with the Alpacas," I respond.

"Lee, what are we having for breakfast?" Dad repeats.

"Cereal?"

"Pancakes," Cassie says, frowning at me. "We're making pancakes, scrambled eggs, and bacon," Cassie lists, sounding like she's already planning a big meal.

"Sounds like a treat," Dad says, smiling at me.

“It’s not a holiday, people,” I complain.

My family doesn’t understand that this place has to be ready for the guests in a couple of hours. I’ll have to bake several batches of chocolate chip cookies to replace the stench of bacon. Why don’t they go to the resort for breakfast? I glare at them, but the anger subsides when Lance reaches out for my hand and squeezes it.

*It’s okay*, he mouths.

“Come on, I’ll help you,” Lance offers, heading to the industrial refrigerator.

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## Love in Kentbury



The stiff dress uniform chafes my neck as I tug at the suddenly too-tight collar. There's not enough champagne to make me forget I'm trapped at a wedding with three hundred strangers, all dancing to pounding electronic music.

Just as I'm trying to calm the fuck down so I don't lose it, another perky bridesmaid giggles as she sways by me in her pretty tight dress, batting her eyelashes.

"Looking sharp, Sarge. Love a man in uniform," she trills giving me an obvious once over.

I resist the urge to scowl, wondering why these women are so intent on getting my attention today. Peace and quiet—that's what I need. If I wanted some action, I wouldn't have retired. Well, there's also the issue of my shoulder and my sight. After my injury, the Air Force decided I was no longer fit for active duty. I was forced into early medical retirement, my options either becoming a professor at the academy or entering civilian life.

I chose the latter and my retirement plan is simple: retreat to an isolated cabin in Kentbury, help my brother with the new vineyard, and leave the noise behind.

Do you know what I don't need? Women who seem very desperate to get a husband out of this wedding—bonus point if they served along with the groom. I heard someone said that it would make them sisters. I clearly fail to understand how that would happen.

And though I want to shoo this one, I try to be polite. “Ex-military, ma’am. Master Sergeant Holden Miller, retired Air Force pararescue jumper, at your service.” I give her a polite nod.

She titters again before tottering off in towering heels. “Well, if you need some company, I’m here for you. I know how lonely it can get when you’re out there fighting for us.”

I doubt she knows shit, but I force a tight smile as she walks away. What is it about weddings that turn sensible women into flirtatious piranhas?

But I shouldn’t complain. This day is almost over, and after that, I’ll be heading back home to meet my new nephew and hang out with my niece, Cassie. Well, of course, I’ll have to deal with the adults with many questions, including the most pressing one: what else will you do with your future?

The vineyard isn’t enough. They want me to have a life as if I haven’t had one since I left the town at eighteen. Just because they didn’t see me, it doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.

Knightly, my sister-in-law, already threatened to introduce me to a cute friend of hers. I don’t need dates—I’d rather parachute into a blizzard off Denali weighted down with gear than make small talk with a stranger.

Yet here I stand, sweating in my suit, watching Nick and his gorgeous bride, Lola, swirl across the dance floor, unable to peel their besotted gazes from each other. That kind of all-consuming love is what I’ve been fighting to protect myself from all these years. And I doubt I’ll ever be ready to dive into the world of compromise and romance.

Who needs a partner who makes my heart skip a beat and wants to resend the rights to the television remote—not that I watch TV? But that's one of the things my mother and father always fought about, along with who squeezed the stupid toothpaste the wrong way and ... I can't even remember what else, but it was not only uncomfortable, but it made me wish never to get married.

I'm content on my own, thank you very much. No need to complicate things with a relationship filled with messy emotions.

I check my watch again. Just twenty more minutes before cake time, and then I can peel off this penguin suit. Jumping into frozen Arctic seas, wearing nothing sounded more appealing than spending one more minute at this wedding.

I force a smile as Nick and Lola wave at me from the dance floor. Almost there. I just need to stick it out a little longer, for my friend's sake.

Tomorrow morning I'm taking a plane to Burlington, Vermont. I'm not looking forward to the drive to Kentbury, but everything will be alright after I arrive home.

[Love in Kentbury](#), Holden's story will release on February 2024.

Preorder today >>> <https://claudiayburgoa.com/wp/love-in-kentbury/>



Claudia is an award-winning, *USA Today* bestselling author.

She writes alluring, thrilling stories about complicated women and the men who take their breaths away. Her books are the perfect blend of steamy and heartfelt, filled with emotional characters and explosive chemistry. Her writing takes readers to new heights, providing a variety of tears, laughs, and shocking moments that leave fans on the edge of their seats.

She lives in Denver, Colorado with her husband, her youngest two children, and three fluffy dogs.

When Claudia is not writing, you can find her reading, knitting, or just hanging out with her family. At nights, she likes to binge watches shows or movies with her equally geeky husband.

*To find more about Claudia:*

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