



MINDY BURBIDGE STRUNK



**JINGLE
BELL JILT**

A GIFT-WRAPPED ROMANCE

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ALSO BY MINDY BURBIDGE STRUNK

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CHAPTER **ONE**

SHAY

This has to be the worst idea I've had. We're talking cut-your-own-bangs bad. Okay, maybe not quite THAT terrible. But close. This one takes the cake. And not the delicious vanilla cream-filled white cake with a white chocolate-coconut ganache and a bride and groom on top kind of cake.

Although this bad decision I blame mostly on my best friend, Maggie. She is the reason I'm sitting on a plane, watching people herd down the aisle, pushing and shoving each other as they try to remove their carry-on bags from the overhead compartment.

I'm in no hurry to join the throng. I have no place to be or anyone I need to see. There's no one waiting for me on the other side of security.

My breath hitches and tears prick at my eyes. I push them back. I will not cry. He's taken enough of my tears already.

Finally, the crowd pushes to the front and I'm left alone to walk off the plane in silence. All by myself. It's the new metaphor for my life. That Celine Dion song starts to play on repeat in my head and I push it back. Oh, no, no, no. He will not make me sing Celine Dion songs. THAT's where I draw the line.

Taking a calming breath, I close my eyes. I can do this. I'll be at my vacation rental property soon enough. Then I can let loose all the emotions I have kept inside for the last thirty-four hours and—I check my watch—forty-two minutes since my wedding ceremony was canceled.

"Thanks for flying with us. Have a great time in Orlando, Miss." The flight attendant gives me a practiced, perky smile and my lips quiver slightly. Does she have to emphasize 'Miss'? It's like she knows I'm supposed to be Mrs. now. But I'm not.

I duck my head and plow past her, hardly acknowledging her greeting. "Yeah, thanks," I mumble.

The warm, jet-fuel-filled air fills my nostrils as I step out of the plane, and the cookies I ate in flight swirl around in my stomach, lurching every so often toward my throat.

Closing my eyes, I clutch the handle of my carry-on tighter. I just need to collect my checked bags (yes, I checked them and yes, my father will be

disappointed in me). Then I can get my rental car and be on my way. Easy peasy.

I follow the steady stream of pedestrians heading in the direction of the luggage pick up and hitch my backpack farther up, gripping the strap like it's my lifeline. I glance down, immediately noticing the absence of the shimmering ring on my finger. I quickly look away.

Signs for the escalators leading to the baggage claim guide me and I pull my carry-on behind me, hurrying toward them. I step on, but only one wheel makes it onto the step above where I'm standing. The bag teeters as the steps grow taller. I try to finagle it so both wheels are on, but it's caught on something. I give a hard flick of my wrist and the suitcase slips down, the wheels slicing down my ankle before settling firmly next to me.

"Ooh." Tears form at the corners of my eyes as I let out a small cry of pain. But I push them firmly back. If I let the floodgates open now, I may never get out of the airport. It'll be like that movie with Tom Hanks. I never saw it, but it's got to be the same, right?

"May I help you with that, Miss?" A deep, rich voice asks behind me.

There's that 'Miss' word again.

I place a dazzling smile on my face and turn around, expecting to see a handsome man close to my own age with a ring noticeably absent. After all, isn't that what happens in any good romance? And let me tell you, I'm in need of a good romance right now.

I smile bigger, hoping my rebound Prince Charming will ignore my airplane seat hair and smudged eyeliner, seeing me instead as the beautiful, if slightly broken, woman that he has been waiting for. Because all rebound Prince Charmings (RPCs for short) are looking for someone slightly damaged. It's what makes them look good, right?

I look up into the face of a man almost three times my age. He has salt and pepper hair and a white goatee. I frown slightly. He is not my RPC. Don't get me wrong. He is handsome in the way Sean Connery was in his later years. But I'm not interested in dating my grandpa. Not even as a rebound. Uh, ick.

"Do you need some help?" He asks again. "You look like maybe you hurt yourself when you got on the escalator."

I offer a twitchy smile and shake my head. Why is this man's kindness nearly my undoing? "I'm totally good. But thanks for the offer." I turn back because I'm coming to the bottom of the escalator and I don't want to end up

sprawled on the floor. I glance back as I step off flawlessly. (Yes, I'm going to brag about that, because I need a victory. Even if it's a very small one). I yank my carry-on wheels over the edge of the escalator as the stairs disappear into the floor "I'll just grab a trolley and I'll be good to go. Thanks." I'm not sure why I feel the need to tell the grandpa my whole airport plan, but I do. Although, I didn't mention my rental car plans, so I suppose we do still have some mystery in our relationship.

I roll my eyes. How depressing is it that I am willing to call this a relationship?

I stare out at the baggage area. Holy crap! And I thought it was crowded by the gates. The baggage carousels are two deep with people. What were all these people thinking when they decided to fly to Orlando on Christmas Adam? Do they not have anything better to do over the holidays? Yes, I am hearing the hypocrisy. But in my defense, I didn't choose to book my honeymoon on the 23rd of December. That was Nathan's idea. *I won't have to take as much time off work, Babe.*

Seriously, that should have been a big red flashing warning sign that he wanted to plan our wedding around the time his office would be closed for the holidays. I mean, isn't a wedding more important? And who wants an anniversary this close to Christmas?

I bite my cheek. Well, I guess that's something I don't need to worry about anymore.

I let out a breath when I see the carousel with my flight number displayed above it. I'm almost out of here. I'll grab a trolley and be on my way. Except when I look around, all the trolley stations are empty. Great.

I drop my hands to my side—my carry-on suitcase clatters to the ground at my feet—and look at the ceiling. Keep it together, Shay. I know it shouldn't be a big deal. It's a stupid trolley. But it's like the Universe is reminding me that I shouldn't have come on this trip. I subconsciously touch my forehead, just to make sure I don't have bangs. I release a sigh.

Okay, this was a bad idea. I get the point already. But I'm here. Can't the Universe give me Orlando? Even just for a day? Is that asking too much?

Apparently.

I grab my suitcase handle. I'll just have to figure out how to strap all my bags together and get them out to my rental car. I'm a strong, independent woman. I don't need no stinkin' cart. My lip curls slightly, as if affirming I am indeed, a bad A.

I think about muscling my way to the front, but it's the airplane disembarking all over again. What's the rush? It's not like the luggage self-destructs if it makes a third trip around the carousel without being claimed. I glance to the ceiling and grin as I envision red lasers rotating and honing in on unclaimed baggage.

Maybe I'll put that into my next book. Middle-grade kids would find it hysterical and way cool.

I type out a quick text to my mom, telling her I've arrived safely. I think she's concerned I may be too emotionally damaged to travel alone. She nearly came on the trip with me, but thankfully I averted that. Not that I don't love her and like being with her, but I don't need her overabundance of positivity right now. I just need time to wallow in self-pity without being reminded of the bright side.

I lean against the pillar and drop my head back. My foot taps impatiently. I can't wait to get to my rental. I'm exhausted. In fact, I had better grab some dinner on the way because once I get to the house, I don't plan to leave again until I have to use my Disney World tickets. And that's not for another two days. Two days of sleeping, watching romance movies, and crying. Merry freaking Christmas to me.

I sniff back the tears. This was supposed to be the best Christmas ever. But no. Not only did Nathan ruin my wedding, but he's ruining my Christmas too.

Maybe instead of stopping to get take-out for dinner, I should stop at the grocery store. I'm going to need ice cream. LOTS of ice cream.

All the bags must be out because the crowd around the carousel has thinned. Finally, I can grab my stuff and be on my way.

It shouldn't be too hard to find my bags. Apart from being some of the few left on the belt, I also tied a pretty pink ribbon on the handles so they would be easy to spot. I read that tip on a Pinterest pin from a travel blog. In hindsight, I feel a little stupid not to have come up with that little nugget on my own. But hey, if it was on a travel blog, I'm probably not the only person who hadn't thought about it.

I glance at all the suitcases but I don't see any pretty pink ribbons. Where are my pink ribbons? I start to panic. Oh for the love of Pete. Please don't tell me my suitcases are on a more exotic vacation than I am.

I feel the tears pricking at my eyes again, but then I notice a small frayed piece of ribbon, not very pink and not very pretty, attached to a black suitcase

just like mine. I release a huge breath and reach down to grab it, but the handle comes off in my hand. I just blink down at it as my suitcase moves past me and starts another lap.

I shove the handle in my back pocket as I lean over and grab my second bag. I tentatively test the handle, but it seems secure as I stand there waiting for my other suitcase to come back around.

I lift the limp, dirty, frayed ribbon barely clinging to the handle of my suitcase. What the crap happened to it? It looks like it was chewed by an angry beaver.

“You tied a ribbon on your handle to distinguish your bags from everyone else’s?” A voice asks to the side of me.

I turn. “Yeah. I read about it on a travel blog.”

The lady, probably about ten years older than me, shrugs. “Yeah, a lot of people read it. It’s not a terrible idea.” Her face says the opposite. “But some people leave the ribbons way too long and then they get stuck in the conveyor belts.”

Who is this woman, a rep with the baggage handlers union or something?

“I don’t think I left them very long.” I lift the shreds of ribbon. “But I guess maybe I did.”

The woman shrugs again. “My husband works in baggage. It’s a huge pet peeve of his.” She motions to my bag. “You’re lucky it didn’t rip your handles off.”

I place a hand over my back pocket, subconsciously trying to hide the evidence. But just then my other suitcase comes around again and I have to use two hands to lift it off the belt. I don’t have to look to know the woman is giving me an I-told-you-so look.

I straighten as she walks away. “You’re lucky it didn’t rip your handles off,” I say in a low snarky voice. And I may have stuck out my tongue. It seems four-year-old Shay has come out to play.

Why did I decide to come to Florida? Why? Who goes on their honeymoon without the groom?

Once BW (short for baggage wife) is out of sight, I push the handle of my carry-on down with more force than is necessary. But my ankle still hurts, and I can’t help but give it a little piece of me.

I lay my carry-on on its side on top of my largest suitcase, leaning it against the extendable handle. Then I grasp both bags and pull them along behind me.

I want to give the Universe a little ‘take that’ flick of my chin. It thought it had given me more than I could take, but it was wrong. The only thing standing between me and my rental car is a sliding glass door. And I can totally take it.

My bags bump over the door jams and my carry-on suitcase clatters to the floor. I shake my head and release a deep, heavy sigh. Universe, 3; Shay, 0.

How close is the grocery store?

CHAPTER
TWO

SHAY

I get my suitcases rearranged and head where the rental car sign directs me. Just a little farther and I will be on my way to the house.

I push back the tears that threaten to fall. I can't lose my crap yet. I'm so close to the finish line, I can taste it. Or maybe I'm just anticipating the chocolate peanut butter ice cream.

I've never rented a car by myself. Nathan travels quite a bit, so for him it's old hat. I had voiced my concern, but he said it was no problem. *We'll have a reservation, Babe. All we do when we get there is pick a car, scan it into our app, and drive away.*

The blood drains from my face. The app. I don't have the app. And even if I download it now, there's no way I can log into Nathan's account to get the reservation.

The rental car was the only thing he'd put on his credit card, and he'd probably already canceled the reservation. Why hadn't I thought about that before I hopped on the plane? I stop and shake my fist at the sky. Curse you, Universe!

I move to the little booth thing that has the name of the rental car company Nathan booked with. A guy with long stringy hair and a ring pierced between his nostrils looks up as I approach. He can't be older than twenty. "You just open your app and scan the QR code that's in the car."

I flick a glance at him. "Uh, here's the thing. I don't have the app."

He stares at me like I'm speaking a foreign language. "If you don't have the app, just download it. You'll just have to log into the account you created on your computer when you booked the reservation." He thinks I'm an idiot—it's written all over his face—and I'm not sure I disagree with him.

I smile awkwardly again. "Uh, I didn't book the reservation. My fianc—" I clear my throat. "Someone else booked it, but then they weren't able to come."

He blinks at me once. Twice. Three times. "Can you just call them and get the login info for the app?" He looks at me like this is the obvious choice.

My head shakes. "Nope. I can't reach him." He stares blankly at me so I keep talking. "I mean, I tried, but there was no answer," I lie.

The guy rolls his eyes like he's mad I'm actually making him work.

I would just download the app and try to log in. I think I know what Nathan's username would be—TooCool9499. Yeah, it should have been another red flag. But his password? His are all ridiculously long and there's no rhyme or reason to what he capitalizes and which special character he uses. I have a better chance of picking all the winning lottery numbers correctly. And as I'm not a millionaire, you can guess my odds of logging in.

"So you don't have a reservation?" Car Reservation Guy asks in irritation.

I lift my shoulders in a sorry-but-no kind of way. "Can you just look up the reservation on the computer?"

He stares at me, his head shaking, his mouth set in an I-don't-trust-you look.

I give him a wide-eyed look. "Then it looks like I don't have a reservation." I try to sound perky and lighthearted. But I don't pull it off.

He types something into the computer and looks at the rows of cars behind him. "The only thing we have is a couple extra large cars. Like that Denali over there." He nods with his head.

"A suburban? Are you kidding me?" Dang Nathan. He must have canceled the reservation. "Don't I need my commercial driver's license to drive one of those things?" My eyes plead with him. Surely he is only saying this to prove a point to me. I get it, friend. Next time I'll make a reservation. But please, just give me a compact this time. I mean really, I drive a MINI Cooper. How am I supposed to maneuver a Denali XL?

There's no humor in his face, just annoyance. "It's Christmas Eve Eve, lady. What do you expect? You're lucky we even have the Denali."

I just stare at him. He's really holding firm to this ruse. What if I say no? What will he do? What will *I* do? How much will it cost to just Uber for the whole week? "Do you know if any of the other places have a compact?"

His eyes roll even harder than the last time. Like he purposely slows the roll down so he can make a complete loop around the eye socket. Point taken. He's annoyed with me. But I don't care. I just want a nice little car so I can be on my way. Where's his Christmas spirit?

He picks up the phone and pushes some numbers. "Hey, Reggie, it's Devon over here at American Rental. Do you have any compacts available?"

I can hear a chuckle on the other end of the line. "Yeah, that's what I thought. But I got a lady here who didn't make a reservation and now she

wants me to call all over the airport trying to find her a car.”

American Rentals could use a refresher course on customer service for their employees. Perhaps I’ll send an email and suggest it to them...After I’ve had a carton of ice cream and slept for a few days.

“Do you know if any of the others have any compacts left?” He flicks his annoyed gaze at me. I return it with a snarky, overly-wide smile.

“Alright. Can’t say I’m surprised. Thanks for checking, bro.”

I so could have predicted he’d be a bro guy.

He hangs up and looks at me. “No compacts, ma’am.” I am twenty-freakin-eight and he’s calling me ‘ma’am.’

I kind of want to snatch that ring from between his nostrils and throw it at him.

“So, do you want the Denali or not, ma’am?”

I’m beginning to think that perhaps ‘Miss’ had not been so bad. “I guess that’s my only option.” I sneer at him. I know it isn’t his fault, but he keeps calling me ‘ma’am,’ and I can’t help but clench my fists at my side.

He types into the computer and then looks up. “I need your credit card.”

“How much is it going to be?” I brace myself. Aren’t bigger cars more expensive?

“When are you bringing it back?”

I narrow my eyes at the car. Maybe tomorrow? “Uh, January 1st.”

He types on the computer. “That will be eighteen hundred dollars. And make sure you return it with the tank full or we have to charge you for fuel.”

I cough. It’d be totally cheaper to Uber where I needed to go. But the thought of waiting outside the grocery store with melting ice cream makes me pull my credit card from the zipper pocket on the back of my phone case and slide it over to him.

He takes it and holds it up to a scanner. It must be one of those things like on some food apps that it takes a picture of your card so you don’t have to manually enter the information. He hands it back then turns the screen to me. “Enter an email address and create a password for the account.”

I lean in close to the screen to make sure no one sees the password I enter. One cannot be too safe when it comes to internet transactions. Or rude rental car agents.

I press enter and the screen changes. He stares at me expectantly and I nod. He turns the screen back to him, types a few more things, and then slides my credit card and a business type card to me. “If you scan in this QR code, it

will take you to our website. You can download the app from there. Once you sign in with the email and password you just created, you can go over to either the black or silver Denali and you're all set."

"You may need to give me a brief driving lesson first. I'm not sure I can even back that thing out."

He blinks at me. OOKKAAAYYY. He's beyond personality at this point. "When you log into the app, you may want to click the option requesting insurance." Now his lip quirks up on one side.

"Thanks for the tip, bro." I smile at him as I collect the cards and head toward the black government issue SUV. Have I mentioned that the score is now Universe, 5; Shay, 0? Just wasn't sure if you were still keeping track.

I open the back and shove my luggage inside. At least there's plenty of space. I could probably fit my entire apartment furnishings in the back of this thing.

I climb into the monster truck and settle myself in. I half expect to discover a cord drooping down next to the window that I can pull to honk at kids in passing cars. But it's not there.

Feeling around on the side of the seat, I find the buttons to move my seat forward. Being 5 foot 2 inches tall, I need to move it a lot. The person who drove this before me must have been a giant.

I pull out my phone and scan the QR code from the card Bro gave me. The website appears on my phone screen and I start the download process. While the circular bars spin in the middle of my screen, I push in the ignition and turn on the radio. There's a satellite radio button, but when I push it, no music comes on. Is it because I'm currently sitting in a concrete bunker or because this car does not have a subscription? I look at my phone. If I close out of the download, will I have to start over?

I really don't want to be sitting here any longer than I have to. I guess I'll just have to sit here in silence until the app has finished loading. But silence leaves me to think, and I don't like doing that right now. My mind always drifts to—I glance down as the app appears on my phone.

"Thank the heavens," I sigh. I find the section on the app to scan in the QR code in the car—or Big Rig. I shake my head.

The app displays a big green check mark. I guess that means I'm good to go? I hope so, because I'm leaving. Chocolate peanut butter is calling my name, and I think I might be getting the shakes just thinking about it.

I put BR in reverse, and I'm kind of surprised when I do not hear backup

beeps. I don't even know if that's what they're called. Which should indicate that I'm not qualified to drive this beast. But I manage to back up, with the aid of the three cameras, without incident. Wow. I don't think I felt this victorious about backing up even when I was in driver's ed in school.

I release a heavy sigh. I'm pointed toward the exit and I'm ready to go. Orlando, you better watch out. Shay Taylor is on her way.

CHAPTER
THREE

EVAN

The sun is just starting to set as I flip on the light in my garage/workshop. I push the button next to the switch and the garage door pulls up as I push the garage screen door down. It's a beautiful night, and I want to see when Nathan and his new wife arrive. Nathan's wife. That's so weird to say.

I glance out toward the house next door, but it's still quiet. I expected them to be here already, but their flight could just be delayed. Airlines are not always the most timely companies. Besides, it's December, and I've heard flights from Salt Lake City are sometimes delayed by snow.

I shake my head. Who chooses to slip their way around in the snow when they could enjoy this beautiful weather year round? It boggles my mind. Which is why I leave my New Hampshire house and spend the winter down south.

The board of directors of my tech company had wanted me to move the company to Lehi, Utah (apparently it is just outside of Salt Lake City?) because there are a lot of tech companies there. But I'd pushed back. If I had to deal with snow, I wanted it to be New Hampshire snow, not Utah snow. But then the Everlake Tech. people swooped in and bought the company. Now I don't care where it's located because it's no longer my problem.

I walk over to the boards in the clamps, glue oozing out from the joints and run my hand over it. It's rough and bumpy. But soon it will be smooth and soft. Just thinking about the work ahead refreshes me.

The low rumble of a car nears, and I look out the screen door as a large SUV pulls into the driveway next door.

I grin. Nathan. I haven't seen him—except on FaceTime—since Stanford six...no, seven years ago. Man, where has the time gone? I can't believe he's married. Although, I don't know why I'm having a hard time accepting it. Most of my college friends are married and have kids. I think I'm the only one who's not. But I've been too busy building a company from the ground up to worry about marriage. My shoulders tighten and a burning fills my gut.

I never thought I'd be the holdout. Nathan has always been such a player. I never thought he would actually commit to someone. But I suppose when

the right woman comes along, even someone like Nathan could take the leap.

Although, with what Nathan has said about this woman, I have my doubts that she's the right one. I'm not sure why he decided to marry her. But I'm not going to be that friend who disses on his friend's new wife.

Wiping my hands on the nearby towel, I push through the doorway of the screen to say hello and give them the garage door opener and passcode for the front door. Usually, I just have the management company handle it, but John's wife went into labor early. And anyway, I had planned on greeting Nathan when he got here. I know he's on his honeymoon and I probably won't see him much, but I still want to at least greet him and welcome him to Florida.

The driver's side door opens, and a woman jumps down.

She does the driving? I don't know why I'm surprised. Nathan said she was a control freak.

She's shorter than I pictured from Nathan's description. And prettier. He'd said she was 'hot,' but I guess the other things he told me about her tempered her looks in my mind.

I smile at her. "Hey, you must be Mrs. Shay Montrose."

She flinches slightly. It probably still feels weird for her to be called that.

"I'm Shay, but my last name is Taylor." She eyes me.

Huh. She kept her own name. How very progressive of her. It's like I'm already seeing everything Nathan said about her. I can't believe he actually married her. I tried to tell him things would only get worse once the vows were said. But he never listened to me in college. Why should he start now?

I look toward the car, waiting for Nathan to get out.

Shay Taylor, the progressive woman, stares at me. "Do you need something?"

I smile. "I have the garage door opener and door code for you. But I thought I may as well give it to both you and your husband at the same time."

Her eyes narrow slightly. "I don't have a husband."

I frown. I don't know why I don't mention Nathan, but from the look on her face, it seems the safe move. "I thought the note in the reservation said this is your honeymoon."

"Nope. NOT a honeymoon." There's a definite bite in her voice. "You need a husband to have a honeymoon." She points to the car that I can now see is empty. "And as you can see, it's just me."

It's just her? Where's Nathan? "But the contract said there were two of

you.”

“He didn’t come with me, okay? Can we just move on? Or does it null and void the contract if I come by myself?” Her voice gets higher with every word.

I shake my head. “No. No. It’s fine. I was just confused for a minute.” I have a sinking feeling in my stomach. What happened to the wedding? Did he tell her about me? I really hope he didn’t. I thrust my hand forward. “Here’s the remote to the garage.” I frown as I look at the car. “Although, I don’t think that car will fit. It looks too long.”

“Of course it is. That’s another point for you, Universe.” She looks to the sky with an angry scowl and shakes her fist.

My brows raise. Okay, she might not be entirely stable. From all accounts, I think Nathan may have dodged a bullet on this one. “Uh, the code to the front door is the last seven digits of the phone number on the reservation.” I shift onto my other foot, not sure I should ask the next question. “If you’re here alone, are you still planning to stay for the full amount of time?”

She shrugs. “I plan to. Maybe I will even extend if the place isn’t rented out immediately after my scheduled stay.”

It’s booked. I already know that. All my rentals are booked all the way through May. But she doesn’t look like she wants that info right now. So I think I’ll wait until she’s less jet-lagged and in a more pleasant mood.

She does have a more pleasant mood, right? “Okay. Well, you’re probably tired and want to go rest.” I point to the townhouse next door. “If you need anything, I’m staying in the house next door.” I cringe, wondering if John really needs the next week off for the baby. I mean, are babies really that hard? Maybe I should reconsider spending Christmas in New Hampshire.

She nods to me as she heads to the front door and jabs the code into the keypad. Does she expect me to bring in her luggage like I’m some bellhop or something? Well, she’ll be disappointed if she does.

I turn to leave, but then roll my eyes as my mom’s voice echoes in my head. *You’ll never regret performing an act of kindness.* I grit my teeth and turn back toward the car. Yanking the handle on the back, I wait while the door slowly pushes open revealing two suitcases. Two? Did she actually pay to check bags? She’s only going to be here a week. Nathan was not too far off. She’s high maintenance.

I grab for both bags, but one is missing a handle. I shake my head as I

tuck it under my arm, like a giant, heavy football. I carry them into the house and deposit them on the entryway floor.

She appears and drapes her arm over the stair railing. Her gaze drops to the bags at my feet and then up to my face. Her lips shake lightly. Is she going to cry? Man, this girl is a hot mess.

“Thanks for bringing in my bags,” her voice quivers.

This is decidedly uncomfortable. And my mom had been wrong. I do regret my act of kindness. I regret it so hard.

I glance at the door. “No problem, Miss Taylor.” I take a step closer to the door, trying to make my escape.

“It’s Shay.” She sniffs.

I nod. She’s definitely not emotionally stable. “Anyway, if you need anything else, I’m just next door.” Why do I keep bringing that up? It’s like I’m inviting her to come over and bother me.

I lift my hand in a wave and slip out the door, sucking in a breath as I close it behind me. I hurry across the driveway, afraid that she’ll stick her head out the door and call me back.

Pushing through the small door in the garage screen, I grab my cell phone off the counter on my way to the door into my kitchen.

I pull up the contacts on my phone and scroll down to Nathan’s number, shoving the phone to my ear.

It rings several times before a tenor voice answers. “Hey, man, what’s up?”

“Nathan? Where are you?”

He lets out a groan. “Oh, man, I’m sorry I didn’t call you yet. The wedding didn’t happen. I kind of thought Shay would have canceled the reservation.”

Nathan didn’t know she was here? I open my mouth to tell him that she is, but then I stop. I’m not sure why, but I don’t feel right about telling him. “Nope. She didn’t cancel.” I can tell him the truth without him discovering the full truth, right?

“Dude. I give you permission to charge her credit card for the full amount.”

I frown. I don’t really need his permission to charge the credit card. After yesterday, the reservation was non-refundable. “What do you mean the wedding didn’t happen?” I had received an invitation, but since he was coming to Florida for the honeymoon, I hadn’t worried about flying out to the

wedding. I guess that was a good call on my part.

“I called it off. The more I started to think about what you said, the more I realized that I couldn’t go through with it. She’s just too much.”

A knot forms in my stomach. As much as I don’t want my friend stuck in a bad marriage, I also don’t like the thought that he is using my words as an excuse.

“I didn’t tell you to call off the wedding.” Right? I wrack my brain trying to remember the details of my last conversation with him.

“Uh, yeah, you did. You literally said ‘You can’t marry her.’”

I drop my head back and close my eyes, thumping my palm against my forehead. When would I learn to keep my mouth shut?

“Don’t beat yourself up, man. I totally owe you one.” Nathan sounds far too upbeat for someone who has just called off his wedding.

“Was she really that bad? Are you sure it wasn’t just cold feet?” I just keep feeling sicker and sicker.

“No. It wasn’t cold feet. I told you about how controlling she is.” I remember him saying that she always picked where they ate and what movies they saw. “And then there are all of her neuroses.”

“Neuroses?”

“Yeah. They hadn’t really bothered me at the beginning. I kind of thought they were cute. But the longer we were together, they just became so annoying.” He lets out a sigh. “And I’m not convinced they were even completely real—like, I think she used them just to get attention.”

“Like what?” If this girl was staying in my rental, maybe I had better know if she is dangerous. I really don’t want a whole Fatal Attraction-dead bunnies kind of thing to happen.

“Like she has these weird phobias.”

“How weird?” Was it like fear of the dark kind of phobia or like the ones I read about in an article on the internet—the fear of beards or pelicans? I run a hand over my stubble. What am I in for here?

“She says she’s afraid of heights. Oh, and she has claustrophobia and is a complete germaphobe.”

I relax back on my couch. Those aren’t very weird. I know several people with those same fears. Heck, my mom had been afraid of heights. “That doesn’t seem weird.”

“Well, yeah. I guess those aren’t weird, but her reactions are. She acts like she’s going to pass out or be sick. It’s just so over the top. And don’t

even get me started on her fear of open-backed stairs.”

My brow creases. “Open-backed stairs? What are those?”

“You know, the stairs that just have the treads, but no risers so they’re open in the back. She freaks out if she has to walk up or down them.”

Okay, that one is kind of weird. But it isn’t dangerous. And I’m not sure it would be something I would call off a wedding for. But then, I’m not the one who was marrying her. So who am I to judge? “Well, I’m sorry it didn’t work out for you. But I’m even more sorry that I won’t be seeing you.” I guess Christmas will just be me, not that Nathan had previously asked me to join them.

“I know, dude. Not seeing you is like the worst part of this for me.”

I pull my phone back and stare at it for a moment. His only regret is not seeing me? Not the nearly two-year-long relationship that has come crumbling down?

I can’t help feeling a little bad for Shay.

But also, what is wrong with Nathan?

CHAPTER
FOUR

SHAY

My phone dings and wakes me up. I see only a blue tint from the TV lighting the room.

I sit up and wipe some drool from my face, noting the obvious wet spot on my pillow. Gross. No wonder I'm alone.

I grab my phone and see a text from Maggie.

Maggie

Did you arrive safely?

Yeah. It was touch and go, but I made it.

Maggie

Details???

I'm not going to text her the harrowing details of my trip. That can wait until I get back.

What are you doing up?

I glance at the clock on the microwave in the kitchen. It says it's just after two in the morning.

It's after midnight.

Maggie

It was Dean's company Christmas party tonight. We just got home. I couldn't sleep until I knew you were okay.

A warmth spreads in my chest. I just love her. Even if she has the worst ideas ever.

I'm good. I already had my first therapy appointment with Ben and Jerry. And we have a few more scheduled over the next few days. I'll hunker down and completely forget it's Christmas.

Maggie

Do you need me to come out? I bet ShaRhonda would love to join you.

Ugh, no. All my sister will do is tell me that I wouldn't be in this position if I had listened to her because she always knew he was a jackadaw.

Maggie

LOL. True. I'm just worried about you.

Don't worry. I'm fine. I even had a great idea for a book today. So I can get some work done this weekend without anyone bothering me.

Maggie

You promise you'll call me tomorrow?

Cross my heart.

Maggie

Okay. I love you. You know that, right?

Yeppers! Now go to bed. You know your kids will not let you sleep in.

Maggie

You want me to send them out to keep you company?

Hahaha. Hard pass. But give them a kiss for me.

Maggie



I STAGGER INTO THE BEDROOM, putting a hand to my mouth as I open for a huge yawn. I probably should have turned off the television after watching *Legally Blonde*. But then I saw *The Holiday* on the "Suggested for you" and I

thought, *Why not?* Now, I know the answer to that question. Because I will be exhausted in the morning. Although, what do I really have to do tomorrow—I mean today? Lay in bed and eat ice cream? I can pretty much do that at nine am or two pm.

My tongue slides over the roof of my mouth and teeth, feeling the remains of tonight's ice cream still lingering. I can smell the dairy on my breath. I gag a little.

With a sigh, I heft myself into the bathroom. While I couldn't care less about removing my makeup—most of it is probably gone from crying anyway—brushing my teeth is a high priority.

I don't take the full two minutes. But what my dentist doesn't know, won't hurt him.

Flipping off the light, I head for bed. I grab my Minky blanket, and I throw off the comforter ready to snuggle in for the night. Or maybe the week. I'm just playing things by ear.

Big Green—the name I have given to my neon green travel blanket—casts a soft glow in the darkness as I spread him out over the bedding.

I don't get inside beds that aren't my own. It grosses me out. I know, the bedspread is way worse than the sheets. And don't get me started on the carpet. I saw a story on a news show when I was like nine where they took a black light into the room of several different hotel chains. I cannot unsee what they showed me. Like ever. Since then I have been a bit of a germaphobe, at least where vacations are concerned. I mean really, it's surprising I travel at all after seeing that.

But that's why I made sure to buy the XXXL Big Green. I mean, he takes up almost an entire suitcase himself, but it's totally worth it to not be sleeping in...filth.

With Big Green positioned and my pillow replacing those that came on the bed, I kick off my slippers and crawl onto the bed. It feels like it's a pretty good mattress. It isn't overly firm but also not super squishy. It's a Goldilocks mattress.

I grab the far edge of Big Green and pull him over me. Taking in a deep breath, I finally relax. I love the smell of freshly washed bedding.

I roll toward the middle and stare at the empty space. Nathan was supposed to be in that spot. I expect tears to fill my eyes, but they don't. I think I've used all the expendable moisture in my body already and there's just nothing left. Or maybe I'm just over him? But that seems unlikely. We

were together for over two years.

Maybe I'm too tired to care that he didn't bother to show up for our wedding. Or call to say that he wasn't coming. Even a text would have been nice in a destroy-your-hopes-and-dreams kind of way.

Rolling to the other side, I stare at the bright red numbers on the clock sitting on the nightstand. 02:15. My eyes burn, but for some reason I just can't sleep.

02:16...02:19...02:25...02:40.



I RUN a hand down my face, not fully out of the deep sleep I'm in. Something wet hits my forehead and then runs down the side of my face and onto my pillow. I wipe the back of my hand across it. Turning my head, my face settles onto a cold, wet spot. It takes me a moment to realize this is not right.

Plink.

A drop hits me on the temple and rolls down into my hair.

My eyes pop open, but the room is dark. Where am I? I don't recognize the space.

I flop onto my back as memories of the last few days tumble through my mind. Orlando. I'm on my not-honeymoon.

A drop plops onto my forehead again. Why is water dripping on me? Where is it coming from?

I reach for my phone and turn on the flashlight. Shining the light upwards, I gasp. A huge paint bubble has formed on the ceiling, and water is dripping from the lowest point. "Oh, this can't be good." I say aloud.

I throw my legs over the side of the bed and stand up, water seeping through my socks and between my toes. I stop the gag in my throat at the thought of everything that might be in that water.

I take another step and my eyes widen as the water seeps up again. The whole floor seems to be wet. I had not ventured upstairs since arriving. Ice cream and crying had seemed more important. But I knew there were several bathrooms upstairs. What if one of the toilets is overflowing?

I throw up in my mouth. I could be standing in toilet water. I hurry up the soaking stairs, already planning the Clorox bath these clothes will be taking. Or maybe I'll just throw them away. I'm not sure I can ever wear them again.

I check both bathrooms, but I can't find where the water's coming from. As much as I hate to wake up the manager, I know the water won't stop until the main line to the house is shut off.

I check my phone. 4:47. I don't know what else to do. In the time it takes me to locate the main water valve, there could be another inch or two of water on the floor.

I slosh down the stairs and out the door, high stepping through the flowerbed dividing the two driveways. My wet socks are now wet and muddy. Great. I knock three firm times on the door. Then I ring the doorbell twice, just in case he's a heavy sleeper.

I wait, looking up and down at the quiet street. Nothing.

I knock again.

As I lift my hand to ring the doorbell again, I hear muffled noises on the other side of the door.

The front door opens and the manager stares at me. His hair is disheveled and he's standing in front of me in basketball shorts. I suck in a breath. That's it. Just basketball shorts. His bare chest—his very tan and defined bare chest—is just staring back at me. Or perhaps I'm the one staring. I can't be certain.

His irritated voice pulls me out of my trance. "Do you know what time it is?"

I nod. "Of course I know what time it is. It's the first thing I checked."

He growls and it kind of just adds to the hot vibe he has going on.

"What do you want?"

I pull my gaze back up from his chest. "I need to know where the main water shut-off is in the house."

His brows shoot up. "Why do you need that?"

"To turn off the water, obviously." Were all men in Orlando so dense that you had to spell everything out? Or maybe the manager and the car rental guy are related. Although, the manager has been much nicer.

He steps out of his house and moves toward mine. "But why do you need to do that?"

"There's a water leak somewhere. I thought it best to turn off the water before the place floats away." Again, I try to push the thought of the toilet water out of my head. It isn't helping anyone right now. Instead, I focus on his back. Which I'm happy to report is just as muscular as his chest. Only he can't see me when I stare at it.

"There's a leak? How ba—" He opens the door and his mouth drops.

“What the h—,” he swears. Not that I blame him. If I was the swearing type, I would’ve probably already said a whole slew of them. He looks back at me. “What did you do?”

I frown at him. “I didn’t do anything. I just woke up to water dripping on my head.”

He peeks into the room I’d been sleeping in and swears again when he sees the paint bubble. Moving with grace I would not have guessed he had, he flies toward the stairs. “It’s coming from upstairs. Did you leave a sink running or something?” He shouts back at me.

I put my hands on my hips. “I already told you, I didn’t do anything. I didn’t even go upstairs until just before I came and got you. But I think you should turn off the water and then you can come back to accusing me.” I stay standing just outside the front door. I don’t need any more exposure to fecal matter (those are literally the worst words ever) than I’ve possibly already had.

His head is shaking as he bolts down the stairs two at a time, water sloshing up onto his legs, the water droplets clinging to his leg hair. It’s both sexy and revolting.

He rushes down the small hallway toward the kitchen and ducks into the closet under the stairs. Even from the porch, I can hear the pipes hiss as the water stops flowing through them. He comes out of the closet and just stands there. As if he doesn’t know what to do next.

Truthfully, I don’t blame him. This is a huge mess and is going to cost the owner a fortune. And that’s just in repairs. I have no idea what it will be in lost rental income.

He runs his hands through his hair and swears again. It isn’t a terrible one as far as swears go. No f-bomb or anything. Nothing that makes me think less of him.

My mom told me once that she never swore until she was, like, forty. And then one day, something happened and it just came out. She said she wanted to tell me that it didn’t make her feel better, but that it really had. At least for a minute. But then she had hurriedly told me that she was not giving me permission to swear. As if I needed her permission. I’m an adult.

“You say you didn’t go upstairs?” He says it like he doesn’t believe me. “Even to look around when you first got here? Maybe you turned on a sink and don’t remember doing it.”

“I’m not memory impaired. I’d remember if I’d turned on a faucet.” I jut

my hip out and put my hand on it. “But in order to turn on a faucet and then forget that I did it, I would have had to go upstairs. Which I didn’t. The first time I went up was to see if the toilet was overflowing or something. Before I came to get you. Last night I unloaded my groceries, then watched movies until 2:00. Then I was awakened at 4:30 by water dripping on my face.”

He rolls his eyes. “Well, something happened.” He narrows them at me. “Do you sleepwalk?”

I shake my head and look at him like he’s crazy. “No.”

He tromps up the stairs and disappears around the railing. I hear doors open and close and then I hear him swear again. I must admit, he has a very good swear word vocabulary.

He comes down the stairs and stops in front of me, his eyes looking down at the ground. “I’m sorry I accused you. It looks like one of the washer hoses burst.”

I let out a relieved sigh. “Then it isn’t toilet water?” I’m already pretty sure it isn’t. I mean, I hadn’t seen any of the toilets overflowing, but I have no idea if it can come from underneath.

He shakes his head. “Does it matter?”

“Uh, yeah.” My eyes widen. Okay, he might actually be crazy. “It doesn’t bother you to think that you might be standing in toilet water?”

His brow creases. “It didn’t, but now it does.”

I step inside and look around. And then it hits me. My suitcases. I walk into my room and see my suitcases sitting on the floor of the closet. For the first time in my life, I regret not being one of those people who put their clothes away in the dresser when they arrive at the hotel.

I mean, I don’t because, hello...germs. But as I lean over and poke at my clothes— water fills the space where my finger had been—I wonder if dresser germs were as bad as wet carpet germs. “Well, son of a biscuit,” I say.

Stupid Nathan. If he hadn’t talked me out of buying those new hard-sided suitcases, I wouldn’t be without any dry clothes right now.

“Son of a biscuit?” I hear from the doorway. “Must you use such harsh language, Shay?”

I turn and see the manager (did he tell me his name and I just forgot it?) standing there, a grin on his face. Although, how grin in the midst of this disaster, I have no idea. “I’m not a big swearer.”

He runs a hand through his hair again. “Normally, I’m not either.” He

sighs. “Sorry you had to hear them.”

I shrug. “It’s okay. My dad has a rather colorful vocabulary. You haven’t said anything I haven’t heard from him.” I lift my first suitcase and water runs out from one corner. I look up at him. “I think I need to visit a laundromat.”

He shakes his head. “You can bring them over to my house and wash them there. It’s the least I can do.” He looks around him, and it’s the first time I can say I have seen someone look forlorn. I don’t think he knows where to even start.

“Thanks. Maybe you can call a disaster clean-up place and get them out here before they leave for the holidays?”

He nods. “That’s a good idea.”

I look down at my suitcase. How am I going to get them to his place without making a mess over there?

“Wait just a second.” He lifts a finger and then turns and walks away. A minute later he returns with two black garbage bags in his hands. “Put them in these, and then once your clothes are in the washer, we can put your suitcases out on the patio to dry.”

“That sounds as good as any plan I had.”

He sloshes over and holds open the first bag. I drop my suitcase and all the clothes from it inside. He twists the top and moves it to one hand, then opens the other bag for me to put my other suitcase in. It’s less full because BG and my pillow are still on the bed.

Thank goodness I had left my backpack and carry-on on the chair in the family room, or my computer would be toast.

I reach for the bags. “I can take those and then come back for my backpack and carry-on.”

He shakes his head. “Go grab them. I can take these.” He grimaces. “Think of it as the first part of my apology.”

CHAPTER
FIVE

EVAN

I'm so embarrassed. I can't believe I acted like such a jerk. If Shay leaves a terrible review on the rental site, I'll totally understand. She probably hates me after the way I accused her of forgetting to turn off a faucet.

The water makes the plastic garbage bags slip in my hands.

She comes down the hallway with her backpack slung over one shoulder and carrying her carry-on like it's a briefcase.

"Ready?" I ask as she approaches.

She nods. "Yeah." But then she ducks into the bedroom. She grabs an ugly green blanket off the bed and wraps it around her neck like a big, fluffy boa. She bends over and picks up a pair of slippers. They drip with water. She glances up. "I guess I'll be washing these too."

"Sorry. You probably weren't planning to do all your laundry on your first day here."

She shrugs. "There's a lot of things I didn't plan on lately." She looks up at the sky as we walk out the door. "That's another point for you, Universe."

Is she some sort of holistic person who uses crystals and talks to animals? I may need to question Nathan about that.

I open the door to my house and step to the side so she can go first. I set the plastic bags on the entryway floor. It's tile, so if water leaks out, it won't be a huge problem. I motion upstairs, just realizing for the first time that I'm not wearing a shirt and she's in her pajamas. Or at least I think they're pajamas. My sister wears leggings and a t-shirt to bed more times than not. And I can't imagine Shay bothered to change her clothes before she came to get me earlier. How could she? They were all soaked with water.

"The washer and dryer are in the closet in the upstairs hallway. There's soap and dryer sheets in the half-closet next to it. Feel free to get started when you're ready."

She nods. "Then I'll start calling around to find someplace to stay. I obviously won't be staying over there." She drops her head to the side toward the other townhouse.

"I'm really sorry. I'll cover any extra expenses you have to pay." I can't believe this is happening. When I pictured spending Christmas with Nathan

and his wife, this hadn't even been in my periphery.

"You don't need to worry about it. It wasn't your fault." She pulls a pair of flip-flops out of the pocket of her suitcase and holds them up. "Do you mind if I wear these or are you a no-shoes-in-the-house kind of guy?"

I'm exactly that kind of guy, but I don't have the heart to tell her that. Not when she has no clean clothes to wear. "It's okay if you want to wear them."

She looks at me, squinting slightly. "You *are* a no-shoes-in-the-house kind of guy. I can tell." She leans down and pulls a pair of socks out of her carry-on. "No problem. These will be better anyway. My feet are kind of cold after being in wet socks."

"It's really okay," I say, feeling like I should be the one making accommodations, not her.

"Hey, no worries. You don't need to change just because I'm homeless." A hint of a smile turns her lips but she stops it midway. "Sorry. Nothing about this situation is funny, yet."

I'm not sure what to think about her. From what I saw yesterday, I'm surprised she even asked about the shoes. From the way Nathan described her, she seemed like a her-way-or-the-highway type of girl. And what's with her using socks instead? She isn't acting like I thought she would.

"It might be a few days—or years—before it's funny." I smile even though I'm not really feeling it. The weight of what has happened is only now dawning on me. I mean, I have insurance. But my deductible is high. And, well, I'm fairly cheap. That's why I have as much money as I do. I don't waste it. "I better make that call. If I call them right when they open, then maybe there's a chance they can make it out today."

She nods. We seem to do that to each other a lot. She bites her cheek. "Do you mind if I shower first? I still feel like I have airport germs all over me."

Airport germs? I'm pretty sure they aren't a thing. But I understand what she means. "Sure. But I thought all your clothes were wet."

She lifts up her carry-on. "My dad always tells us to pack a spare set of clothes in our carry-on when we check luggage. Just in case our luggage gets lost."

Her father seems like a smart man. Normally, I would say that he should just tell her not to check bags at all. But it feels like that lesson may not resonate this morning. "There's a spare bedroom upstairs with its own bathroom." I motion to the one right next to us. "Or there's this one."

She glances up the stairs. "Maybe I should take that one so I don't bother

you while you're on the phone.”

“Sounds good.” I head down the hall but stop and look back over my shoulder. “There’s soap and shampoo in the shower.”

She lifts her carry-on. “I brought my own, but thanks.”

I nod. She probably thinks I’m a complete idiot.

“Oh and—” She frowns. “I’m sorry, but if you told me your name yesterday, I completely forgot it.”

Does that mean that Nathan didn’t tell her about me? I can only hope. Or this will be a really long morning. “Evan. Evan Barrington.”

She smiles and I’m struck again by how pretty she is. Not in a striking Gal Gadot in *Wonder Woman* kind of beautiful. But more the girl next door that you secretly crushed on all through high school kind of way.

“Thank you, Evan Barrington. I really appreciate everything you’re doing for me.”

I guffaw. “Uh, it’s the least I can do.”

“Maybe. But not all managers would do this much.”

I just stand there staring at her for multiple reasons. The first being that she thinks I’m the manager, which I suppose is only natural. Most people do not deal with their own vacation rentals. At least not around here.

But also, I’m surprised at how sincere she sounds. The woman that I saw yesterday—that Nathan has described to me—was not one I would have thought to be appreciative. Especially under these circumstances.

She disappears up the staircase, and I head into the kitchen to see if I can find someone to help ease my fears that this ruptured hose isn’t going to bankrupt me. Alright, it’s not going to bankrupt me. But I’m kind of cheap, remember? I need a number on the repairs before I can feel at ease.



I HANG UP THE PHONE, relief spreading through me. Someone will be out within the hour to assess the damage. I should go shower, but the thought of wading through the water with the clean-up people changes my mind. I’ll shower afterward. But I should probably put on a shirt. I had noticed Shay glancing down at my bare chest several times. I want to feel pleased, but she’s just come out of a long-term relationship. She is probably more embarrassed for me than impressed.

She walks out of the guest room as I step out of my bedroom, pulling a shirt over my head. Her hair is still wet, but it's pulled up into a ponytail at the back of her head. She's wearing different yoga pants than earlier and a long tunic kind of shirt. I don't think she's wearing any make-up and I'm struck by how pretty she is. My stomach does this flopping thing that comes out of nowhere.

"I think I'll get started on my laundry unless you want to shower first. I don't want to use all your hot water."

"I'm going to wait until after I wade through the water over there with the disaster guys."

She perks up. "Oh, are they able to come out today?"

"Yeah," I nod. "Someone should be here within the hour. I'm glad I called when I did."

"I'll just stay out of your hair. Do I need to stay upstairs while the washer is running?" Her eyes widen slightly. "You know, after the whole pipe bursting thing, I'm a little leery."

"Nah, I think you'll be fine downstairs." I raise an eyebrow. "But that makes me think that maybe I should buy some hoses and replace them all—just in case."

"Probably a good idea." She tosses her head and her hair bounces around her shoulders. "I'm going to grab my clothes and start a load. Then I'll start calling around for a room."

I grimace. "Yeah, I'm really sorry about that."

She waves me off as she heads down the stairs. I hear her grunt as she lifts one of the bags. They were likely heavy to begin with, but with all the water, they're super heavy.

"Do you want some help with that?" I call down the stairs.

"I think I'm good." She grunts again and I grin. Would she ask me for help even if she needed it? She tests the second bag and then moves some clothes into it from the first bag.

I wait for her outside the washer closet door. "Here's where the washer and dryer are."

She motions to the guest room. "I think I'll take them in the bathroom and ring them out in the sink. I don't want to get your carpet all wet."

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

A knock sounds at the front door and I head down the stairs. "I think that might be the clean-up people." I don't know why I yell that. It's not like it

makes any difference to her.

“Good luck,” she calls.

A burly guy in a white uniform shirt and dark blue shorts with work boots stands on my porch. “Are you Mr. Barrington?”

I nod. “Yeah. Thanks for getting here so quickly. I don’t even know where to start with drying it out.”

“That’s why I’m here,” he says. “What happened?”

“The hose to the washing machine ruptured. I don’t know how long it was running, but it had to have been a while.” I open the door to the townhouse.

The man looks in and whistles. “It was running for a long time. I’d guess ten to twelve hours at least.”

I swallow hard. I know it’s bad, but I expected this guy to come in and calm my worst fears—tell me that it wasn’t as bad as it looked. My stomach knots tighter. “How much is this going to cost me?”

“Best guess?”

I nod, even though I want to say, *No, give me the worst guess.*

“Twenty grand, minimum.”

I suck in a breath. I’m not sure what I thought it would be, but that wasn’t it. “Twenty grand?”

He twists to the side and looks down the hallway. “Minimum. We’re going to have to replace the drywall,” he sniffs. “And pretty much all the padding.” He glanced into the bedroom off the entry. “And replace at least that ceiling.”

With every word, my stomach plummets more. It’s not the amount of the repairs, but how long it’s going to take to fix, because this place is rented out for the next six months. “When can you get started?” After his news so far, I’m not sure I want to hear the answer.

“I’ll get a crew out here today to get the water sucked up. We can put some fans in and see if we can save some of the carpet.” There is little confidence in his voice. “You’re really lucky this wasn’t waste water. It would be a lot more expensive and time-consuming if that were the case.”

Gee. I’m glad there’s a bright side to all this. I release a deep breath. “I guess I don’t have much of a choice.” I smile at the guy because if I don’t, I think I might cry. “Thanks again for coming so quickly.”

He walks to his truck. “You’re lucky you called early.”

Again with the lucky? I’m feeling anything but lucky right now.

“We already have a full day ahead of us.” He gets into his truck and turns on the ignition, the air conditioning blowing the hair hanging just over his ears. He writes some things on a clipboard, but then, noticing me still standing there, he rolls down the window. “Oh, and Merry Christmas.”

Yeeaaaahhh. Merry Christmas.

CHAPTER
SIX

SHAY

I hang up the phone and drop my head to the counter. I've called a dozen hotel chains and there's not a single room available for the next week in all of Orlando. At least not consecutively. There's a room for tonight at the Hilton. And then a room tomorrow night at the Marriott. But then the rest of the time? Nada. I've even checked the vacation rental sites. That was more abysmal than the hotel chains, because they did not even seem to have single nights available.

I raise my fist in the air and shake it. "Ah, you may have won another one, Universe. But—" I trail off. I'm not really sure how to threaten the Universe. Like what do I really have to use against it? Besides, it's totally winning this war. I have not won a single battle, and I've lost count of how much I'm down at this point. But I'm pretty sure it's a lot.

The front door opens and Evan walks in. His shoulders are slumped and he's looking at the floor, his head shaking.

"Is it that bad?" I ask. My stomach sinks at the thought of what this might mean. Would the owners fire him over something like this? I mean, it isn't his fault. Or at least I don't think it is. Is it part of his management job to check washer hoses and make sure they were solid? I have no idea.

"The initial assessment isn't good." He sighs. "But I wasn't really expecting it to be fantastic." He motions to me. "How about you? Any luck?"

I shrug. "I booked the last room at the Hilton for tonight. Then I booked the Marriott for tomorrow night. But the only thing available after that is the Super 4 Motel."

His eyes go big. "The one just down the road?"

I nod.

He shakes his head. "No way. You can't stay there. It's on the news almost every day for a shooting, drug deal, or something equally as bad."

I pick up my phone. "Maybe this whole trip was a bad idea, and I should just go home." The flight will cost a buttload, but it's got to be better than sleeping on the streets of Orlando.

I can feel him standing there as I look down at my phone. Finally, he sighs, and I look up to see him leaning against the counter. But he doesn't

look at ease. “Why don’t you just stay here? I mean, it’s my fault that you don’t have a place to stay.”

Stay here...with him? I don’t even know this guy. Until an hour ago, I didn’t even know his name. Did I dare stay in his house? He could be a serial killer for all I know, and this is all part of an elaborate plan to kill me. I frown. But couldn’t he have just killed me in my sleep without destroying the rental property? He has the door code after all.

I bite my cheek. “I don’t want to put you out,” I say. Which is code for *not a chance in Hades*.

“You won’t be putting me out.” He almost sounds like he believes it himself. He pushes off the counter. “You can have either of the guest rooms. They both have locking doors,” he says as an afterthought. “Well, think about it. It would be a shame to leave and lose the money you have paid for the theme parks.”

“How did you know I had tickets to the theme parks?” I ask suspiciously.

“I just assumed.” He looks at me like I might be crazy. “You’re in Orlando. Isn’t that why you picked this location? Because it’s close to Disney?”

I relax, now feeling more like an idiot than suspicious. “Oh, yeah. I guess I hadn’t considered that.”

“I’m going to go hop in the shower. You don’t have to decide this minute, but you’re welcome to stay.”

I smile and nod. “Thanks, I appreciate the offer.” I look at my phone as if that will give me the answers I’m looking for. “I’ll definitely think about it.”

He takes the stairs two at a time, leaving me alone in the kitchen-family room. I pull up the airline app on my phone and pull up my return flight. How much will it cost to change? That is part of the reason I came to Orlando in the first place. I didn’t want to eat the cost of the plane ticket if I canceled (Yeah, lesson learned to purchase insurance). It was nearly as much as the original ticket to change it to a different location. Plus, there is the issue of the previously mentioned theme park tickets that are non-refundable.

I sigh. But maybe it’s worth the money to just put this whole dreadful week behind me.

My phone rings and I flip it over so I can see the screen. It’s probably Maggie because I haven’t called her like I said I would. My breath catches in my throat. It’s Nathan.

I stare at my phone, frozen. Should I answer it? I don’t think I’m ready to

talk to him yet. Maybe I should—

My mind is made up for me when the ringing stops. Maybe he'll leave a voicemail.

I open my screen and watch the corner for the little tape reel to appear. But when it doesn't appear, my heart beats faster. Why didn't he leave a message?

Instead, the text notification appears. Nathan's name is at the top. Seriously? He hung up before leaving a message so he could text me instead? Who does that?

Granted, I would probably have just sent the text in the first place. But who takes the time and effort to dial the number and wait for it to ring and then doesn't leave a voicemail?

I pull up the message.

Nathan

hey babe Im at your place and youre not answering the door I
just want to talk but ur making this weird just come open the
door

I roll my eyes at his text with no punctuation at all. It's one of the things that has bugged me since we first started dating. Like, how hard is it to add an apostrophe? And periods are just a no-brainer. *It takes too long to punctuate.* How did I not see what an idiot he was sooner?

I read it again, and this time process the words. I'm the one making it weird? He totally blew off our WEDDING and he's claiming I'm making it weird?

Another text pops up.

Nathan

Come on shay just open the door so we can talk

There's a part of me that's curious about what he has to say. What's his excuse for not even leaving a note? This is the first I've heard from him since the rehearsal dinner, and this is not even a sorry-I-left-you-at-the-altar message? (Technically I never came out of the bride's dressing room, but it's just semantics).

I set my phone to the side but continue to stare at it like maybe it will strike me if I turn my head.

Evan comes down the stairs and the thought that he might be shirtless

again makes me look up from my phone. His hair is damp and his shirt is sticking to his back, like he didn't fully dry off. That's a rather pleasing image. I long blink to try and dislodge those thoughts.

The sticky shirt defines his torso. If I hadn't already seen it bare, I'd be impressed. Eh, who am I kidding? I'm still impressed.

He smiles at me, but it slowly fades. "Is something wrong?"

I shake my head, as my phone rings again. I glance over to see that it's Nathan. Again.

I look back at Evan. "Feel better?"

He nods, but his eyes flick to my phone vibrating and ringing on the countertop. "Are you going to answer that?"

I shake my head. "Nope."

"Okay..." He draws the word out.

Finally, my phone stops ringing. But just like before, a moment later, it dings.

I laugh awkwardly. "I thought I had silenced that." But my eyes drift over to the screen. The first word I see is a swear word. *Nice, Nathan*. Then he proceeds to rant about how immature I'm being because he knows I can hear him but I still won't answer the door.

I'm the immature one? Whatever.

Another text comes through on the heels of the first one. Or the second one? Does it matter? This time there's an even worse swear word. One he knows I hate. It seems he's just discovered that I changed the locks on my apartment. Maybe all of Maggie's advice wasn't errant.

I don't need to see Nathan to know he's mad.

When my phone dings again, I flip it over and look up at Evan. "I've decided to stay."

A look flickers across his face and I don't know what it means. Had he only offered obligatorily, hoping I'd refuse? "Unless you've changed your mind," I mumble and fiddle with my hair.

He shakes his head. "No. Not at all. I just thought with all that noise on your phone that you might have decided to go home."

I shake my head, suddenly exhausted by it all. "No. I think it's best if I stay away for a while."

He leans back against the counter like he had earlier. I think maybe he thinks it makes him look casual.

It makes me smile because he's looking anything but casual right now.

Maybe we're both having the same worries. Although I doubt he is worried that I will attack him and ravish him in the dark of night. But then, maybe he is. How am I to know?

"Okay." He sighs. "Do you want to just stay in the room where you showered?"

Part of me wants to move down to the lower-level bedroom. It's closer to the front door and exit. But I think he already thinks I might be a bit of a weirdo, so maybe I should just stay in the upstairs room. I nod. "Sounds great."

"Why don't you call and cancel the other two rooms you booked? There's no sense in you moving three times just to end up back here."

"Oh, yeah. I should do that."

A knock sounds at the door and he goes to answer it. I pick up my phone and call the first hotel to cancel.

I'm just hanging up with the second hotel when Evan comes back. "Did you have any problems?"

"Nope." I grin. "Take that, Universe."

He gives me an odd look.

"The Universe has been telling me this trip was a bad idea every step of the way. I just want it to know I won this battle." I don't think my explanation helps matters any. In fact, he looks even more leery.

So I just shrug.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

SHAY

We both stare at each other like we aren't sure what to do now. It feels a little like I just found a roommate on Craig's List. Is that even still a thing?

"So," I start. "I'm guessing this isn't how you planned to spend your Christmas."

"Yeah, I'm guessing the same goes for you."

I snort out a laugh. "Not. Even. Close. This was going to be my best Christmas yet. What better way to start a new life together than at Christmas?" I stop talking because thinking about how wrong things have gone, makes my vision a little blurry. I push it all back. "So, what do you usually do at Christmas? I notice you don't have any Christmas decorations up."

He glances around the room. "Nope. I'm not normally here for Christmas. I'm usually in New Hampshire with my family."

"Oh? That's really cool that you can take time off. I would think that the vacation rental is really busy at this time of year."

His lips twitch. "Yeah, I have a really cool boss."

"It sounds like it." I nod. "You're lucky. A lot of people wouldn't be allowed to take off at the busiest time of year."

"What about you? No problem taking time off at Christmas?"

I lift my chin, as if it will convince him that I'm not a complete mess. "Well, I was taking the time off for my honeymoon." Evan's mouth snaps shut, and I think I can actually see him reprimanding himself.

"This place is booked pretty much the whole year. There are only a few days here and there that it's empty. If I only got a vacation when it's slow, I'd never get to take time off."

That makes sense. I can see how Orlando would be busy all the time. I mean, it's probably hotter in the summer, but if that's when kids are out of school and the only time that the family can go together, it makes sense that it would be busy even if it's hot.

"Why didn't you go to New Hampshire this year?" If it was his only vacation, what would keep him from going?

He looks a little sheepish. “Actually, I’m filling in for the manager. His wife just had a baby and that’s why I stayed here.”

What did that mean he’s filling in? Is he not usually in charge of the house I was renting?

He can probably see the smoke coming out of my ears as I try to process what this means. “I actually own these townhouses. The guy who usually manages them is out on paternity leave. And rather than have the management company fill in with someone who isn’t familiar with the properties, I just stayed to do it.”

My face heats with embarrassment. I’ve been calling him the manager all this time and he’s the owner? Why hadn’t he said something sooner? “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply—”

He lifts his hand. “No. Don’t apologize. Most of these places are managed by companies. I would have assumed the same thing.”

I close my eyes so that I can roll them at myself. I’m such an idiot. When I open them, he’s watching me. Smiling at me. Holy cow, he’s handsome when he smiles. I mean, he’s easy on the eyes when he isn’t smiling. But he’s next-level beautiful when his lips quirk up. “Really, you don’t have anything to feel bad about.”

I look around again, mostly because I can’t look at him any longer without heat creeping up my neck. “Okay. Here’s the deal.”

He raises a brow. “The deal?”

I nod. “We’ve both had a pretty crappy week. And I don’t know about you, but I don’t want this to be how I define Christmas from now on.” I look at him with wide eyes, but then stop because I realize they probably just make me look crazy, and he might already think I have tendencies. There’s no need to add fuel to that fire. “I mean, I don’t want to end up being like all those people that they base Hallmark movies on. You know, the ones who hate Christmas because something bad happened to them just before Christmas, forever tainting them until that one special year when their long-lost love comes into town to buy it for a huge hotel development and suddenly they see the wonder of Christmas again.”

I stop because he’s just staring at me. And not in a good way.

“But wait. I thought the guy who rolls into town to buy the little hotel and exploit it only for revenue, is the one who hates Christmas.” His lips quirk. “I’m beginning to wonder if you’ve actually seen a Hallmark Christmas movie.”

I'm somewhat shocked by his apparent Hallmark savviness. "And I'm beginning to think you may have seen too many." I give him side eyes.

He laughs. "Okay. So how are we going to change our fates?"

I tap my finger to my lips and his gaze drops briefly. But only briefly. Not in an I'm-holding-myself-back-from kissing-you-senseless kind of way, which feels like a pity. "The first thing we need to do is decorate this place so it feels Christmas-y." I pull my purse over and pull out my wallet. Slapping a twenty-dollar bill on the counter, I look up at him. "I propose a little contest."

He leans forward, dropping both elbows on the counter. "A contest? Is that really in the spirit of Christmas?"

I grin. "With my family, it is. Everything is a contest. Who buys the best present. Who found the cutest wrapping paper. If it isn't a contest, it isn't Christmas."

"Duly noted," he nods. "Go on."

"I propose we each take twenty bucks and see who can buy the best, most creative decorations for the money."

He narrows his eyes at me and leans closer.

Now *my* eyes drop to *his* lips. They're so close. I mentally shake myself. What am I thinking? I just got dumped after two years together. I'm not supposed to be thinking about kissing someone else.

"And what's the prize? Any good contest has to have a prize." He eyes me.

"The winner gets first pick of the ice cream sitting in the freezer in my townhouse." I frown. "I should probably go get my stuff. They may need to unplug the fridge to get all the water cleaned up."

"What if there isn't a flavor that I like?" He asks.

"Are you implying that you're going to win?" I act offended. Although, really, I'm pretty certain I'm going to win. This guy does not have it in him to craft. And he'll need to craft to get anything decent for twenty bucks.

"I wasn't implying." He looks serious, but then his lips start to twitch.

"Oh, it's on like Donkey Kong." I stand up and jam the twenty back into my wallet.

"Nice pop culture reference." He picks up a towel and drops it on the floor between us. "It's a throwdown."

I laugh. "I'm glad you explained that because I wouldn't have known what that meant."

He just shrugs.

“When are they coming to start on the cleanup?” My big plans come to a screeching halt. Although, I’m not sure why it matters. It’s not like we have to go shopping together, right?

“They already have. That’s where I went while you were canceling your reservations.” He opens the door under the stairs and grabs an empty paper box. “Here. We can use this to bring your stuff over.”

I pause. “Do you have enough room in your fridge and freezer?”

He waves my concern away. “How much could you have bought?”

My face heats as I go through the groceries in my head.

He heads to the door. “Come on, let’s get this over with so I can win this contest.”

I hurry to catch up with him. “I should probably explain my mental state when I was at the grocery store,” I babble as we walk through the already open door of the townhouse I had spent the night in. There’s a loud sound of high-powered vacuums somewhere in the house and cords running through the front door and up the stairs.

He looks over and I continue to ramble. “I wasn’t in a good place emotionally. So…” I trail off as he opens the freezer. Ten cartons of Haagen-Dazs and Ben and Jerry’s ice cream are haphazardly thrown inside. He looks over at me again. I’m pretty sure this won’t be the last time he does this. The fridge isn’t any better.

“There are like a dozen cartons in here,” he says.

“Actually, there are only ten. I already ate two of them last night.” I raise my chin so he doesn’t realize how much I’m dying inside that I just admitted that.

He pulls the cartons out without another word and stacks them neatly into the box on the counter.

He goes to open the fridge and I put my hand on the handle. “I had just been left at the altar. Please keep that in mind.” I’m struck for a moment at how easily that rolls off my tongue. It doesn’t feel like it only happened… two days ago?

He frowns. “Left at the altar?”

I nod as I stare at my hands. Why had I blurted that? It makes me sound pitiful. And when you add in all the ice cream and what he’s about to find in the fridge—it’s not the vibe I’m going for.

He looks at me out of the corner of his eyes as he pulls open the door. A stack of assorted candy bars—Symphony, Hershey, Toblerone occupies the

top shelf. There are also bags of Hershey Kisses and Nuggets, Snickers bars (because they satisfy, okay?), and Reese's Peanut Butter cups. Where's a random sinkhole when you need one? But hey, in my defense, there's also a small carton of milk, a dozen eggs, a package of deli ham, and some yogurt.

He packs everything neatly into the box and smiles at me. "I get it. You don't need to be embarrassed. I'm pretty sure I've emotionally shopped before." I've never felt more seen than I did right then. While he may not truly understand what I'm thinking or feeling, for the first time in two days, I don't feel judged. I don't feel as if everyone is wondering what I did to drive Nathan away. If I'm being honest, I've wondered that myself.

I grab the grocery bags off the counter. I see him glance at them—packed with an assortment of chips and cookies. Oh. My. Heck. I don't remember putting all this stuff in my cart. Is there such a thing as sleep grocery shopping? Or maybe grief shopping is a better word. Whatever it's called, that's definitely what happened.

He looks over at me and I want to hide my face. But then I realize he's just smiling. He isn't grinning as if he thinks something is funny. He's smiling sweetly as if he knows this is hard for me and he doesn't want to make it any harder. I swallow the urge to throw my arms around his neck and thank him.

"Is that all?" He asks, as if we haven't just loaded the entire frozen dessert and snack food aisles of the store into our arms.

I nod. "I think it's enough." I grimace and lift the bag. "I totally don't even remember buying half of this stuff."

"It's the break-up haze. People really shouldn't be allowed to shop on their own for the first seventy-two hours post break up." He lifts the box. "I don't hold you responsible for this." He waggles his brows. "But I will gladly take it as my prize when I win the contest."

CHAPTER
EIGHT

EVAN

We pull into the parking lot of the nearby strip mall. There's a grocery store at the other end and a line of small shops in front and back of us. Shay pulls into a spot, parking her car in the middle of the two nose-to-nose spaces.

"Uh, I think you're taking up two spaces." I open my car door and look down at the white dividing strip underneath me.

"Yeah, well, Big Rig here needs a lot of space." She smirks. "I don't have my commercial driver's license, you know."

I laugh. "I didn't realize you needed one to drive one of these."

She snorts. "Well, apparently you don't. But I think they should have at least given me some lessons first." She grabs her purse and opens her door. Looking over her shoulder she shrugs. "It's for everyone's safety that I take two spots. Trust me." She hops out.

I climb out and meet her at the front of the car. "So, where do we start?"

She slings her purse over her shoulder and puts her hands on her hips. "It's a competition. I'm not going to share my secrets."

I fold my arms across my chest. "But you made up the rules. How am I supposed to have any chance against you?"

"There aren't many rules. You can't spend more than twenty dollars." She raises her hands to her side. "What about that is difficult to understand?"

"That's it? Just the twenty-dollar limit?"

She softly taps my temple. "And your design sense. That's it." She's close enough that I can smell her perfume. Or maybe it's lotion. Whatever it is, it smells good.

"Will you at least tell me what store you're going into?" I put a hint of pout into my ask, hoping she'll take pity on me. I really have no idea what I'm doing in pouting or decorating for Christmas. Where do I even start?

She tips her head to the side. "I think I'm going to start at the dollar store."

"The dollar store?" I look over my shoulder. "Do they have any tasteful decor?"

She looks at me with pursed lips. "I guess you'll just have to use your

imagination. Or lose the contest.” She tips her head. “Or was your boasting about winning just some big talking, fancy walking?”

I can’t help myself. I start to laugh. “Big talking, fancy walking? What does that even mean?”

She shrugs. “Just what it says. Now, are we going to go to any of these stores, or are we just going to celebrate the baby Jesus here in the parking lot?”

I wave my hand toward the line of stores. “After you, ma’am.” She flinches slightly but walks past me and heads to the dollar store.

We walk inside and she grabs a cart. A cart? She’s planning to buy so much stuff that she needs more than a basket? From what I can see, this store has nothing that constitutes classy or tasteful.

I follow along behind her, not at all disappointed by the view. She has curves in all the right places. I shake that thought from my head. I’ve got to stop looking at her like that. She’s Nathan’s ex. Instead, I focus on trying to find anything she can possibly use that would win this challenge. Maybe I have nothing to fear.

We haven’t even gone three feet before she snatches up three boxes of red, green, and white candy canes. She looks at them closely, shaking the boxes up and down.

“What are you doing?” I peer over her shoulder.

“Making sure none of them are broken. I can’t use them if they’re all in pieces.” She gently puts them in the seat of the cart. Then she grabs three packs of green tinsel garland and three boxes of colored ornaments—the round kind that you color on every Christmas tree picture there is. I’m completely baffled and slightly worried my house is going to look like Christmas threw up on it.

She looks up at me. “Do you have a glue gun?”

I shake my head.

“Crap.” She grunts. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“What’s wrong? Why do you need a glue gun?”

She frowns at the stuff in her cart. “I have a glue gun and glue sticks at my house, so I hadn’t really thought about needing to buy those with the twenty bucks.”

I smile and pat her on the arm. “I’m going to be generous because it is Christmas and allow you extra money to buy the glue gun stuff.”

She looks as if she’s going to fake cry. “Wow. Look at you with the

Christmas spirit.”

I nod. “I know. Didn’t I say I would be the one to feel the holiday spirit and give up all my exploiting ways?”

“You really need to cut back on the Hallmark.” She gives me a hip bump. “Come on. I have a few more things I need to get.”

She adds a pack of plastic champagne flutes and a bunch of bare tree branches to her cart. Then two plastic baskets and a package of thin wooden dowels. The last thing she throws in is two spools of Christmas ribbon. She looks up at me. “Okay, I think I have everything I need here.” She stares at the contents of the cart. “Oh, except glitter. I need some glitter.”

“Glitter?” That’s where I put my foot down. “I don’t allow glitter in my house.” I give her a ‘sorry’ look.

Her lips turn down. “But it will be so pretty. You just need to wait and see. I promise I’ll glitter it outside and shake everything off before I come back in. And then I’ll move it as little as possible inside.”

This time she actually looks like she might cry. Is glitter really that important? I cave like a sandcastle at high tide. “Okay, fine. You can buy glitter.”

Her smile is instantaneous. Almost as if the tears weren’t real.

I scowl at her. “I think I was just played.”

She lifts a shoulder and grins sheepishly. “It’s for glitter. I feel no remorse.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.” I motion to all the stuff in the cart.

“Me?” She looks at me in shock. “What about you? You haven’t bought a single thing.”

I nod slowly. “I know what I’m doing. Don’t you worry.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not worried. I already know which ice cream I want.” She winks at me, and my heart skips a beat. Woah. I was not expecting that. Either thing, actually.

We head to the checkout where she only gets a few coins back in change from her twenty-dollar bill.

“You’re out of money and this is our first store.” I don’t understand her logic. Nothing she bought looks remotely like it will be high-end decorating.

“Where do you want to go?” She asks as we pull the bags off the end of the check-out counter.

“I don’t know. There’s a Walmart at the other end of the parking lot. Maybe I’ll go there.”

She smiles. “Oh, good. I wanted to stop there also. They’ll have the glue gun. Plus I can buy groceries.”

“Didn’t you already grocery shop?” I nudge her, hoping she knows I’m teasing her about the contents of her fridge in a nice way.

“I thought you might want something besides chocolate for Christmas dinner.”

“Chocolate isn’t a completely terrible idea,” I say as we walk on the sidewalk past the other shops in the strip mall.

“I’m thinking I can make some Thai peanut noodles—” She turns and looks in a store that’s decked out in Christmas decorations. “Maybe you can find something in here.”

I peer in the window. “I think this place may be out of my budget.”

“Can we go inside anyway? There may be something I can buy for my mom.” She looks over at me as if asking for permission. Again, not what I expect from her. The woman Nathan described to me doesn’t ask permission for anything. She does whatever she wants and usually drags Nathan along, whether he wants to go or not.

But I haven’t really seen that woman yet. Shay was a little terse yesterday when she arrived, but can I really blame her for that? She’d had a pretty rough couple of days and was jet-lagged.

Maybe the other personality comes out after she’s comfortable with a person.

I move to open the door for her.

“Thanks,” she says as she ducks inside.

The whole store smells like cinnamon and pine trees. I’ve never noticed it here before. Is it a Christmas shop year-round or is it just for the holidays? An older lady, probably in her late sixties, stands behind the counter. She’s pretty much exactly what I picture Mrs. Claus looking like if she wore green jeggings (I only know the term because of my sister.) and had gray spikey hair.

She smiles up at us. “Welcome to The North Pole Mercantile.”

With a name like that, I’m guessing this is a just-for-Christmas thing. Maybe it’s like the costume shops that open in unrented spaces just for the few months before Halloween.

“Your store is so lovely,” Shay croons as she lightly touches the snow globes on a shelf.

“Do you collect snow globes?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No. But my mom does. She would love this.” She picks it up and looks at the price, then sets it back down.

“Aren’t you going to get it?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. She would freak if she knew I spent that much on a snow globe. And maybe there will be one at Disney or Universal that she will like more.”

I guffaw. “And you think that one is expensive?”

She grins back at me. “I know. I will likely pay more for one there, but —” She moves to a different aisle—one filled with ornaments. “This is what I collect.” Her hand hovers just above them as she looks at each one.

“You collect Christmas Tree ornaments?” I should duh myself. Sometimes I’m not the best conversationalist. “Anything special?”

“I buy them when I travel so that when I decorate my tree, I can relive the memories of wherever the ornament is from.”

I guess that’s kind of cool. It’s better than buying souvenirs that just sit on a shelf and collect dust.

She picks one up that has a palm tree with Christmas lights on it. It says, ‘Christmas in Orlando’. “I think I’ll get this one.”

“You’ll probably find one at Disney or Universal.” I don’t want her to forget about that and then have buyer’s remorse.

“I know. I want to get one from each of those places, too.”

I look at it over her shoulder. “It’s cute, but I think you can do better.”

“What?” She looks it over, squinting like I must see something that she doesn’t.

“It’s just a little cutesy, isn’t it? You seem like a more traditional, sophisticated kind of tree decorator.”

She laughs. “Oh, what gave you that idea? My dollar store buys?”

I stare at her. I have no idea why I think that about her. Is it from something Nathan said? “I don’t know. It’s just the vibe I get from you.”

“What if I’m both? I do work with middle-grade kids. Maybe cutesy is more me than I’m vibing.”

I nod. I bet she’s a really fun teacher. “I can see that,” I take the ornament and dangle it in front of my face. “Actually, you seem like a two-tree kind of person. A fun one and the formal one that kids aren’t allowed to touch.”

She blushes and I figure I’ve hit the nail on the head. We’re kind of alike in that way. I’ll be a two-tree person once I have kids. One that the kids decorate with salt dough ornaments and decorations they make at school.

And a pretty and perfectly decorated tree that lives in the living room. The room where only guests are allowed. That's what my mother did.

"I think I'll just take this one," she says. "I can look for fancy ones at Disney."

We walk down the aisle toward the register, and I stop dead in my tracks as an angel tree topper catches my gaze. I pick it up with shaky hands and break out in a cold sweat.

She stands next to me and looks over my arm. "That's really pretty. Maybe we should buy a Christmas tree?"

I shake my head. "No. It's probably not worth it." I'm still staring at the angel in my hands, unable to put it down or pull my eyes away. "We had an angel just like this one for the top of our tree when I was growing up. It was my mom's favorite part of decorating. Only she was too short to ever reach the top and was too afraid of heights to climb the ladder to do it. So she would always make a game out of it and the winner got to put the angel on top. My brother, sister, and I always battled for first place."

"That's such a sweet memory. Are you sad you're missing it this year?" She moves in closer, and I can smell her lotion again.

"No. We don't do that anymore."

"What?" I flinch because her voice is louder than I expected. "Why not? It's so perfect."

I lick my lips, hating that I ever saw this angel and even more that I brought up this story.

She puts her hand on my arm. "Evan, are you okay?"

I nod, even though I'm really not. How had I thought I could carry on with Christmas as usual? "My mom died three days before Christmas two years ago. She was sick for a while before it happened. But it was a really busy time for me at work so I couldn't take off the time to be with her. And then it was too late. Her funeral was Christmas Eve."

"Christmas Eve? That's brutal."

I nod. "Yeah. My dad didn't want to have to take off work, once the holidays were over."

"Oh," she whispers beside me. "I'm so sorry, Evan."

I shake my head, finally able to pull my eyes away from the angel. "It's okay." I sigh all my emotions away. It's a lot easier to do after two years. "It was a long time ago."

"What happened to the angel?" It's like she can tell there's more to the

story that I haven't mentioned.

I lift one shoulder. "I don't know. My dad packed everything up and sent it to Goodwill."

She gasps beside me. "Oh my heck. How could he do that?"

I turn on her, ready to bark out a harsh reply. She has no right to judge my dad. Only I can do that because I've earned the right. But the tears in the bottom of her eyes stop it on my tongue.

"That had to be so hard. I can't even imagine." She swallows and turns toward the end of the aisle. "Hey, do you want to get out of here?"

I nod. I don't think I can get out of here fast enough.

We walk quickly to the register and the lady smiles at us. "Is this all for you today?"

We both nod.

She smiles wider. "Are you sure?"

Shay looks back at me and I nod. "Yep," she says. "This is it."

The woman looks slightly disappointed. I've never thought of Mrs. Claus as someone who would push her wares on you, but apparently she's a true capitalist. She sighs. "Very well. Shall I gift wrap this for you?"

Shay shakes her head. "No. It isn't a gift. It's for me."

Mrs. Claus rings up the ornament and we're finally on our way out. As I put my hand on the door, Mrs. Claus calls out. "Wait! You can't leave without kissing under the mistletoe." She points to the ceiling above us.

You've got to be kidding me. Mistletoe? How had I not seen that coming?

We both look up slowly and then at each other. "We don't have to," Shay whispers. "She isn't the boss of us."

I feel my lips curve upwards and a laugh bubbles out. "I kind of think she might be."

Shay looks seriously at me. "I know you want to get out of here. We really can just go." She lifts her hand to push on the door, but her hand lands on mine which is already there.

Is she doing this just for me? Or does the idea of kissing someone other than Nathan not sit well with her?

"Come now, don't be shy. Just kiss your girl." Mrs. Claus waves her hands at us. Is she shooing us into a kiss? "If you're that embarrassed, I'll turn away." She says, annoyance lacing her voice. Okay, so maybe she isn't exactly like Mrs. Claus.

I look down at Shay. She holds my eyes, and I can see she's feeling a bit of trepidation too. Why do I feel like this is a major turning point in my life? It's a stupid mistletoe kiss.

I push down all the jumpy, tingly nerves zinging over my skin and in my stomach. It's not a big deal. I can give her a quick, grandma-style kiss and bing, boom, bam we're back in the car.

I lean forward and brush my lips across hers. Oh, man. This feels nothing like kissing my grandma.

CHAPTER
NINE

SHAY

I freeze as Evan's lips brush across mine. It's so quick, and yet I can honestly say I've never been affected more. My lips tingle and warmth seeps slowly through my core and into my limbs.

Feather-light kisses aren't supposed to be like this. They're supposed to be forgettable. The move-along-there's-something-else-to-do kind of kiss. And yet, we both stand here, just staring at each other.

He's probably waiting for me to move because I'm still stiff as a statue with my hand on his.

"Oh, man. I am so sorry. I should not have done that. Especially not—" He shrugs. "Not after the week you've had." He runs a hand through his hair, leaving it standing on end and poking out in all directions. Crap. It makes me want to wrinkle his t-shirt in my fists and pull him back for another, longer kiss.

But instead, I clear my throat and finally have the presence of mind to take a step back. I shake my head and grimace. "What? No, you don't need to apologize." Cool. That's how I need to play this. "It's not a big deal. Like at all." I really want to run my fingers, or at the very least my tongue, across my lips, but I'm afraid if I do, it will draw his attention to me, and he'll see just how affected I am.

"You wanted to leave, right?" I ask.

He nods slowly.

I raise a hand and wave. "Thanks for the ornament. And Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, dear. Oh—" she calls as Evan and I turn away.

I look over my shoulder. "Yes?"

"Just remember we're open until 6 o'clock tonight." She smiles kindly. "In case you forgot something."

My brows raise. "Okay. Thanks again." She's a very passive-aggressive salesperson.

Evan is already holding the door open for me like he can't leave fast enough. Not that I blame him. This store has some weird vibes going on.

We head out to the car, and once we step off the sidewalk, his shoulders

relax. Who would have thought a little angel tree topper could set him so on edge? Although, I think it's more the memories than the actual angel.

"Now what?" He asks.

I push the button that has the picture of the tailgate lifting. The back of the Denali opens wide like a gaping mouth. "Well, I have almost all my stuff for the contest. But if my memory serves, you have," I tap my finger to my lips, "oh, yes. Nothing." I stow my bags and fold my arms. "Do you have any game plan here?"

He lifts his hands to his side in confusion. "This is your game and I think there's more of a learning curve than you let on."

"Since when has decorating for Christmas developed a learning curve? It's something you've done since you were a little kid."

His face darkens. "I guess I'm just out of practice. We haven't decorated in a few years."

My arms fall to my side, and I soften my stance. "Point taken." My voice comes out quiet and a little shaky. I push the button to lower the tailgate and give him a nudge. "Do you want some help? When formulating the rules, I wasn't aware of extenuating circumstances." I give him a side-eye smile. "But next year, buddy, you're on your own."

He smiles at me for the first time since our kiss. "You're truly a kind-hearted soul, Miss Taylor. But I think I only need to maybe change the rules a little. Then I can do it on my own."

I raise a brow. "I'm listening."

"Can we up the limit to forty dollars?"

"You realize that only gives me more money to trounce you with?" I say.

"I think I'm going to have to buy this win because I'm surely not going to make it," he grins.

"Okay. To even the playing field, I'll absorb the cost of the glue gun into my forty." I motion back to the dollar store. "Do you want to go back in there or try somewhere else?"

He looks across the parking lot at the Walmart. "I need superstore kind of help."

"So you did the big talking, but without the fancy walking?"

He nods emphatically. "Complete hot air. I had no idea who I was up against."

I give him a sympathetic grin. "We won't get the same bang for our buck as we will at the dollar store, but I think I can make it work."

He holds out his hand.

“What?” I ask.

“Do you want to walk all the way there and then back with our bags or do you want to park closer?”

I shake my head. “Oh, no. I’m not driving this beast closer. Look at how many cars are there.” A cold sweat breaks out on my forehead even thinking about maneuvering BR around that parking lot.

He wiggles his fingers. “I figured as much. Give me the keys and I’ll drive the beast,” he emphasizes the name as if I’m being overly dramatic. Which I’m not. “I drive a truck at home in New Hampshire. I think I can manage this. It’s the same size.”

I dig in my purse and pull out the keys. I’m just about to hand them over to him, but I pull back. “Wait. You aren’t on the insurance. What if you’re in an accident?”

He tips his head to the side. “Which do you think is more likely? *Me* being in an accident or *you* being in an accident?”

I give a fake laugh. “I won’t be in an accident because I’m not driving over there. You see how that works?”

“Come on, you big chicken. Give me the keys. I promise I’ll be careful. And if anything happens, I’ll pay for everything.”

“On top of your house repairs?” I guffaw. “Someone’s feeling rather high on the horse.”

“It’s the hog. I’m feeling high on the hog.” He raises a brow at me, looking rather stern. “Come on, I’m good for it. If you don’t believe me, ask Na—” He pauses and his cheeks redden. “My neighbors. They can all vouch for me. Besides, my insurance will pay for most of the repairs on the house.”

I smack him lightly on the arm. “You have insurance? Why didn’t you say so? I’ve been worrying for nothing.”

“Oh, there’s still plenty to worry about. Do you know how much my rates are going to go up?” He snatches the keys from my hand while I’m distracted with his not-as-sad-as-it-used-to-be story.

“Hey!” I grab for them, but he holds them above my head. I scowl at him. “I have always detested keep away.”

He brings them down. “You really would rather walk all the way back here with all of our bags than let me drive?”

I look at the Walmart in the distance. I think it might have actually moved farther away since we began this conversation. “Fine. You can drive.

Otherwise, we may never even make it back in time to decorate.”

He smiles. “How long are these crafts going to take? It’s barely even ten.”

“Well, it can’t take all night. It’s not Christmas Eve if we don’t watch some traditional Christmas movies, right?”

His eyes light up. “Like *Die Hard*? We watch that every year.”

I roll my eyes. “Why do all guys think that *Die Hard* is a Christmas movie? It’s not.”

He scoffs. “Uh, it takes place at Christmas.” He opens my door and waits until I get in before he shuts it. He jogs around the front of BR and continues the debate as if he had never left off. “Which means, ipso facto, *Die Hard* is a Christmas movie.”

“Ipso facto? Do you even know what that means?”

He pushes the ignition button and grins over at me. “I have no idea, but I think I heard it in a legal movie once. So I’m pretty sure it’s for real.”

“Yeah, because movies never lie.”

He nods emphatically. “Just like the internet.”

I jerk my head around. “You really don’t believe that, right?”

He laughs as he shifts the car into gear and pulls forward.



I’M STANDING in the craft aisle, looking at hot glue guns.

“Are they really that much different?” Evan asks.

“Uh, yeah. One is a cool melt while the other is a hot. I’m just trying to decide if the cool one will work for all my projects.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m not going to use it. So, it’s all on you,” he looks bored.

I put the cool melt in the cart and then move down the aisle a couple of feet. I add a tube of Alene’s Tacky Glue. Evan picks it up. “You only mentioned hot glue. I did not agree to this one. I guess it’s a good thing we upped it to forty dollars.” His head drops to the side and he looks at me with sad, regretful eyes. “You’re welcome.”

I take it from him and drop it back into the cart. “Forty dollars in the craft world is like a hundred in the regular world. I got this under control.” I wave him away. “Don’t you have a decoration to buy or something?”

He picks the glue back up. “What are you using it for?”

I waggle my brows. "It's for the glitter."

He narrows his eyes. "I might have changed my mind on that."

"Too late," I say in a sing-song voice. I hold up a pack of elastic bands. "I only need one big one. Do you have one or do I have to buy this whole bag for it?"

He shakes his head. "I'm coming to realize I'm woefully undersupplied for crafting."

"I'm not surprised. Nathan didn't have any of this stuff either. And he never saw the reason for it." I wait for the tears to well up in my eyes, but they don't. There's a small stab of regret in my chest, but it's not as bad as I expected it to be. Maybe it's just because there's been so much that's happened today. I'm sure when I have the chance to be alone, it will all come out again. But the last thing I need is to start bawling in front of Evan in the middle of the Walmart.

I move to the wedding aisle and Evan groans. "Okay. This is where I leave." I try to avoid looking at things that specifically say 'wedding,' but I can't help but notice them. The little bride and groom cake topper. The cake knife we should have used to cut our cake together. What happened to my big day? How had it all gone so wrong?

"Before I go in search of my winning decoration, I think we should decide what we want for dinner." Evan moves to stand in front of the overtly wedding items.

I look up at him and smile. Were all rental hosts this kind or had I just lucked out? "Do you have any traditions? I think so far we're only doing mine."

"We used to have pizza every Christmas Eve."

I smile. "Then pizza it is. But you're going to have to choose the place because I have no idea where to get good pizza." I tilt my head. "Are you okay with Thai Peanut noodles on Christmas Day? It doesn't really scream Christmas."

"It's okay. I mean, that's your tradition, right?"

I shake my head. "No. Our tradition is actually fondue. But that seems a bit much to organize away from my kitchen. So if you would rather do something else, that's fine too. We can do anything you like."

He strokes his stubbled chin like some villain in a cartoon movie. But even villainy doesn't stop me from remembering the kiss we shared earlier. I slowly run my tongue over my lips, still feeling a slight tingling.

“How about enchiladas?”

I purse my lips. “Do you know how to make them?”

He frowns. “I kind of thought you might. I mean, you make Thai Peanut Noodles right?”

I shake my head. “Well, I do know how to make them. But I can’t believe you just assumed it. What if you were wrong?”

“There’s a frozen section here.”

I give him a slow blink. “We’re not eating frozen dinners on Christmas.”

He nudges me in the arm. “Then I guess it’s a Christmas miracle that you already know how to make them.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, the Christmas miracle will be if you win this competition.”

CHAPTER
TEN

SHAY

“Let’s go grab the stuff for the enchiladas and then you can go find your decoration and we can check out separately and meet back at BR,” I say without taking a breath.

Evan nods. “Sounds like a plan.”

We hurry through the store, but as we pass the women’s section, an assortment of truly ghastly Christmas sweaters catches my eye. I pull to a stop. “Okay. It’s not truly Christmas in the Taylor house without an ugly sweater contest.”

“Another contest?”

I shrug. “I told you, my family is very competitive.”

Evan looks at where I’m looking and shakes his head. “No. Those are sweaters. You realize we’re in Florida, right?”

I tilt my head to the side. “Please?”

“Do all men give into you when you look like that?”

I frown. “No.” Nathan completely ignored me when I did it. I pretty much stopped after a few months. I’m not really sure why I’m doing it with Evan. Nor am I sure I’m happy about it. But I can evaluate that later.

He sighs, but one side of his mouth quirks up. “Okay, Shay. What are the rules to this contest?” He folds his arms across his chest and shifts his weight onto one leg.

I straighten to my full five foot two inches. “I will buy you a sweater, and you will buy me one. The person who buys the worst sweater wins,” I say very matter-of-factly.

His gaze takes on a rather wicked look. “May I ask your size? Or is that considered rude?”

I wag my finger at him. “That’s part of the deal. We have to guess each other’s sizes. However,” I hold up one finger in front of him, “the size needs to be close. You can’t claim a victory just because the sweater looks terrible due to an ill-fit. You can only win if the sweater is terrible on many levels.”

His shoulders lift on a sigh. “What’s the prize for this one?” He looks at me with a side-eye. “And don’t say ice cream. I want something else.”

I now do the evil villain goatee stroke. “The loser has to make the winner

either cookies or brownies to go with the ice cream.”

He lifts a shoulder and does a little brush-off action. “I suppose it doesn’t matter, because I’m pretty sure I’m going to win them both.”

I just shake my head. “Game on.” I wave him away. “I will meet you in front of the store in forty minutes? That will give us both enough time to grab the rest of the stuff we need.”

He frowns. “You don’t need to buy all that.” He looks down at the cart. “Why don’t I take this cart? You can grab another one and buy the rest of the stuff. And then I’ll just Venmo or PayPal you whatever extra I owe you.”

I shake my head. “I saw that you refunded the whole amount of the rental. So unless you let me pay for it again, I’m covering this cost.”

He stares me down, but I just stare back. I can be very stubborn when I want to be. It is something that drove Nathan crazy.

“Fine,” he growls and scratches at the stubble on his cheek. “But I don’t like it. I totally displaced you for the holidays. You shouldn’t have to pay for that.”

“And I’m totally crashing your holiday celebrations. I think that makes us even.”

“Whatever,” he grumbles as he turns away. “I just hope you don’t think I’m going to take it easy on you when it comes to these contests. I play to win.”

I smile at him. “I expect nothing less.” I turn and head toward the men’s section, intent on finding the most awful Christmas sweater I can find. Granted it will not be as bad as if I had the internet at my disposal, but I am confident Walmart’s selection will not disappoint.

Once I’m certain I’m out of his line of sight, I begin to look through the selection of men’s sweaters. I’m guessing a medium will fit him snugly, defining his very nice chest and toned arms. I pull out several sweaters that are bad, but they aren’t terrible. And for Evan, I need truly terrible. There are brownies on the line. I pull out a black sweater and can’t help the snort-laugh that comes out. Oh. My. Gosh! This is it.

White snowflakes and dots are scattered throughout the black background. There’s a row of red and yellow Christmas presents encircling the whole sweater just below the neckline and a row of green and red drums that encircle the waistline. But front and center are three nutcrackers. And above and beneath them, tucked in next to a row of decorated Christmas trees, it reads *Crack Deez Nuts*.

I stand corrected. I don't think the interwebs could have delivered anything better than this. I grab the medium off the rack and put it in my cart, tucking it under all the other things I had, just in case I run into Evan.

It's cute he thinks he's going to win. But he's not going to know what hit him.

I quickly grab the rest of the items on the mental list in my head. I'm a little worried we might have to return to the store at least for something for dinner tomorrow. Let's just say that my grocery shopping track record is not at one hundred percent.

Finally, I push the cart with all my purchases in bags and head to BR.

But Evan is waiting for me at the Vision Center. Two sacks hang from his wrists folded at his chest.

His eyes make a quick scan of my bags, but I used the glassware paper and wrapped it around his sweater so he can't see it through the sheer-ish bags. There is no use letting him see how badly he has lost...yet.

He drops his purchases in the seat where you would put a child and takes over pushing the cart as we glide through the sliding doors and head out into the sunshine.

I blink several times, reminding myself where I am. With all the festive shopping, I forgot I'm in Florida. Forgot there is no cold and no snow outside the store.

My gaze travels down to the strip mall at the end of the parking lot and it gives me an idea. I'm just not certain it will go over well. But I can't seem to shake it. As we walk to BR, my gaze keeps flicking over to the Christmas store.

We load the groceries into the back of the car. Evan comes around and opens my door for me. Nathan never did that kind of thing. He'd always say that I'm an independent woman and he didn't want to offend me. Not that I had ever said it did offend me.

Evan makes his way over to the driver's side. No, I hadn't even tried to get the keys back. He passed the test, and I'm content to let him drive the beast.

He starts the car and slowly backs out of the parking space.

"Nicely done, sir," I say and tip an imaginary hat.

He smiles over at me. "Mr. Jones, my driver's education teacher, would be so proud."

"Mine would likely have predicted my failure. He was never voted as Mr.

Congeniality.” I see the strip mall out of the corner of my eye, and I know this is my last chance. “Hey, Evan? Can I stop by that Christmas store? The more I think about it, the more I want to buy my mom that snow globe.”

He nods, but I can see his hands tighten on the steering wheel. “Sure.”

“I can just run in,” I hurry to clarify. The last thing I want is for him to come into the store with me. “You don’t even have to turn off the car. That way we won’t have to worry about any of the food spoiling in the heat.”

His whole body melts into the chair. “Are you sure?”

I wave a hand in the air. “Totally. I’ll be really quick.”

He pulls up in front of the shop and I hop out. Once I’m on the sidewalk, he pulls forward and I watch him pull into a parking space.

I run inside and wave at the store clerk, once again taken aback at how much she looks like Mrs. Claus. Not that I know Mrs. Claus personally, but just what I imagine her to look like.

“You came back.” She smiles at me.

“Yeah,” I say. “I decided that I wanted that snow globe for my mom.” I pull my bottom lip between my teeth. “And I think that I want to buy a tree topper.”

“I thought you might be back for that.” She smiles at me knowingly.

Why would she think that? Had she been listening in on our conversation? I shake that thought off because it’s too ridiculous and slightly creepy.

“Why don’t you grab the snow globe you want, and I will get the angel. We don’t want to keep that man of yours waiting.”

I open my mouth to tell her that Evan isn’t my man in any sense of the word. But then I decide, ‘Why bother?’ It’s not like I’ll be seeing this lady again. Plus, I’m wondering why she thinks that she knows which tree topper I’m talking about.

She disappears while I’m looking at the snow globes. I pick one that has a sandy beach with a palm tree and a surf shack. When you shake it, instead of snow, fine pieces of glitter and sand rain down. My mom will love it.

I take it to the front counter where Mrs. Claus’s doppelganger is wrapping a bow around a box. She already wrapped it? How do I know it’s the right one?

She takes the snow globe from me. “Do you want this wrapped too, dear?”

I nod, but my eyes are riveted on the package. What if she grabbed the

wrong one? It will be a disaster when Evan opens it.

“Is something wrong, dear?” She asks without looking up.

“I just wondered which angel tree topper you picked. There are, like, half a dozen of them back there.”

She ties a big red bow around the elf wrapping paper. “It is the one in the red velvet dress holding a star above her head, yes?” She finally looks up, piercing me with a look that makes me wonder why I ever doubted her.

I nod, because I’m a little scared at what she might interpret from it. After all, she had figured out the right angel, and all I’d said was I wanted a tree topper. What else would she discover if I actually opened my mouth?

She rings in my purchases in the old-fashioned cash register that dings with each push of the keys. It’s so quaint. But it must be one of those old time-y remakes using modern technology but old aesthetics because it’s attached to a credit card machine. I tap my card on the screen and she hands me over a plastic bag with the shop’s name and logo on it. As the bag changes into my hands, a bundle of fake snow falls on my head.

I set my bag on the counter and drop my head down, swishing my hands at the fake snow and trying to get it all out of my hair. But all I succeed in doing is getting several plastic ‘snowflakes’ stuck on my eyelashes. “What was that about?”

She giggles. “Oh, you were our ten thousandth customer.”

I raise a brow. And all I get is fake snow down my shirt and in my hair? Maybe next time warn me and I’ll wait for the next turn. I look around the empty store. I might have had to wait a while.

She slaps a calendar on the counter that says *Elves of the North Pole* across the top. “There’s your winnings! Come back and visit us next year.” She winks. “Unless you’re up north.”

Up north? Why would I be up north? I lift the calendar and examine it. Would she be offended if I just left it on the counter? Because there’s no way in the North Pole I’m hanging this up anywhere.

But she makes the decision for me when she plucks the calendar out of my hands and tucks it into my bag sitting on the counter.

I hurry and grab the bag before she does anything else odd. Because, I’m sorry, Christmas spirit aside, this lady is weirding me out a little. Okay...a lot.

I walk quickly to the door, making as wide a sweep of the mistletoe as I can, just in case another guy happens to enter the store at that moment.

I lift a hand. “Merry Christmas,” I wave.

“Merry Christmas to you, dear.” She’s still waving when I turn my back on her and sprint to BR.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

EVAN

Shay hurries out of the store and hops into the car before I can even step foot on the asphalt to open her door. She slams the door and looks at me. “Just drive.”

I look at her and my brow creases. “What’s wrong? You look like you’ve robbed a bank.”

She tilts her head to the side. “Really? Do you actually know what that looks like on me?” She shakes her head and glances over my shoulder out the window. “That old Mrs. Claus lady is just odd.”

I glance at the Christmas store. “What do you mean, odd?”

She shakes her head. “She totally picked out the present and had it wrapped before I even knew what was happening.”

I put the car in gear and pull out of the parking lot. “Then how do you know you got the right one?”

She clutches the bag to her in her lap. “I asked her, and she described it to me perfectly.”

I shrug. “She must have seen you looking at them earlier.” I pull out into traffic. “It says she’s a good salesperson that she actually remembered which one it was.”

“Yeah, maybe.” But she does not sound convinced.

I merge into traffic and glance over at her. “Did something fall on you? It looked like you were trying to wipe something off.”

She runs a hand through her long, dark brown hair. “Apparently I was the ten thousandth customer, and I won a shower of fake snow and a calendar.”

I look over at her. “A Christmas calendar?”

She rummages around in her bag and pulls out a spiral bound calendar with a holly border. I burst out laughing. “Elves of the North Pole?”

Her face relaxes into a smile and she joins me in laughing.

“I triple dog dare you to put that up in your house.” I laugh even harder. “Or better yet, next to your desk.”

She’s still grinning. “Wow. You went straight to the triple dog dare. That’s unprecedented.”

I lift a shoulder. “It should tell you how I’m approaching these contests

today. I'm going big or going home."

"As we're staying at your house, I don't find that very threatening."

I stare at the road in front of us, because I realize how easy it could be to get caught up in watching her. Which is not a good thing while I'm driving.

I glance at her out of the corner of my eye. I just can't reconcile what I'm seeing with what Nathan has told me about her. Sure, she has made a lot of the decisions for this holiday celebration we're having. But I get the idea that if I pushed back at all, she would have backed off. I think she's just trying to make the best of it for both of us this Christmas. She seems determined to do as many of my holiday traditions as we're doing of hers. And some are just new to us.

I frown. I shouldn't think of us as 'us'. We're not a couple. We're barely acquaintances. Although, in the last six hours, it's felt more like we're more than acquaintances. Maybe we're friends? She's just so easy to talk to.

Her ideas have me anticipating what's coming. I mean, I have no idea how any of the things she bought are going to make anything remotely resembling Christmas decorations. Or at least nothing I would expect to see outside of an elementary school or retirement center. But I must admit, I'm kind of excited to see the outcome. It's the first time I've been excited for Christmas in years.

I give her a you'll-be-sorry look. "Hey, don't say I didn't warn you. I play to win."

"Consider me warned." She looks out the side window. "Thanks for agreeing to all this. You probably think I'm as weird as that Mrs. Claus lady."

I chuckle. "I thought she looked like that too."

"I suppose working in a Christmas store doesn't help with the stereotype." She flashes me a smile. "Anyway, I do appreciate you going along with my crazy."

"I don't think you're crazy." I turn into my neighborhood, and, for the first time, I'm a little sad that I don't have Christmas lights up like some of the other houses. But it's too late for that. "It's probably about time that I decorated for Christmas. You're just ripping off the BandAid."

She chuckles. "That's just how I hoped you'd describe it. It has such a merry tone to it."

We pull into the driveway in front of what should have been her rental. The door is still open, and hoses and cords clutter the walkway from the van parked in front.

“Let’s get this stuff inside,” I say as I hold her door open and wait for her to step out.

She stands next to me, her bag hanging on her arm but held close to her body. “I’ll grab the ones I got at Walmart. Do you mind getting the others?”

I nod. “I wouldn’t want you to see the awesome sweater you get to wear.” I open the tailgate. “Speaking of sweaters, when are we wearing them exactly?”

“Tomorrow. When else would we wear them?”

I admit to being pleased about that, as it seems unlikely we’ll leave the house on Christmas Day. “Okay. So will my cookies be made tomorrow too?” I grin and flick my brows up at her.

She nods. “I’m pretty sure I can eat brownies and ice cream any day of the week or on any holiday.”

We each load our arms with bags and head inside.



I LOOK around my family room and can barely believe it. The decorations would likely never be featured in a society magazine, but considering she only spent forty bucks on supplies (including the eight dollars on glue guns, glue, and elastic bands), I am pleasantly impressed with the outcome.

Silver, light blue, and red Christmas tree ornaments hang from differing lengths of Christmas ribbon off the builder-grade light fixture over my kitchen table. It’s by far the best the light has ever looked. She’s inverted black spray-painted champagne glasses and added small lidded candy dishes onto the former bases. Little battery-powered votive candles flicker inside, casting a warm glow on the fireplace mantle. Tuffs of real pine boughs—apparently if you bat your eyelashes at the guy in the tree department, he’ll let you have some of the branches that have been cut off the bottoms of the live trees—decorate the space around the new base of the ‘candlesticks’.

There are two green tinsel trees of different sizes standing in the corner. Neither is taller than four feet, but they add a much-needed festive look to the room. The same silver, blue, and red bulbs have been glued on the trees and a string of lights add just the right amount of sparkle. Not even the entryway table has been ignored. Three boxes of candy canes line the outside of the vase. I’m guessing the elastic band she had to buy the whole bag for, is

hidden under the Christmas ribbon holding them in place. Branches covered in clear and white glitter stand upright, making it feel very high-end.

Holy crap. I totally lost this contest.

I stare down at the two boxes of decorated garland in my hands and wince. Compared to what Shay has done, the pine looks rather sparse and the ‘decorations’ and lights look cheap. Some of the paint is already chipping off. The worst part? I actually spent four dollars over our limit.

I sit on the couch and stare at the felt Christmas stockings hanging from the entertainment center. Yes, she even made stockings. I’m not sure why we have them, but I have a sneaking suspicion that perhaps she bought things to fill my stocking.

This sends a shock of panic through me. I hadn’t thought to get her anything other than the sweater. And that can hardly be considered a ‘gift.’ I check my watch. “Hey, if we’re going to get pizza, I should probably order so I can go grab it before it gets too busy.”

She looks up as she attaches a big ribbon bow to the tops of the tinsel garland trees. “Do you have to go pick it up? They don’t deliver?”

I shake my head. “Not the good kind of pizza.” It’s a lie, pure and simple. But if the pizza is delivered, how am I going to sneak out to buy some stocking stuffers for her?

She puts her hands on her thighs and pushes herself up. “I can come with you.”

“No.” It comes out a bit harsher and louder than I intend. But that would definitely ruin my plans.

She looks away, but I can see her brow is deeply creased. “I’m sorry. I’ve taken over your Christmas Eve.” She shakes her head. “I haven’t even given you a chance to say no to all of this.” She waves her hand around the decorated room.

“No. It’s not that.” But I don’t know what to tell her besides the truth. And I’m not certain I want her to know the truth. I put my hands out in front of me like I’m trying to calm a skittish dog. “Surprisingly, I love all this. You totally won the contest. Hands down.” My shoulders drop. “I forgot to get something when I was at the store earlier. And I thought I would just grab it on my way to get the pizza.”

She stares at me. “You forgot something?”

I nod. “Yeah.” I hope she doesn’t ask me what, because she still looks sad enough that I will likely tell her everything. And I don’t want to look like an

idiot. I brighten. “Maybe you can plan out what movies we’re going to watch tonight while I’m gone?”

Her face relaxes. “You want to watch movies?”

“Unless you don’t want to.” Now I’m the one who’s worried that she’s tired of being with me. “I mean, we’ve pretty much spent the whole day together.”

She smiles and I relax. “I’d like that.” She looks around the room. “Do you really love the way it looks?”

I nod. “I really do.”

She looks up at the ceiling. “Did you say that I won the contest? ‘Hands down’ I believe is what I heard.”

I grab my phone off the counter. “Yes. You won.” I motion to the candy cane vase. “I think that may have put you over the top.”

She motions to my garland still sitting in the box. “Do you want help putting that up?”

I shake my head. “I’m pretty sure it will only detract from what you’ve done.”

“No, it’ll look really nice. Maybe it can go around the door frame?” She picks up the boxes and studies them. “I’m afraid the wire will scratch the wood banisters.”

“I didn’t buy anything to hang it with.”

She smiles. “I think I have some stuff left over that will work.”

“Of course you do,” I laugh.

She sighs and turns in a little circle. “It did turn out pretty, didn’t it?”

I lift my phone. “Okay. I’ll be right back.” I turn to leave, but then stop. “Oh, what kind of pizza do you like?”

She shrugs. “I like pretty much everything. Except mushrooms. But I can usually pick those off.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “What’s your stance on pineapple?”

“I think it definitely belongs on a pizza. Although, I think I like pears even more.”

My nose wrinkles. “Pears?”

She nods emphatically. “Oh my gosh, yes. There’s a pizza place back home that has a pear, prosciutto, and pistachio pizza. It’s so good.” Her eyes roll back in her head as if she’s reliving the dreaminess.

I shake my head. “I just don’t think I can get on board with that. But there’s nothing that fancy at this pizza place. It’s just good, classic pizza.”

“Then just get whatever you usually get,” she says.

“Anchovies it is,” I fist pump the air and laugh when her face falls. “Just kidding.” I walk over to the stairs. “I’m going to grab my wallet and head out. Let me know if you think of anything else.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

SHAY

Evan said he forgot something. What could he have forgotten? Had he seen Mrs. Claus with the angel? Does he think he has to buy me a gift now too? Oh, I hate receiving obligatory gifts.

I hadn't bought the angel so he would buy me something. I just thought it was something he should have. Something he *needs* to have. Something that elicits that much emotion should be part of his life.

I wonder how long Evan will be gone picking up the pizza. My stomach growls and I wonder why I was not remotely hungry until he mentioned food. Now it's like I haven't eaten in days. Granted, I missed lunch because I was so busy helping Evan with the decorations. But still. It can't be that late.

I look over at the clock on the microwave in the kitchen and gasp. Holy cow! It's already after five? No wonder Evan worried that the pizza wasn't ordered yet.

I drop down onto the couch and pick up my phone. I have two texts. One from my mom and one from Maggie. No surprise about either of them. But it does look like Nathan finally got the hint that I don't want to talk to him.

I read the text from my mom first.

Mom

Merry Christmas Eve! 🎄 I was hoping to talk to you today. I just want to hear for myself that you're okay.

I'll hurry and text Maggie and then I'll call my mom. I feel a tug of guilt for not calling her before now. I know she's worried about me.

I pull up Maggie's text.

Maggie

You promised to call.

Sorry. Busy day.

Maggie

Busy? Doing what?

Well, long story. But the shortened version is that the guy who owns the rental I'm staying in had like zero holiday decorations. So we went shopping and are going to have dinner together tomorrow.

I hurry to add, before she gets any ideas.

Because we're both alone. Don't read anything into that.

Maggie

You have a date for Christmas! Shay, that's so great!
Pictures??

No. I don't have any pictures.

Maggie

Why? Is he a toad?

No! He's super hot!

Maggie

If he's hot, why no pictures yet?

Oh, this texting is getting away from me fast.

Hey, I still need to call my mom. I'll call you tomorrow.

Maggie

You said that yesterday...

Pinkie promise. Give the kids a squeeze from me!

She sends me a gif of a bland-faced boy blinking.

I send a gif of Michael Scott from *The Office* laughing

I go to my mom's contact but pause. I'm just not ready to talk to her yet. I'm not sure what I'll tell her about the living situation. Maybe I'll look at the Christmas movie options first.

I pick up the remote and scroll through the first subscription but realize quickly that will take forever. Instead, I pull out my phone. It will be way easier to Google it than check every service.

I look at the list and smile. I wonder just how many movies Evan will be game to watch. There are at least half a dozen of them that we can watch between my streaming services and his. And those are just the ones that start

at 6:30. But I settle on three. One is only about an hour long. So if he gets back here pretty quick, we can watch them all and still be in bed before midnight.

I leave the TV on while *Jeopardy* plays in the background. It's a rerun of a college tournament. I have no clue about most of the categories they're answering, though. I lay my head back, breathing in deeply before I call my mom. I'm suddenly so tired. I can't believe I've been up since four o'clock. It's exhausting work ignoring all my problems. After the holidays, I will unpack all the emotional garbage and really examine my life—make an educated decision about my future. But for now, ignoring is good.

My eyes drift shut, and there's an absolute nothingness there— "*Mama, I'm coming home.*" The Ozzy Osborne song plays loudly on the couch next to me. My eyes slowly flutter open.

It's my mom.

I grab my phone and answer the call, but I let my eyes close again. "Hey, mom," I say. "I was just about to call you."

"Shay, are you okay? I expected you to call this morning. I haven't called sooner because I thought you might be sleeping, but I'm starting to worry."

I want to be annoyed, but I'm really just glad to know that someone loves me enough to worry. I'm not going to lie, Nathan blowing off our wedding has made me question if I'm even loveable. "I'm sorry I forgot to call this morning, Mom. I've been really busy today."

"Busy?" She asked incredulously. "What could you possibly have to do that kept you too busy to remember to call me?"

I bite at my lower lip. "Well, this place had no Christmas decorations. And it felt wrong. It isn't Christmas without at least a few decorations." It isn't a hard decision not to tell her about my current living situation. She totally wouldn't understand and would probably catch the first flight to Orlando to rescue me from Evan, who she would've convinced herself is a serial ax murderer or something.

"You bought Christmas decorations? That sounds expensive, Shay. I know you just got your advance for your next book, but you should probably watch your money. You're not combining your income with anyone anymore."

I let out a hard sigh. "I know, Mom. It cost me all of forty dollars from the dollar store and Walmart. Even I can afford that much. They're all DIY things. And I'm already plotting another book. So, I can pitch it to my editor

once I get back home.” It doesn’t matter how many times I tell my mom that I’m making a living writing middle-grade books, she still believes I’m on the brink of poverty—living paycheck to paycheck. Which I’m not. I actually have a pretty impressive sum in the bank. And a healthy amount in a ROTH IRA account. All that’s to say I have a financial planner and I’m doing just fine. But she still worries. I guess that’s her job, though, right? To make sure I’m okay?

“Oh, that’s good.” She pauses, and I know there’s more she wants to say. “So how are you feeling? You sound happier than I expected. But then you’ve always been good at pushing your feelings aside until you just can’t anymore.”

She isn’t completely wrong. But it still kind of irritates me that she brings it up. “I’m fine, Mom. I barely remember what’s his face’s name.”

“You see? Is that really the healthy way to deal with it?”

“Would you rather I stayed in my room and cried for the next week or two? Is that the healthy way to deal with it? I think moving on *is* healthy. And that’s what I’m doing. I’m moving on.”

“But it’s only been two days. I’m pretty sure it takes more than two days to move on,” she says, and I can picture her I-know-of-what-I-speak face.

“Maybe that’s how you deal with it. But I’ve wasted more than two years of my life on him already. I don’t plan to waste another second.”

“But I’m not certain he’s over you, Sweetheart. I think he may have just gotten cold feet.” She sighs like she wants to say something but can’t decide if she should. “He called here for you this morning.”

“You didn’t tell him where I am, did you?” I don’t know why, but my heart speeds up. It’s not like I’ve done anything wrong. I paid for all of this, and I’m the one out the money if I canceled.

“No, I didn’t tell him. He said he went over to your apartment but you wouldn’t answer the door for him. I said that you probably just needed some time.” I smile at my mom, even though she can’t see. She has my back. Even if I don’t always like everything that it entails.

“Yeah, I do. Like the rest of my life.”

“Honey, don’t be spiteful.” She is frowning at me; I can tell by her tone.

I snort. “Mom, he embarrassed me in front of all our friends and family. And need I remind you how much money you and Dad spent on the wedding? And for what? Nada. Zilch. Zero. You still have one daughter unmarried.”

“Yes, Maryeshayne. I’m perfectly aware of how much money your father and I spent. You don’t need to remind me.” She sounds like she’s angry at me, not jerky Nathan who flaked on the wedding.

“Well, maybe you’ll remember that the next time he calls to find out why I’m not answering my door for him.”

She sucks in a deep mom breath. “I don’t know why it has to stay a secret that you’re there.”

“He lost the right to know where I am at any given moment when he didn’t show up to the wedding. And I don’t want him showing up here, thinking he can make everything all better.”

“You see? That right there makes me think you’re still open to reconciliation.”

“Nope. I’m not. Not even a little bit. Not even a sliver of light can shine through because I’m so closed off to the idea.” I pull my feet up under me and pull a sweatshirt that’s draped over the couch onto my legs.

“You’re being a bit dramatic, Maryeshayne, don’t you think?”

“Not if it means you stop thinking that what’s his face and I will get back together.”

“You can use his name, Sweetheart.”

The door opens and Evan comes in carrying a few Walmart bags and several pizza boxes in differing sizes. He sets them on the counter.

I release a breath. It’s probably good I didn’t call her this morning. I’m not sure I would’ve remained this calm after the flood incident. But craft therapy, and maybe even Evan, has helped my mood. “Hey, mom. I need to go. The pizza guy is here.” I wink at him, hoping he doesn’t mind me calling him that.

“You’re having pizza for dinner?”

“Yep. And it’s going to get cold if I keep him waiting.” I stand up and walk to the counter. “I’ll call you tomorrow, Mom. Love you.” I disconnect the call as I hear her say she loves me too.

I set my phone down and push it to the side. “It smells delicious.”

He tips his head. “Is that how you think of me? I’m just the pizza guy?” He shakes his head, a disappointed look on his face.

“Sorry. It was my mom.”

He nods. “And she doesn’t know about this?” He swirls his finger around in the air.

I shake my head. “No. I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t approve of any of

this.” I repeat the finger motion. “She didn’t want me to come on this trip in the first place. She said it was ‘bad form.’”

“She didn’t think that paying for your vacation was the least your fiancé could do for you?” He folds his arms, placing the Walmart bags mostly behind his back, and leans his hip against the counter.

I straighten up. “Why does everyone keep saying that? Nathan isn’t paying for anything. This entire honeymoon, except the rental car—which *he* remembered to cancel—is on my credit cards, not his. I’m the one who loses the money if no one comes. So why should I not come and enjoy what I paid for?”

Evan’s mouth is hanging open like a rainbow trout. “You paid for all of this? I knew your credit card paid for the house, but—,” he trails off.

I nod. “Yep. My money was supposed to be his money and his money was my money once we were married, so what did it matter which credit card we used?” I can hear the irritation in my voice. Although, I’m not sure why. So far this has been one of the best Christmas Eve’s in recent history.

He swallows, running a hand through his hair. “He’s such a tool,” he murmurs. He glances up like he might have just offended me.

I shrug, but Evan has definitely moved up a few notches in my opinion. I rub my hands together. “Now, about this pizza. It smells delicious.”

He grins, but he also looks at me with something like pity. I hate pity looks. It was one of the worst parts about announcing to everyone that there wasn’t going to be a wedding. Not that they hadn’t figured it out on their own by that time. I mean, what groom is two hours late to their wedding with no word?

Evan holds up the bags but not enough for me to see anything that’s in them. Dang Walmart and their gray bags. “Let me just put these in my room.” He doesn’t wait for my reply before he dashes up the stairs.

I rummage around for the receipt, but I can’t find it. I’m certain this wasn’t the cheap kind of pizza, and I want to make sure to reimburse him. I lift up all the boxes, but can’t find it. Instead, I open the first box and peer inside. Just cheese. That’s a safe bet.

He’s back before I have a chance to open all the boxes. The smell of pizza fills the room and my stomach growls loudly.

He grins at me. “I think I heard a bear.” He looks over his shoulder, which I promptly smack with my hand.

“If you hadn’t taken so long picking it up, my stomach wouldn’t be doing

a bear imitation.”

He pushes an aluminum foil bundle forward. “Don’t forget the garlic bread.”

“Mmmm. Pizza isn’t pizza without garlic bread.”

We load up paper plates that he had grabbed from the closet under the stairs and head for the couch.

“What did your mom have to say?” He asks.

I wave a hand in front of my face. “Oh, you know. The usual.”

He shakes his head, his brow furrowed. “Nope. I don’t know what the usual is. It’s been a while since I had one of those conversations. But I would guess a guy’s chat with his mom would be different than a girl’s, anyway.”

I pause with a slice of pizza halfway to my mouth. How could I have been so flippant about a conversation with my mom? At least I can have one. I take a bite and chew thoughtfully. “She’s worried about my finances. And she thinks that Nathan just had cold feet and that we really aren’t over.” My shoulders drop. “And a lot of using my full name.”

He squints at me, but his head nods. “Oh, yeah. I wondered about that.”

“About what?” I ask him warily.

“The name on your credit card. I looked at it for several minutes and I have no idea how to pronounce it.”

I sigh, cursing my parents and their ‘creative naming practice’. “It’s pronounced Mary-Shane.”

His brow creases even more. “Mary-Shane? What country are your parents from?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Rural Utah.” I grimace. “It’s kind of like being from a foreign country.”

His head tilts to the side. “What nationality is your name, then?”

“It’s Utahn.” I say.

“Utahn?”

“Yeah. People in Utah are kind of known for naming their kids weird names. And they take it a step further by using really ridiculous spellings. That’s my parents.” I lift a shoulder. “I’m named Mary after my mom and Shane after my dad. But they thought that adding the *e* after Mary made it less common and adding the *y* to Shane made it more feminine.” I shake my head in wonderment. “What they did not think about is how stupid the names sound together.”

“They don’t sound stupid together.” His lips are twitching, but he shakes

his head. “There’s so much I never knew about Utah.”

When I look away, he reaches over and puts his hand on my knee. A delicious warmth curls up and down my leg. I keep my eyes averted because I don’t want him to know that his touch has affected me. I’m sure it’s just because I’m feeling vulnerable.

“Hey, I think your name is really pretty.”

I finally glance at him, my lips pressed into a thin line. “You’re not a good liar, Mr. Barrington.”

He pulls his hand from my leg, and I glance longingly at the empty spot. “I’m not lying. And I bet you never had to wonder if someone was calling for you, rather than the other Maryeshayne in the halls at school.”

“No, I never had that problem.” I can’t help but laugh. “But I can promise that I will never do that to my kids. They will have nice normal names with proper spellings.”

Evan crosses his legs at the ankles and puts his plate in his lap. “I don’t know. I had the opposite problem of you. There were four other Evans in my grade. All the way through primary school I was known only as Evan B. There’s something to be said about having a unique name.”

“Maybe. But if you choose something ‘unique,’” I make air quotes in front of me, “it should be spelled in a way that every teacher doesn’t stumble over it.”

Evan nods. “Point taken. I’ll make sure to spell all my kids’ names normally.” He wipes his hands on the napkin sitting on his thigh. “Now, what movie are we watching first?”

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

SHAY

I wake up to complete darkness and am unsure where I am for a minute.

A breath sounds as my head rises and then falls. I jerk up, seeing Evan sleeping next to me. Or I guess under me? Oh, that doesn't sound good at all. Not nearly as innocent as it really is.

The TV has the time bouncing around on a blue screen. 1:14 am. When did I fall asleep? I remember *The Year Without a Santa Claus* ending and starting to watch *Die Hard*. But that's when things start to get a little hazy. I guess that means *A Christmas Story* is on deck for tomorrow. I glance at the TV. Or rather today.

A little shiver of excitement travels down my spine. It's Christmas morning. Who would have thought three days ago that I could feel this way?

Evan lets out a quiet snort and I slap my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing. Apparently, when I wake up in a strange place in the middle of the night, I get the giggles. But I don't want to wake him. He looks so incredibly cute, his arms spread wide on the back of the couch and his hair slightly mussed.

I have a strong urge to run my fingers through it—to mess it up a bit more. Confession? I've wanted to do it since I woke him up in the early morning to inform him that his rental was flooding. I can't imagine this opportunity will present itself many more times.

I reach forward slowly, as if inching toward a sleeping bear, if you were crazy enough to do such a thing. But fingering Evan's hair feels pretty on par with that. Two of my fingers barely graze the surface when he snorts again and shifts positions.

I yank my hand away, my heart hammering in my chest. Okay, so the analogy holds true, because I scoot a little farther back on the couch and try to calm my breathing.

I guess I'll just have to be content with staring at him—which really isn't a terrible option. I allow myself the chance to really look at him from head to foot. Something I haven't been able to do while he's awake. He's far too observant for any sly checking out.

His scruff, which is usually neatly trimmed, is a little longer and I can see

the five o'clock shadow stretching down his neck. His deep green Ron Jon's t-shirt is stretched across his broad chest, each muscle and bump winking at me from beneath the fabric. Or I'm guessing they're winking. It's hard to tell in the relative darkness.

I scoot closer, breathing in his cologne. I have no idea what brand it is, but I can smell an undertone of sandalwood and citrus. (Yes, my mom sells essential oils). As I move closer, I notice a small dark circle on his chest. I lightly touch it and it feels wet. My eyes widen at the same time my hand shoots to my mouth. Oh, crap on a cracker. Did I drool on him?

I wipe my mouth until there's hardly any skin left, let alone spit. I have never been so happy that someone was asleep in my life. Hopefully the mark will dry before he wakes up. "Come on, Universe," I whisper. "Just give me this one."

I sit back. 1:16 in the morning and I'm not sure what I should do. The flicker of light from the TV hits the tinsel tree and it sparkles momentarily, reminding me that I have a Christmas present, an ugly sweater, and some stocking stuffers that need to be put in place.

Evan snores quietly on the couch. This is likely the best opportunity I'll get to do this without protestations or 'help.'

Slowly and quietly, I lift myself off the couch and hurry to my bedroom. In hindsight, I'm grateful to the quirky Mrs. Claus for wrapping Evan's present. After the decorating, dinner, and the movies that I apparently fell asleep during, there hadn't been time to actually wrap everything. I quickly put the sweater in a box and wrap it in some sparkly silver paper I found in single sheets.

I carefully grab the Mrs. Claus wrapped present, not wanting to accidentally drop and break it. That would be the ultimate irony, right?

I tiptoe to the family room and place the present next to the tinsel tree. Then I grab the felt stocking with Evan's name on it and sneak it into my room.

Now, I'll admit, these aren't the most personal stocking gifts. But, I mean, I've only known Evan for, like, two days. Wow, two days? That's it? It feels like way longer than that. Maybe it's because we've been living together (sorry, mom) for most of that time. Except for sleeping, we've been together for all of it.

It feels weird because I don't think I've spent this much time consecutively with anyone I've ever dated. Not even Nathan. Although, now

that I think about it, maybe the warning bells would have sounded way earlier if I had. But who knows? There's no sense in what-if-ing my relationship with Nathan. That ship has sailed and sunk.

Okay, I'm going to confess something else now. But you can't judge. I may have snuck into Evan's bathroom and looked at the brands of toiletries he uses. I know it's a complete invasion of privacy, but how else was I supposed to figure out what to buy for his stocking? I may have made the stocking purchase seem spur of the moment when I showed them to Evan, but as soon as we decided to go shopping, I knew I wanted to do at least that for him. I mean, he opened his house to me on Christmas Eve.

So I peeked in his bathroom because there's little worse than dumping out your stocking and finding a bunch of stuff that you'll never use because it isn't your brand. (I may or may not be speaking from experience).

As I stuff the shampoo and body wash into his stocking, guilt tugs at me. What if he can't get past my snooping and hates his stocking because of it? I fist my hands at my side. "It's a little late for regrets, Shay," I whisper to myself.

The stocking is surprisingly full, and it makes me feel all kinds of happy. This may not be the Christmas either of us had planned, but hopefully it will still be memorable. In a good way.

I sneak back out to the family room and place Evan's stocking on the floor in front of the entertainment center. Then I take the remote and find a channel with a crackling fire as its only programming.

A yawn stretches my mouth way bigger than it should. I guess I better get to sleep or Santa won't come and leave me anything for Christmas. Not that I'm expecting him to. Just spending Christmas with someone is enough of a present for me.



EVAN

I THROW the blanket off me, the sound of a fire making my body sweat. I shift and my body screams out in pain. My neck is kinked and my back aches. I crack open an eye and see a crackling fire on the TV screen. I sit up and look

around, disappointed when I discover that Shay is no longer snuggled on the couch next to me.

She must've awakened before me and turned the channel to the fire. I glance over at my arm draped on the back of the couch and look at my watch. 2:32. It's Christmas.

I sit forward and drop my elbows onto my knees, rubbing my palms roughly over my eyes. I look down at my shirt, the warmth from Shay's head still present on my chest. When *Die Hard* had ended, she was sound asleep and I didn't have the heart to wake her up, so I just channel-surfed until I fell asleep myself.

I stand up and rotate my shoulders and neck. My eye catches on a present sitting next to the tinsel tree. I move close and my foot knocks against something on the floor. My stocking. And it's chocked full of stuff.

My head shakes, but I'm smiling. I knew she was up to something. I'm so glad I followed my gut and went shopping for her.

The present by the tree is neatly wrapped in elf wrapping paper, with a big bow on top. For a moment I think that maybe that's just the ugly sweater she bought for the contest. But as I look closer, I realize that there's no way a sweater is fitting in that box. It's not tiny, but it also isn't big enough for a sweater. Unless it's child sized.

I have a moment of panic at that thought. The ugly part of the sweater isn't because it was five sizes too small—I mean, she mentioned that, right?

I shake that thought off when I see the sparkly-wrapped clothing box on the other side of the tree.

But if the elf wrapping paper isn't the sweater, it means she bought me a present-present. Not just stocking stuffers. I have no idea what she would have bought for me. I wouldn't say we know each other that well. As my present for her will show. But every girl likes books and fancy soap, right?

As I stare at the present next to the tree, I begin to doubt that every girl *does* like books and fancy soap. What if she hates my present? What if she's allergic to the soap and she breaks out in life-threatening hives?

I run a hand through my hair as a million terrible scenarios stream through my head. But what's worse—not giving her anything or sending her to the hospital in anaphylactic shock? I'm ashamed to say that I actually have to think about that one.

I push out a breath and bounce my shoulders up and down. What's the likelihood she'll be allergic to the soap? And if she is, we can just return it to

the store tomorrow or sometime before she leaves.

I push all the thoughts of allergies from my mind before I do something really lame like go to the twenty-four-hour gas station and buy her something there.

I pick up her stocking and run up the stairs. Grabbing the bags from behind my bed, I start shoving the different toiletries into the stocking. She's probably going to think I'm a complete creeper for giving her stuff like body wash and shampoo in her stocking. I'm embarrassed to admit that I went into her bathroom to try and see what brands she likes. But that was a complete bust. Everything she has is in travel bottles. And not the name-brand bottles that you buy at Target or Walmart. Additionally, she had like three different bars of soap in her shower. Who needs three different bars of soap? None of them had names inscribed. It is the worst example of spying I've ever witnessed.

I stare at the Bath and Body Works body wash. Why did I think this was a good idea? It would be one thing if she was a guy. Most guys will use about anything that's in the shower. But girls are super picky about things like this, aren't they? And even if she does, by some chance, like Bath and Body Works body wash, what if I got the completely wrong scent? They only sell like a thousand different kinds. My sister definitely has opinions about such things.

I may as well just plan on battling the after-Christmas crowds to return everything I bought her. Because I'm pretty sure she's going to hate it all.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

SHAY

I wake up and yawn, stretching like my parents' labradoodle. Arms and legs stretch out taut in front of me with my back curved inward. I take a deep cleansing breath and cry out as a Charlie horse tightens my calf muscle.

Tears spring to my eyes as I hurry and pull my leg up to me, kneading at my calf like it's a hard piece of Play-Doh.

There's a knock on my door. "Shay, are you okay?" Evan asks.

"Yeah," I say, even though I'm not sure I am. It's a doozy. I may never be able to walk normally again. "It's just a Charlie horse."

"Ah, I hate those," he says. "Maybe we should stop by the store and pick up some bananas once they open."

"Bananas?" Why would we want to make a special trip to the store just for bananas? I mean, I like them well enough. But maybe not enough to go to the store on Christmas Day for them.

"Yeah, they have a lot of potassium. That's supposed to help with Charlie horses."

I stare at my door. What's he talking about? "I thought Charlie horses meant that you aren't drinking enough water."

"Maybe that helps too." It's quiet for a minute before there's another knock. "Shay, can I come in?"

"Yeah," I draw it out because I'm not sure what to expect when he opens it. Just as it cracks open, I throw Big Green over me. I mean, he's seen me in my PJs, but it feels a little personal for him to see me in them in bed.

He steps inside with a tall glass of ice water. "Here. You may as well start hydrating now. If it doesn't get better, I'll go grab some bananas."

My heart skitters inside my chest. He brought me water and is offering to go find bananas? On Christmas Day. Who is this guy?

I abandon kneading my calf so I can clutch the water glass in my hands. "Thanks," I say, suddenly shy.

"Hey, Merry Christmas." He grins. "You want to come open your presents?"

"Presents?" I ask. Because I only bought him one. And that will be weird

if he bought me a bunch.

“Well, there’s the matter of the ugly sweaters.” His brows dart upwards several times.

My eyes widen. It’s just so cute that he thinks he’s going to win. Because he’s so not going to. “Oh, yeah. I almost forgot about that.”

He smirks. “Why do I not believe you?”

“Let me just brush my teeth and I’ll be right out.”

He nods and closes my door behind him. I take two more big swigs of the water but swallow them way too fast and start choking.

“Shay, are you sure you’re okay?” I think he’s calling from downstairs.

“Yeah, I just forgot how to swallow,” I holler.

I can hear him chuckle even from here. I throw back the covers and hurry into the bathroom to give my teeth a quick brushing. None of that two-minute crap for me this morning. It’s Christmas, and I’m not going to feel guilty for slighting my dental hygiene. But I do swish the toothpaste around in my mouth for good measure.

I check myself in the mirror, running my fingers under my eyes to clean up the eyeliner I never removed last night. A few finger combs through my hair and I decide it’s probably a messy bun kind of morning.

I finally come downstairs and see Evan sitting on the couch. The crackling fire is playing on the TV.

“Oooh. I feel warmer already,” I say as I slip onto the couch next to him. Not as close as last night, and I’m kind of surprised at how disappointed I am in that. But I don’t have the luxury of blaming my closeness on sleep.

“This is a Florida fire.”

“I watch home improvement shows that are based here and I’m always surprised how many people put in fireplaces.”

He shrugs. “I guess when you’re used to eighty degrees most of the year, the fifties can feel pretty chilly.”

I raise a brow. “Maybe they should visit Utah or New Hampshire in the winter.”

“No kidding. They don’t know what cold is.” He sets a gift box on my lap. “Okay, maybe you should unwrap this first, so you’re happy for a minute before you see your sweater.”

I raise a brow at him. “You didn’t have to buy me a present.”

He motions to the Mrs. Claus present under the tree. “I could say the same thing.”

I pull off the lid and look in at an assortment of things. There's a nice leather-bound book on one side and a fancy box. I pull out the book and I squeal. "Emma? This is one of my favorite books." I lift my shoulders. "Well, really anything by her."

He looks sheepish. That's actually a thing, believe it or not. "I thought it was a book most girls like."

I pull out the long, fancy box. It's filled with handmade soaps of different colors.

"Are you allergic to any scent?" he asks with a worried look on his face.

"Nope," I shake my head as I pull off the ribbon and take out each soap to smell them. The first one smells like coconut, and it looks like there's a fig one also. Ah, my absolute fav.

"There were some shaped like roses, but the lady at the store said those might be better for my grandma. She thought you might like these better."

I nod. "I love them! They smell so good." I lift the fig one to my nose again.

He releases a sigh and I realize then how nervous he looks. Had he thought I wouldn't like what he bought? Nathan had never worried about me liking his gifts. And there were times he definitely should have. I guess he just figured I would love whatever he gave me. And I did, to a point. But sometimes I wondered if he really knew me at all.

I know I shouldn't compare Evan and Nathan. They're two different men. But it's hard not to. Especially when Evan, who has only known me for a few days, is nervous when he actually bought me something I love. The two men are just so different.

He rubs his hands together. "Okay, let's get to the present that really matters. I want to win this contest so you can start making those chocolate chip cookies."

I chuckle. He probably thinks it's because of his impatience, but really it's because he has no idea who he's up against in this contest. I've been doing this with my family for years. And I have to say, the sweater I got Evan is pretty much the best ugly sweater I've ever bought for anyone. "Someone's a little cocky for seven o'clock in the morning."

He shrugs. "Cocky has taken me far in this world."

I shoulder bump him. "Be prepared to be humbled."

He sits back with a smile on his lips and his arms crossed. "Just open the bag, Shay."

I pull on the ribbon handles, but the top has been taped closed. I use my thumbnail, a.k.a. my Swiss Army nail, and slice easily through. I don't see the sweater immediately as there's a bunch of tissue paper covering it. "Nice wrapping skillzzz." I hold out the z.

He nods, looking cockier than before.

I'm going to feel a little guilty when I totally obliterate him. Just kidding, I'm not.

This is turning out to be an amazing Christmas. I pause. It really is. I can honestly say I haven't even been sad about Nathan today. And I kind of feel guilty that I don't feel guilty about it. What kind of twisted logic is that?

"Well, come on. Open it." He pushes it toward me.

"Okay, Mr. Patience. I am." I pull out the tissue paper with a flare and fling it up over our heads. Then I reach in and pull out a bright red sweater. Not the good red that comes on Ferrari's or candy apples. But more of the orange-red that comes on cheap plastic toys.

For a second, my stomach twists. Maybe I'm the one who's too cocky.

The sweater, which has been rolled up rather than folded as a sweater should be, unrolls into my lap and reveals a large Christmas tree. So far not terrible. But then I see the Christmas lights strung around the tree and I know what I'm in for. I feel around and, sure enough, there's a small battery pack. Great, now I have two of these sweaters.

He's staring at me, waiting to see my reaction. I hold up the sweater to me and tilt my head, giving him a pert smile. "Oh, Evan. It's absolutely dreadful."

He grins widely. "I knew I was a shoo-in to win as soon as I saw that."

I sigh and nod. "It's pretty terrible." I side-eye him. "But don't declare victory just yet."



EVAN

SHAY DOES NOT SEEM OVERLY disappointed in her sweater. Is it because it isn't that terrible, or because she's just really nice? I can't tell. She pulls the sweater on over her pajama top.

“It has—” I stop because she seems to know exactly how to turn it on.

“This is great, Evan. Thanks,” she says in an overly animated voice as dots of green, blue, and yellow lights flash on and off across her torso.

I frown. I’m suspicious that she’s faking her dislike of the sweater. My stomach drops. If she thinks the sweater she bought me is worse—. I’m not sure what to think about this.

She motions to the box wrapped in sparkly silver paper with snowflakes all over it. “That one is yours.” She has a pretty smug look on her face, which doesn’t feel like it bodes well for me. She has seen the competition and still feels like she won.

I set the package on my lap and slip the ribbon off. Unlike the presents I wrapped for her, Shay’s all have pretty ribbon bows on top. And not like the curling ribbon kind. It’s the nice kind of ribbon that you would find at a fabric store. Where did she get it? Because I’m pretty certain she hasn’t gone to a fabric store since she got here. Unless she went while I was shopping for her. Not that it matters at all.

I carefully run my finger under the tape, trying not to rip the paper.

“Oh, no,” she says sounding a lot like Phoebe Buffay from *Friends*.

I look up. “What?”

She tilts her head. “You’re one of *those* kind of unwrappers.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I pause, drawing the process out even longer. I know what she’s talking about. I’ve been teased by my brothers my whole life for choosing to unwrap gifts in a slow, precise manner. Just because they go through presents like a tornado is not my fault.

“Are you going to keep the paper to reuse it later?” She asks with her brow all crinkled. I would never admit it to her or Nathan, but she looks so cute, I’m tempted to discard the present and just kiss her instead.

“No.” Or rather yes. I’ve already admitted I’m cheap. But I’m not about to admit that to her. “I just don’t see the reason to rip through everything and make a huge mess.”

She stares at me with a pensive look on her face. “Yeah, I can see that about you.”

What does that mean? Is she saying I look uptight?

She taps the box. “Okay, come on. You’re killing me, Smalls!”

I grin at the *Sandlot* reference. “I can always move slower if I’m making you too stressed.”

She sits back on the couch and folds her arms over her chest. “I will say

nothing more.” She pinches her lips together tightly.

I peel back the paper and find a box with a Santa Claus face printed on the box lid. “Why did you wrap it when it had this on top? Isn’t that the point of printed boxes, so you don’t have to wrap them?”

Her nose scrunches up. “But he’s so creepy looking. No one wants that staring up at them from under the tree.”

I chuckle as I examine the picture. I wouldn’t say he’s creepy, but she’s right. Her wrapping paper is much more pleasant to see next to the tinsel trees.

I cast the silver sparkles to the side and pull the lid off the box. Unlike her sweater, mine is tucked neatly in folded tissue paper. But as I pull the tissue back, I look down. The sweater is predominantly black and white, with pops of green, red, and gold. There’s lettering across the top, but I can’t read what it says. I can see several nutcrackers in a line across the chest. I grin. She thought nutcrackers were more terrible than blinking Christmas lights on a Christmas tree? I don’t think so.

I pull the sweater free of the box and my grin falls away as I read all the words knitted into it. *Crack Deez Nuts*. Is she serious?

I glance up at her and can tell she’s barely containing her laughter.

I look back at the sweater. Does she really expect me to wear this monstrosity? Hers might be tacky, but it isn’t completely inappropriate.

She laughs. “It’s the worst, isn’t it?” She claps her hands. “You have to admit, I won pretty handily.”

I don’t even know what to say. This is literally the worst.

“Put it on. I want to see how well it fits you.” Her eyes are alight with excitement. Or maybe it’s just the thrill of victory. She leans forward and whispers in my ear. “By the way, I prefer brownies, but I can do chocolate chip cookies if they’re warm.” She winks at me and something flutters inside me. “I’ll even share my ice cream with you.”

I swallow. Okay. I have two choices here. I can look like a complete jerk and refuse to wear this thing. Or I can be a good sport and pretend like it doesn’t bother me—even though it does. A lot. But it’s not like we’re leaving the house today, so I guess it’s not that big of a deal.

I pull the sweater over my head and shove my arms in, pulling it down over my chest. It’s a little snug, but unfortunately, it fits well in the arms and torso. “I think you undersold your abilities at this game.”

She gives me a little shoulder shrug. “I told you my family does this

every year.”

My mouth drops open. “What? You made it sound like they just made up random competitions. Not that you did this particular one every year. That’s not fair. You’re a ringer.”

She grins so big her eyes close slightly and little creases form at the side. “We didn’t make it up. Ugly sweater contests have been around for years.”

I sulk. “I still think you should have told me you had so much experience.”

“I promise to tell you that the next time.” Her head tilts and she pushes out her lips like she’s talking to an insolent child. Which she kind of is. But then her words hit me. Does she want there to be a next time or is she just saying that?

“Okay, but I’m going to hold you to it.” I narrow my eyes at her in fake anger. “And don’t think I’m not going to be researching the most terrible sweaters I can for next time.”

She cocks a brow. “I would expect nothing less.” She hands me my next present, the one wrapped in elf paper. “Here. Hopefully, this will make up for the sweater.”

I unwrap the gift that’s smaller than a bread box but bigger than a ring box. This time I don’t go as slowly. I’m curious to see what she bought for me after knowing me for such a short time.

I pull off the lid and see the angel tree topper staring back at me. The one we had seen in that little Christmas store yesterday. The one that looks exactly like the one my mom used every year on the top of our tree. The one I had not seen since she died.

A lump forms in my throat and I feel tears welling up in my eyes. I swat them away. I shouldn’t cry in front of her. We don’t know each other that well. I stare through blurry eyes at the box in my hands. Or maybe we do.

Shay puts her hand on top of mine.

I glance up at her.

“I think you should at least have something from your mother.”

I nod but can’t speak because of the tightness gripping my throat. I also can’t stop staring at the angel. I run a finger lightly over the delicate dress and face. “Thank you,” I mumble.

I glance up as she gives a little head bob. “You’re very welcome, Evan. And thank you.”

I jerk my gaze up. “Uh, comparatively speaking, my gift is completely

lame.”

She shakes her head and I see tears forming in her eyes. Man, we’re a duo, aren’t we? “Thanks for turning this Christmas into a good memory.”

I shrug. “Back at you.”

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

EVAN

slip my sweater on and look down at the front. I will never look at nutcrackers the same way again.

I pull the sweater down subconsciously, but then realize that only makes it easier to read, so I scrunch it back up slightly. I can't believe I've actually bloused an article of clothing. It's a new low for me.

I walk out of my room and head down the stairs, the smell of something cooking making my stomach growl. I have no idea what it is, but it smells delicious.

When I step into the kitchen, Shay is standing at the stove stirring something in a pot. I move over behind her and lean over her shoulder, breathing in the smell of apples and spices. "What is that?" I ask.

"Cider sauce," she looks back at me. "It's for the English popovers."

"Popovers? What are those?" I bend over and look in the little window on the oven at the muffin tin with something raising to crazy sizes.

"Have you heard of Yorkshire pudding or German pancakes?" she pulls the pot off the stove and sets it aside, dropping in a chunk of butter.

"Nope."

"You have lived a sheltered life." She grins and rests her hip on the edge of the counter. "It's hard to explain what they are. I think you're just going to have to trust me and try them for yourself."

I nod, but I can't help but look at her skeptically. What's in these popovers that make them hard to explain?

"You're not allergic to anything are you?" Her brow creases. "I probably should have asked you about that when we were at the store yesterday."

I shake my head. "No allergies, so you're safe."

She relaxes. "These have about ten minutes to cook."

My phone dings with a text message. I pull it out and see my brother's name on my screen.

Keaton

Merry Christmas, big bro. You ready to video chat?

I'm really not. I wasn't planning on having a guest present when I video-

chatted with my dad and brothers. But it's Christmas, and I can't not see them after I bailed on the 'family celebrations.' I type out a quick reply.

Sure. Give me five minutes.

"It's my family. They want to video chat." I glance around. "I can do it in my room."

I move over to the couch and pull my laptop off the end table.

"You can do it here. I'm going to grab a quick shower."

Relief floods over me. Not that I have anything private to say to my family. But they can be a little inappropriate sometimes.

Flipping open my computer, I turn it on and wait. Not three minutes later, the ringing starts, and I click on the green Answer button.

My two brothers each appear on their own screens and my dad appears seconds after. Is it weird they aren't even in the same room together on Christmas? "Hey, Evan. Merry Christmas!" They all shout slightly out of sync.

"Hey, guys. Merry Christmas to you." My sister, Alexis, is noticeably absent. She was spending Christmas with her boyfriend's family this year.

"How's Florida, son?" My dad asks.

"Good. It's supposed to be in the mid-70s today."

"You suck, man. It's like 14 degrees here this week." Lowell complains.

"But do you have snow? Christmas feels weird without snow." I complain back.

I sit back on the couch and Keaton lets out a whistle. "Dude, what are you wearing?"

I glance down at my sweater and suck in a breath. So much for no one seeing me in this thing. "It's just a sweater."

Keaton starts to laugh. "Stand up. I want to see the whole thing."

I shake my head. "I don't think that's really necessary."

"Oh, come on. I want to see it." Both Keaton and Lowell are whining.

"Fine," I grunt out. I stand up and pull the sweater down so they can read it. They both let out a howl of laughter. "Dude. That is the best ugly sweater ever! Where did you get it?" Keaton wipes at his eyes with the back of his hand.

"A friend and I had a contest to see who could buy the other person the ugliest sweater."

"I guess they won." Lowell snorts.

“Yeah, you can say that.” I sit down hard on the couch, not wanting to hear any more about the sweater.

“I hope you didn’t wager too much.” My dad asks.

I nod, already ready for this call to be over. “The winner gets the cookie or brownie of their choice, made by the loser.”

My dad nods. “No one really loses then. Smart wager.”

I look down at my sweater. Is there really no loser? I beg to differ.

The timer on the oven starts buzzing. I hear Shay’s door open, and she calls down the stairs, but not before I’ve had a chance to mute the call. “Evan, can you check on the popovers?”

“Just a second, guys,” I mute them and call back. “What am I looking for?”

“Just make sure the middles are set. The edges should be browned.”

I carry my computer over to the kitchen and grab a hot pad as I pull out the muffin tin. I set it on the stovetop and head back to the couch.

I’ve barely settled in again when Keaton leans forward, his face growing large in his box. “Did I just hear a female voice? Evan, are you spending Christmas with a girl? Is that why you couldn’t be here this year?”

I close my eyes. Why did I not just take my laptop out onto the patio?

Shay had not wanted to tell her parents about me, and I understand how she feels. Although, probably for completely different reasons. I unmute. “No, that’s not why I’m not there for Christmas. I told you that John is on paternity leave.”

“Then what’s up with the girl?” Lowell prods.

“It’s complicated,” I hedge.

Both Lowell and Keaton settle back into the chairs and fold their arms. “We’ve got time,” Lowell says.

“Boys, this is Evan’s business, not yours.” My father’s words may say that, but he has also settled back and seems to be waiting for an explanation.

I scrub my hands over my face. “She was staying in the townhouse next door. But the first night she was here, the washing machine hose ruptured and flooded the whole place. Because of the holidays, there were no other rooms available. So I said she could stay in one of my spare rooms.”

Shay is standing at the bottom of the stairs, peering around like she doesn’t know where to go. I wave her in. She shouldn’t have to be locked in her room just because my family decided to call. I’m wishing I had grabbed my earbuds.

“Dude, you invited a stranger to stay in your house with you? What if she’s some psycho serial killer?” Lowell has the most serious look on his face that I can’t help but grin. And when I glance over to Shay, she’s resting her elbow on the counter with her chin in her palm. She’s watching me, a smile on her face and her lips twitching.

“She isn’t a stranger really.” I really do not want to explain all this now. Those popover things are surely getting cold.

“Then you knew her before?” My dad asks. He doesn’t say a lot, but when he does, it usually means something. But I’m not sure what this means.

“Well, we’d never met in person before that night. But I feel like I’ve known her for years.” That’s not a lie. And I’m tempted to glance at Shay and check her reaction. I don’t think I’ve thought of her as a stranger since we left the dollar store yesterday.

“Then you’ve had an online relationship?” My dad asks. Why can they not just let this go?

How do I want to answer this? In a sense, we did have an online relationship before she came. I emailed her a few times with information about the house. And she replied. That technically is a relationship. But not the kind my family is thinking of. Do I fess up to the truth? “Not really,” I say on a sigh.

“So, what you’re saying,” Keaton moves close to the screen again, “is that you had never met or spoken to this girl before she arrived at your rental two days ago?”

I rub a hand along the back of my neck. “We’d emailed a few times.”

“Dude. That’s like the exact definition of a stranger.” Lowell gives me a raised brow. When did the little punk learn how to do that?

Keaton grins. “She’s hot, isn’t she.” It isn’t really a question. “That’s why you’re letting her stay.”

“No. That’s not why I’m letting her stay.” I need to end this call. Immediately. “She needed a place to stay and the only room available was at the Super 4 in the bad part of town.”

Keaton looks disappointed. “Then she isn’t hot?”

I want to die right now. My face is blazing and there’s no way I can look over at Shay now. Death seems like the only way I will get this conversation to end.

“Hey, she’s there, right? Turn your laptop around and let me see what she looks like.”

“I am not turning my computer around. You’re such a tool sometimes.” I roll my eyes.

He stares me down through the computer. “You kind of have to, bro. Because if you don’t, she’s going to think that you think she isn’t hot.”

I drop my head back into my hands. “I’m not not doing it because she isn’t hot. I’m not doing it because she isn’t some centerfold that wants to be ogled by you.”

Keaton puts his hands up in front of him, clasping them together. “Please? Come on, dude. You totally blew us off and I want to see for who.”

“I didn’t blow you off,” I say, covering my face with my hands. How am I ever going to look Shay in the eye again? I can’t even imagine what she thinks of me.

“Wow, dude. Your girlfriend is way hot. Why did you make her sound like she is a complete dog?”

I look at my screen and see Shay standing behind me. Her hair is up in a messy bun on top of her head, and she only has minimal make up on, just a little eyeliner and some mascara. But Keaton is right. She’s way hot.

She winks at me and then moves out of the screen.

I’m both appreciative and annoyed that she gave in and did what Keaton wanted.

“She’s not my girlfriend.” I’m not sure who I’m trying harder to convince, them or me.

Lowell puts his hand to his mouth like he’s telling a secret. “I would have blown us off too, Evan. No worries.”

“I didn’t blow you off for her!” I yell at the screen.

“Okay, son. You don’t need to get angry. The boys are just offering their support.” My dad is trying, but failing, to keep a straight face. He looks down at his watch. “We probably shouldn’t keep you much longer. We need to stop for breakfast before the movie.” Sure, now that they’ve humiliated me, they’re on a schedule?

“The movie? But it’s only 9:30 in the morning.”

“There’s a *Die Hard* marathon at the theater. We’re going to see all six.” Lowell fist pumps the air.

“All six. Well, I’m sad to be missing that.” Not even a little. I glance over at Shay. She’s taking the popovers out of the pan and arranging them on a plate. “Although, I already watched the first *Die Hard* last night.”

“What? How did you convince her to watch that? Or had she already

gone to bed?” Keaton looks like he might take back all the nice things he has said about her.

“Actually, it was her idea.”

Lowell’s mouth drops open. “Evan, you should marry her,” he whispers rather loudly.

“I’ll take it under advisement,” I glance over at her. Had she heard Lowell or had he actually kept his voice low enough? I can’t see her face as she bends over the muffin tin. “Have fun at the movies. Don’t get sick on popcorn.” I need to get off this call before *I* have to go stay at the Super 4 Motel.

“I’m going to pace myself.” Lowell says, his face dead dog serious.

“Good plan,” I chuckle. As much as they make me crazy, I love these guys. Even my dad, who completely changed how Christmas was celebrated.

“Alright, I love you guys. Merry Christmas.”

“Love you too.” My dad says.

“Tell your girlfriend Merry Christmas too.” Lowell grins at me.

“She isn’t my girlfriend. Aren’t you the one who was just telling me she was a stranger? How did she move from complete stranger to girlfriend in a matter of minutes?”

“That was before we knew she was hot,” Keaton chimes in.

“I’m pretty sure hot girls can be serial killers,” I counter. Shay clears her throat and I jerk my gaze up to her. “Not that she’s a serial killer. But I’m just saying. You guys need to change your girl safety rating system.”

“Bye, Evan,” Keaton says, and his face disappears. That kid has always been able to dish it, but he’s not very good at taking it.

“Bye, guys.” I lift a hand and give a little wave to my dad and Lowell before they both disappear from the screen.

I shut my laptop and just stare at it. What am I supposed to say after that? I don’t even know where to start.

“Are you ready for breakfast?” Shay interrupts my thoughts. “I think everything is done.”

“Yep.” I hop up. Maybe if we’re eating, I won’t have to talk much. And then, if I’m lucky enough for a Christmas miracle, she might just forget about everything she just heard.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

EVAN

I lean back to give my over-stuffed belly more room in my jeans. “Shay, that was an amazing breakfast. Where did you learn to cook?”

She smiles as she reaches for my empty plate. “My mom’s a really good cook. She cooks more simply, but I learned the basics from her.”

I put my hand out and shake my head. “Uh, no. You’re not doing the dishes. I will take care of them.” I’m struck by how natural this all feels. It’s like we’ve always been together for the holidays, and this is the friendly debate we have every year.

She waves away my objection. “It’s not a big deal, really.” She glances back at the kitchen. “Besides, I wasn’t a very tidy cook. I think I used almost every dish in there.”

“If it’s not a big deal, then I can do them.” I fold my arms across my chest to show her that I’m serious. She lets out a chuckle and I realize I’m not pulling off the I-won’t-take-your-crap look very well.

“I don’t think you could look menacing if you tried,” she says. “I mean, you’re handsome enough that perhaps you could still be a serial killer but not a very scary one.”

My face heats. “About that...”

She shakes her head. “I’m just teasing you. Your family seems really nice. They seemed sad you weren’t there this year.”

I shrug. “I’m sure they forgot all about me when they got to the theater and *Die Hard* started.”

She puts the plates back on the table and sits down. “Your dad sounded nice too. I’m sorry I acted like he wasn’t when we were at the Christmas store yesterday.”

I shrug. “It’s okay. I know what he did sounds harsh.” I feel like I need to add a “but,” but there’s no “but” to add. What he’d done *had* been harsh.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t seem like a bad guy. He sounded genuinely interested when he was talking to you.”

“I suppose,” I mumble. How do I keep ending up in these awkward conversations that I want to end right from the start?

She puts her hand on mine. “I’ve been thinking about it. And I know it’s

not my place, but I think that maybe your dad deserves the benefit of the doubt.”

She’s right. It isn’t her place. I want to tell her that, but she looks so sincere like she just wants me not to hurt anymore. And while that’s a lovely thought, it just isn’t something that she can wave a magic wand and take away.

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. “I’m discovering that grief is an individual thing. Like, we all handle it differently. My mom, in her well-meaning way, believes I should handle it the way she does. Which I’m not.”

I nod at her, not sure how my dad’s poor handling of Christmas has led to Shay’s grief over being jilted.

“Maybe your dad didn’t change everything because he wanted to but because he had to—it was the only way he knew how to grieve.”

I shake my head. “You lost me.”

“I just wonder if maybe changing Christmas traditions wasn’t because he didn’t love your mom or wanted to forget her but rather because he didn’t know how to celebrate it that way without her. It caused him too much pain.”

I look down at my hands. I’d never considered it that way. Likely because I was too consumed with my own grief.

“And maybe that’s why he worked so hard right after she died. Maybe it was the only way he knew how to survive.” She gives my hand a squeeze. “Everyone needs to feel loved. I think you’re very lucky to have such a great family that loves you so much.” She smiles and drops my hand. I frown. I’m not sure I’m finished with her comforting yet.

She pulls her phone out of her back pocket and starts scrolling. “So I wondered what movie you wanted to go see. I looked but it doesn’t look like any theater around here is doing a *Die Hard* Marathon. But we can see something else.”

I shake my head. “We don’t need to go see a movie.”

Her brow crinkles and I stare at her for a moment because she looks so adorable. But I shake that thought away immediately. What am I thinking? She has just come out of a long-term relationship. She doesn’t need me trying to take advantage while she’s vulnerable.

“I don’t mind seeing a movie. I mean, unless you really don’t want to go. I just thought we’d done several of my family’s traditions, so maybe you’d want to do some of yours.”

It’s nice of her to try and include both of our family traditions.

And I'm still slightly confused by it. Nathan's Shay wouldn't do this. So far we've watched *Die Hard* and she even bought me the tree topper that had been so much a part of Christmas when my mom was alive. I'm not sure what to make of it. Part of me wonders if she's just trying to impress me and putting on a fake persona. Or could it be that Nathan is an idiot? Currently, I'm leaning toward the latter.

She slides her phone across the table. "Anything look good? Or would you rather just stay here? We can watch *Christmas Story* instead." She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. "Or something else if you'd rather. I'm pretty easygoing."

I look at her phone. She's really trying to make this a Christmas that both of us will enjoy. And while the movie on Christmas Day thing isn't really my favorite holiday tradition, I don't want to disappoint her.

I glance up and she's biting her cheek. "If you need some you time, I get that too. I've been pretty much monopolizing your time and lecturing you on your family business. I hadn't really considered that maybe you missed Christmas with your family for a reason."

I shake my head. "No, no. I'd love to spend the day with you."

She doesn't look completely convinced.

"I missed Christmas with my family because the guy who usually manages my rentals is on paternity leave for the holidays. That's completely the truth." Mostly. A niggling of guilt worms around in my stomach. I should tell her that I also stayed in Florida because I wanted to see Nathan—*my friend*. But will that make things weird between us? Living together for the next week will be awkward if she's mad and hates me because I know her ex. But I'm going to have to tell her sometime, right?

I mentally sigh. But if she's leaving on New Year's, why do I have to make things awkward for us between now and then?

I grin. "Well, that and New Hampshire is really cold right now."

Her shoulders relax. "Are you sure? I don't want to be a bother."

I hold up three fingers. "Scouts honor. I'm happy we're spending Christmas together."

She smiles and leans forward, pointing at her phone. "So, does one of those interest you?"

"I'm game for anything."

She raises a brow. "There's a new *Fast and Furious* movie."

I grin. "There's always a new *Fast and Furious* movie." I glance down.

“What about this new Tom Cruise movie?”

She nods. “Sounds great.”

“Are you sure, because there’s also this new remake of a Jane Austen or maybe it’s one of the Brontes’?”

She pulls her phone back. “Northanger Abbey is by Jane Austen. I can’t believe you didn’t know that.” She looks at me in feigned disgust.

I wink. “I did. I’m just testing you to make sure you really did like your book.” I grimace. “Is it okay to admit that I like *Pride and Prejudice*? I think the dad is hilarious.”

“Why would it not be okay?”

I shrug. “Some people might not find it very manly.”

“Whatever.” She rolls her eyes. “Whoever doesn’t think it’s manly is an idiot. My dad loves to watch Jane Austen movies with my mom. And he’s plenty manly. He ropes and wrestles bulls.”

My eyes widen. How had this information not come up before now? “Really? Is he in the rodeo?”

She shakes her head. “No, but he owns a cattle ranch. Sometimes it’s necessary to catch a bull. And trust me, bulls rarely like to be caught.”

My head shakes. “You’re an interesting person, Shay Taylor.”

She grins and her cheeks pink. “I said my dad wrestles bulls. Not me.” Her smile widens. “At least not regularly.”

I twist my head and look at her through side eyes. Is she being serious right now?

She pulls her top lip between her teeth. “Okay, so what time do you want to leave? Do you want to go early this afternoon or this evening?”

“I don’t care.” I look down at my horrible sweater. “I just need to change out of this sweater and then I’m ready. Or we can wait and go this evening.”

Her mouth drops open. “What do you mean ‘change out of this sweater’? We wear our sweaters to the movie.”

“Not on your life.” I deadpan stare at her. Besides, she has to be kidding again, right?

Her head shakes back and forth slowly. “Uh, no. That’s the deal. We wear them all day on Christmas.”

“You want me to wear this outside of this house?” I point down to the Nutcrackers. “You must be insane.”

Her brow does that adorable crinkle thing, and again I push back the urge to kiss her. “You’re right. I’m taking it too far. You don’t have to wear the

sweater.” I can see the disappointment in her eyes. Dang her! I don’t even think this one is a ruse. I think she’s genuinely disappointed.

“No, if that’s part of the tradition, then I’ll wear it.” I sigh.

“No, really. You don’t have to.” She lifts her hand as if that’s what will seal the deal.

“Are you wearing yours?” I ask.

She guffaws. “Of course. It’s Christmas.”

I run my hand through my hair, hardly believing what I’m about to say. “If you’re wearing yours, I’m wearing mine.”

Her whole face smiles and I mean her whole face. Her eyes crinkle and her nose scrunches up slightly. And her actual smile is huge. If this is what wearing this horrible sweater accomplishes, it’s completely worth it. Oh, man. I’m in trouble.



SHAY

IT’S long past dark when we get back to Evan’s house after the movie. I fell asleep while he was doing the dishes, so we decided to do an evening viewing of the Tom Cruise movie.

It was good. I mean, there was a lot of driving fast and things blowing up. And Tom ran a lot, which I always find entertaining. He just has an interesting gait when he runs. His arms and knees stay at perfect ninety-degree angles. Nobody has form that perfect naturally. That’s all I’m saying.

I stand just inside the door as Evan turns to lock everything up. “Well, thanks for the movie. I totally could have paid my own way.”

He turns toward me and smiles. For a minute I think he might kiss me, and my stomach gets all fluttery and roller coaster-y. Does that mean I want him to kiss me? I don’t think I don’t want him to kiss me. But then again, I haven’t kissed anyone but Nathan in years. So the idea seems weird and scary and exciting all at the same time.

But then Evan steps around me and I realize that I’m worrying or anticipating for nothing. “It’s late, I think I’m going to turn in.” He grins down at me. “But not before I burn this sweater.”

I reach over and rub his sleeve between my fingers. “I’m pretty sure with this fiber content, it’ll be more melting than burning.”

“Melting?”

I nod. “I would not advise sleeping in it. I’m certain it’s not fire rated.”

He takes a step closer to me and again, my stomach goes into overdrive. “Don’t worry. I never plan to wear this sweater again.” He smiles down at me before he takes a step back and then turns and heads down the hallway.

I’m not a swearer, but I will admit that one popped into my head just then. I take a very slow deliberate breath, because Oh. My. Heck. What is happening to me? It must be the dim glow of the lights surrounding the tinsel tree. I mean, what else can it be?

I clear my throat. “Oh, yeah? Well, don’t come crying to me when you have an ugly sweater contest at work, and you don’t have it anymore. Because I think we’ve already established that sweater will win every contest.”

He glances back over his shoulder at me. “I will never have an ugly sweater contest at work.”

“How do you know? Just because you haven’t had one yet doesn’t mean you won’t ever have one.”

He walks slowly down the hall, stopping just inches from me. “Because I’m the boss at my company and anyone who even suggests an ugly sweater contest will be fired on the spot.” He taps me on the end of the nose with his finger. Any romantic feelings I’m having flee like the people on *Jurassic World* when the pterodactyls and the T-Rex invade the gift shop. There’s nothing less romantic than a tap on the nose.

I don’t have any response to that. I didn’t know he owned his own company. I wonder what kind of company it is. Or does owning these two rentals constitute a business? He probably LLC-ed like I did with my author business for tax purposes.

“I’m going to bed. I have an early morning at Disney World tomorrow.” I lift my chin to show my defiance of his choice to burn a perfectly terrible Christmas sweater.

“Yeah, I have to meet with the disaster clean-up people in the morning and figure out the game plan.”

My shoulders droop. “Oh, yeah. I’d kind of forgotten about that. Sorry you have to deal with it.” I’d kind of hoped that he’d come to Disney with me. I mean, he can pass as a Nathan, right?

He walks back and stands in front of me. “It wasn’t your fault. Please, stop apologizing.”

I just stand there nodding, not sure if I should just turn around and head to my room or give him a hug. A hug? Who is he, my grandpa? That seems weird, so I’m not going to do it. “Alright then. Thanks again for a great day.” This feels so much like the ending of a first date. Or at least a first date with the person you’re living with? Okay, so this feels nothing like anything I’ve ever experienced.

“Have fun at Disney,” he says as he turns away.

It was a good call on the hug. Or the not hug. It would’ve definitely made things weird.

I nod and trudge up the stairs to my room, shutting the door behind me. The clock on the nightstand says that it’s nearly midnight, but I have far too much pent-up energy to even think about sleeping.

I grab my phone out of my pocket as I chuck my jacket on my suitcase sitting on a chair in the corner. Hopping into the bed, I peel off my sweater (did I mention the synthetic yarn has rubbed a raw spot on my neck?) and chuck it over by my suitcase. It unballs midair and lands with a thud at the bottom of my bed. The sweater’s not very aerodynamic.

Snuggling up with Big Green and my pillow, I put in my earbuds and pull up Maggie’s number. It’s only 10:30 in Utah, so she should be awake, but the kids should be asleep.

“Shay?”

I nod like an idiot. “Hey, Mags, Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you.” She pauses. “How are you doing?” She says it very softly and slowly, like she’s asking me to give her the gun in my hand.

“I’m doing great.”

She sighs. “It’s because of the guy, right? Or are you just pretending like your mom thinks you are?”

“I’m not pretending. I’m really good. I had a great Christmas. Like, better than I’ve had in years.”

“And you haven’t sent me any pictures?” I hear the accusation in her voice. “And you still haven’t told me the long story about you and the landlord.”

“Are the kids asleep? This may take a while.”

“Yeah, I just put the baby down and Harley zonked out at like seven. She was exhausted after getting up at six.” I can hear the exhaustion in Maggie’s

voice.

“Sounds like someone else is a bit sleepy too.”

“Yeah, Dean is ‘resting his eyes,’” I can hear the air-quotes, “on the couch, so I’m all yours.”

I snort laugh. “I wasn’t talking about Dean.”

“I know, I know. Now get on with this story, because you sound way too chipper to be the same girl I put on a plane three days ago.”

“Yeah, about that girl. I don’t think she’s around anymore.”

“Start at the beginning, Shay.” I can picture her settling into her favorite chair in the corner of her bedroom, her soft Minky blanket pulled up around her.

“Okay, this is quite a story—”

“That you have now been stringing me along with for, like, three minutes. Get on with it, Maryeshayne!”

Eeek, she used my full name. She’s tired and grouchy.

“Okay. It all started the night I arrived here. The landlord who owns the place is staying in the townhouse next door. And he came out to greet us. Except, there was no us.”

“You better be leading up to tell me this guy is gorgeous and available or I’m flying to Orlando and kicking your butt for dragging this story out longer.”

“Maybe I should call you back tomorrow when you aren’t so grumpy.” I chuckle.

“No. Sorry. It’s just been a long day between early morning presents and then going to my parents’ house and then Dean’s parents’ house. I’m just tired.”

“Yeah, I hadn’t figured that out.” I sigh. “I mean it. I can call you tomorrow.”

“No. I want to hear about this hot guy. He *is* hot, right Shay?”

“Isn’t everyone in Florida hot? It’s December and it’s like seventy degrees.”

Maggie growls. “I swear, Shay. I’m pulling up the airline app right now. I’m coming there. Get ready for a throwdown.”

“Okay, okay. Just let me tell you the whole story first.” I tell her about the broken water line. “And there were no other rooms except for some seedy no-tell motel. So I’m staying in his guest room.”

I hold the phone away from my ear as a loud piercing yell sounds through

the line. “Mags, watch it or you’ll wake the baby.”

“It’s okay, Dean can deal with him. This is more important. So you’re living with him?” I can hear the excitement humming in her voice.

“Technically, yes. But it’s more like just staying a few nights with a friend.”

“A friend with kissing benefits?” I hear crying in the background and Maggie covers the phone with her hand, but I can still hear her as she calls for Dean to get the baby.

“There have been no benefits,” I say plainly.

“Well, that’s boring.” Her voice becomes louder like she’s cupping her hand around her mouth and the phone. “Do you want to have benefits?”

“I don’t know. Maybe?” I sound so wishy-washy.

“Oh, my heck, Shay. That’s the best. I’m so excited that you’re moving on from loser Nathan.”

“He’s not a loser, Mags.” I sigh. “I think he may have done us both a favor.”

“He abandoned you at the church with not so much as a text message to say he had changed his mind. He’s a complete loser.”

“Well, maybe. He just handled the situation poorly,” I say. “But that’s not to say I’m ready to jump back into a relationship. I don’t need a rebound guy.”

“What? Why? I say totally go for the rebound.”

“You also told me to come on my honeymoon without the groom.”

“And you should be thanking me for advising it,” she has her superior tone on. “Go. For. The. Rebound, Shay.” She totally sounds like a cheerleader.

“But Evan is nice. And he’s like the complete opposite of Nathan.”

“How do you mean?” She’s letting me ignore the whole rebound conversation, but I know she’ll circle back to it.

“I mean he’s just so easygoing. Like he actually participated in an ugly sweater contest.”

“Oh, you did not,” Maggie says. “Please don’t tell me you made that man buy and receive an ugly sweater.”

“I did, and the one I got him is by far the best one I’ve bought to date.” I chuckle.

“Best as in not terrible?” I hear the hope in her voice.

“Nope. Best as in it’s the most terrible sweater I’ve ever found. I wish I

could've found it for one of my brothers.”

“And how did he react to your weird family traditions?”

“Hold on, I'll text you a picture.” I pull up the picture we took outside the theater, both of us laughing and pointing at each other's sweaters. I look at it for a second before I send it to Maggie.

“Did you just sigh when you were looking at the picture?”

I scoff. “No.” Yes. I totally did. But I'm not about to admit it to Maggie.

“Have you sent it yet? I still don't have it.”

I pull myself back to the present and quickly press Send. “Okay. It's on its way,” I say.

“Woah. He's sick.”

I roll my eyes. “Mags, just because you teach high school doesn't mean you can get away with trying to sound like a teenager.”

“Fine.” She sulks. “But he is easy on the eyes.”

“Yeah, he is. But I sent that so you could see his sweater.”

“Oh my heck, he wore that to a movie theater?” She starts to laugh, only getting out a few words in between chortles.

“I know, see? Nathan would never have even tried that sweater on, let alone gone out in public. I feel more like me around Evan than I ever did around Nathan.”

Maggie clears her throat. “I tried to tell you that Nathan changed you.”

I nod and bite my cheek. “I know and I didn't listen. I guess I didn't see it until now.” I sigh. “You know, I think if Evan and I had met under normal circumstances, I could see us dating. But I don't know about now.”

“What's the problem? Does he not seem into you?”

I shrug. “I don't know. There's been a couple of times when I thought he might kiss me, but then he didn't, and I don't know if I'm just misreading things. I mean, I haven't had to read those kinds of signals in so long. Maybe I'm just out of practice and doing it all wrong.”

“There's only one way to find out.”

“No—” I know what she's going to say, and I don't think I'm prepared to take that step.

“Then next time you feel like he might kiss you, just make sure you finish the job. It's just as Charlotte Lucas told Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*. ‘He should be in no doubt of your feelings.’”

“I'm pretty sure Jane Austen said it much better,” I say to misdirect the conversation away from me kissing Evan.

“Whatever. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah. I do.” I sigh and pull my legs up, resting my chin on my knee.

“Promise me you’re going to do it. And then promise me you’ll call me immediately.”

I can still hear the baby wailing through the phone line. “It sounds like you have more pressing matters right now.”

“Promise me, Shay.” She stays on the line even as I can sense her milk coming in from over the phone.

“Fine, I promise. Now go rescue Dean from the screaming baby.”

“He’s Dean’s baby too.”

“I know, but Dean’s at a disadvantage. He can’t nurse Roman back to sleep like you can.”

The crying gets louder. “Okay, I’ll be expecting your call.” The wailing stops and all I hear is the heaves that come after a good hard cry. I’m intimately acquainted with those heaves. “I’m glad you had a Merry Christmas, Shay.”

“Thanks, Mags.”

“Merry Christmas, Shay,” I hear Dean shout in the background.

“Tell Dean Merry Christmas back.”

“I will. Now go get that rebound.”

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

SHAY

I pull into the driveway of my former rental property and drop my head onto the steering wheel.

Why does no one tell you that Disney World by yourself is not the happiest place on earth? It sucks to see all those happy couples and families together enjoying each other's company. There's no better way to feel completely alone than sitting next to complete strangers on Pirates.

I hear a power tool through my rolled-up window and look over to see Evan in his garage.

I climb out of BR and trudge over to Evan's garage. "Hey, what are you working on?" I push through the garage screen door, only then noticing a man leaning against the tool bench lining one length of the wall.

The guy eyes me and flicks up his brows.

Evan looks up and smiles at me. "Oh, hey, Shay. This is my friend, Darrin. He came over to take a look at the kitchen and bathrooms. He does custom cabinetry." Evan motions to me with a dusty hand full of sandpaper. "Darrin, this is Shay."

Darrin gives Evan a knowing look before tossing me a bro nod. "Nice to meet you."

"Yeah, you too." Although with the way he's watching me, I'm not sure it really is.

He pushes off the counter. "Okay. I'll send you a bid in the next few weeks. Do you think we might be able to trade some of it out for that chair? My mom would love it."

Evan chuckles. "Yeah, I'm sure we can come to some agreement." He puts the sandpaper down and brushes his hand off on his apron before he holds it out to shake. "Thanks for coming over. I know you guys take this whole week off for the holidays."

"No problem. It's nice to catch up. I had no idea you weren't going home for Christmas. We could have had you over—"

Evan shrugs. "Don't worry about it. I had a great Christmas," his gaze flicks over and holds mine.

I pull my lip between my teeth. Did he enjoy it as much as I did? I don't

remember a Christmas I've enjoyed more than this one.

"I'll talk to you later," Darrin waves. "Nice to meet you, Shay."

I nod. "Yeah." I watch him until he shuts himself inside a silver truck parked across the street. I turn back to Evan. "What are you making?"

"A chair."

Duh, Shay. Wasn't that part of the conversation just now? But Darrin left me flustered. I feel like he knows things about me that I don't know he knows. Whatever, it made sense in my head.

"What about you?" Evan runs the sandpaper in a long stroke down the grain of the wood. "I thought you were spending the day at Disney."

I shrug. "It's not very fun when you're by yourself."

He nods. "Yeah, I get that." He pauses for a minute. "You know, you don't have to go by yourself. I already met with the flood people—," he pauses. Is he offering to come with me? I feel like I can't read his body language. Or read between the lines or whatever this is.

"I can go with you if you want." There's a vulnerable look in his eyes that, I'm not going to lie, is super attractive. Nathan was never vulnerable. Or if he was, he never showed it.

"Really? Do you think they would transfer Nathan's ticket to you?" I bite my lip. "I can totally pretend to cry if I need to."

He laughs. "I don't think you'll need to resort to tears this time. I have a season pass."

I frown. "Then I'll just have to eat the money for Nathan's ticket?" My shoulders slump. "That kind of makes me want to cry for real."

"Sorry. We can go and see if they'll refund you." He smirks. "Or maybe you should email them, they might not find your tears credible if you're already bringing another guy along."

He makes it sound like a date. A little tingle dances up my spine, but I shrug it off. "I suppose six hundred bucks is a small price to pay for dodging that bullet."

"Ouch," he grimaces and a shadow passes over his face but is gone just as fast. "Then you're not sad that you didn't marry him?"

I sigh. "I don't think so? I don't know. Maybe it's too soon to tell. All I know right now is that I'm mad I wasted so much time on him."

His brows raise, but I'm not sure if it's because of what I said or the chair he's currently running his hand over.

"Are you sure you have time?" I ask.

He lays aside the sandpaper and takes off the apron he's wearing. It's made of thick mustard-colored canvas, lest you're picturing anything frilly. "Yep. I have all the time in the world."

"Thanks, Evan. You're probably counting the days until I'm out of your hair."

His head shakes slowly. "Not even close."

We go into the house. "Let me just grab my wallet and we can go."

I stand in front of him so he can't leave yet. "Do you mind if we take your car?"

His brow creases. "No, why?"

"I had to park in the oversized car section and it's like ten miles away from the transportation hub."

"Ten miles?" He twists his head to the side and gives me a look that says he isn't buying what I'm selling.

I put my hands on my hips. "At least ten miles."

He chuckles. "Gotcha. I'll grab my keys too."



EVAN

WE'RE SITTING on a bench eating our Mickey Mouse head chocolate-covered ice cream bars. Shay pulls off a sheet of chocolate and sucks on it. Is it creepy to say I envy that chocolate? Probably, so I'll just keep it to myself.

"Thanks again for coming with me. This is much more fun than I was having this morning."

I hastily swallow and grin. "My pleasure, Miss Taylor."

She laughs and runs her tongue over her teeth. "You still have some chocolate there."

I smile overly wide and exaggeratedly. Then run my tongue over my teeth. I mean it as a joke, but when the tip of her tongue peeks out between her lips and she subconsciously mimics my actions, a cold sweat covers my forehead.

"There?" I choke out. "Is that where it was?"

She lifts her hand and points, even though I can't see what she's pointing

at.

I pull her sunglasses down off the top of her head and use them as a mirror. Closing my lips, I move my tongue around, trying to melt the chocolate between my teeth. I smile widely at her again. “Better?”

She swallows and stares at me.

My mouth snaps shut. Crap, is it still there?

Slowly her head nods. “Yep, back to your normal pearly whites.”

We stare out into the crowd of people. One of the many Disney sweepers walks past us and sweeps up something I don’t even see. I think they must have twenty-ten vision or something because they seem to spot way more trash than I do.

Shay bites off one of Mickey’s ears and points the rest of her ice cream at the sweeper. “How about we play a game?”

I raise one brow. I’m a veteran of Shay’s ‘games’ and I haven’t come out unscathed. “A game? Is it a game with winners and losers? Because I’m already in the hole.”

She grins. “I know and I still haven’t eaten any brownies.” She shoulder bumps me. “This is a no-winner game. It’s just something fun to do.”

I look at her suspiciously but nod. “Okay. What’s the game?”

“It’s the re-name game.”

“How do you play the re-name game?”

“Easy. When you see someone with a name tag, you come up with a name that fits the person better.”

My brow furrows. “Give me an example,” I say.

She tips her head toward sweeper guy. I can just make out his name tag when he leans over to sweep up something under the bench next to us. His tag says Graham.

She turns to me. “I would totally change his name to Leonard. Not Leo, not even Nard. Leonard. He’s a full-name guy.”

“Leonard?” I study the kid who can’t be much older than eighteen. “Sorry. I have to disagree with you.”

She leans forward and rests her elbows on her knee. “Oh? And what do you think he should be named?”

I sit still, my ice cream dripping down my hand.

Shay reaches over and uses a napkin to wipe it up. “Howard,” I say. “I will allow Howie, but only if he’s drunk.”

She laughs and for a moment I forget what we’re doing. How did Nathan

ditch that? Like, I think I might dream about it from now on.

“He drinks?” She asks. “That seems like a bit of a supposition.”

I shrug. “It’s your game, not mine. I’m just playing along.”

She narrows her eyes at Leonard/Howard (he isn’t drunk as far as I can tell) and nods. “I’ll concede. Howard it is.”

I nod, cockily. Maybe I’ve finally found my game.

We throw our sticks in a nearby garbage can and start walking. “We have twenty minutes until our next Lightning Lane Pass. Do you want to try something else or just walk around?” She asks as she looks at the Disney app on her phone.

“I don’t know that we can get on anything and ride it before the twenty minutes are up.”

We turn toward the other side of the park where our next ride is located, and she looks up. “We still have a bunch of things to check off the Disney World Bucket List I printed off Pinterest. We haven’t taken our picture in front of the giant tree yet.” She glances down the street. “It’s right there in the Town Square. Should we hurry and do that? Then we can check off another item.” She says in a sing-song voice.

“Do we have to do all of them?” I sound like a petulant child, but I really don’t want to do ‘Olaf’s Holiday Scavenger Hunt.’

“No. I just thought it might be a fun guide.” She glances up at me and smiles coyly. If she looks at me like that for very long, I think we’re doing everything on that list. Including watching ‘A Frozen Sing-Along.’

“When I pinned it I wasn’t anticipating coming with a season pass holder who probably knows everything there is to know about Disney World.”

“I don’t know everything,” I look smugly at her. “Just almost everything.”

“Then where do you want to go?” She turns off her phone screen and does a little circle with her arms held out at her side. “The whole park is at your disposal.”

I glance down Main Street. If she wants a picture in front of the giant tree, why not? Maybe she’ll even give me a copy of it. I haven’t taken many pictures of us together because before now it felt weird. I mean, she’s Nathan’s fiancée. *Ex-fiancée*, but still. In my head, I’ve imagined several scenarios where I accidentally send him a picture of us together and then he shows up and everything goes to Hell in a handbasket. But I’m feeling reckless suddenly. “If you want to get a picture at the tree, I’m good with

that. It should take just the right amount of time.”

We stop just before the tree, waiting in the small line. I nudge Shay and jerk my head toward the girl taking the ‘professional’ pictures. “Marianne,” I whisper.

Her eyes drop to her nametag. She’s quiet for a minute, but then she snaps her fingers. “You’re close. But I think she’s more of a Miranda.”

I squint. I’ll be. She’s right. “Yep. Miranda it is.”

It only takes a few minutes until it’s our turn. We position ourselves on the tape mark on the ground and scoot close together. At that moment, Goofy sidles up next to me and puts his arm around me. I flinch but then relax and laugh. “Hey, Goofy, Merry Christmas.”

Goofy laughs and returns the greeting. Miranda-Rachel takes our picture and we’re about to walk away when someone standing in line yells out, “Hey, there’s mistletoe. Kiss her.”

We both slowly look up to see Goofy holding a sprig of mistletoe above our heads. And I thought he was such a mild-mannered character.

Everyone in line starts chanting. “Kiss her, kiss her, kiss her,” with no apparent care that we’re making it so they have to wait longer in the line.

There’s indecision in her eyes as she bites her cheek. “Listen to them. I think they might riot if we don’t do it.” She takes a step closer.

I want nothing more than to have a do-over of our last mistletoe kiss. Don’t get me wrong, I think it was amaze-balls. But I’m not sure it rocked Shay’s world like it did mine. I’m sure Shay must have felt like she was kissing her cousin or something. It was so fast and uncertain. I’ve never enjoyed, yet been so embarrassed by, a kiss in all my life.

But I also don’t want to take advantage of her. “If you don’t want to, I’ll totally fight our way out.”

She smiles and I can’t help thinking what an idiot Nathan is. “Ah, my own knight in shining armor.”

I puff out my chest in an act of mock heroics.

She looks down at her hands. “I’m fine with whatever. So if it makes you uncomfortable...”

I scoff. “I’m not uncomfortable. I just don’t want *you* to be uncomfortable or think that I’m taking advantage of the situation.” I take a step closer and we’re now close enough that if either of us leans in a fraction, our lips will meet up close and personal.

“Garsh,” Goofy says. “If you don’t kiss her, I just might.”

Shay looks at Goofy like she might take him to the ground if he makes a move. But then she turns back to me and there's a look in her eyes. It makes my heart skip a beat. *Don't overthink this, Evan.* I mean, it's just a mistletoe kiss.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

SHAY

My hands are shaking with anticipation. *Come on, please, just kiss me.* I don't know whether it's because everyone is chanting or because I don't think I can take a second rejection in less than a week. Or maybe I just really want to know if our other mistletoe kiss was just a fluke and really was not as life-altering as I've made it out to be. But whatever the reason, when he leans even the tiniest bit forward, I jump on it. Or maybe I jump on him? Who can be sure at a time like this? I just know our lips make contact.

The chanting changes to cheers and whooping, but I only hear it for a moment before the sound of blood rushing to my ears drowns it out. All I hear is the sound of my heartbeat hammering in my chest as his lips cover mine.

My hands slide around his neck and my fingers splay through his hair. Oh my heck, it is just as silky as it looks.

He hugs me tighter to him, and now I can feel his heartbeat thudding in tandem with my own. Did I just tug at his lip? I did something, because he deepens the kiss, and it's all I can do not to jump into his arms and wrap my legs around him. I just want to be closer to him.

A loud cheer goes up and my brain finally registers where we are. I pull back.

Evan must have similar thoughts because he steps back as I run trembling fingers over my lips. Did I seriously just make out with him in the Town Square of Disney? Oh, my mother would be so horrified right now. I can already hear Maggie screaming when she hears about it. *If* she hears about it.

I look down at my toes, my cheeks blazing hot. I don't regret what I've done, just where I did it.

Evan seems to be looking at anything but me or the crowd of people. I totally understand what he's feeling. The group of people—much larger than when we started kissing—standing in front of us have to see my feelings written all over my face. They must know what I'm thinking—how much I want to keep kissing him. How much I want him to hold me and keep me close. This is so bizarre because we hardly know each other. And yet, I kind

of feel like I know him better than I knew Nathan.

“Garsh,” Goofy says. “This is a family park.”

Evan smirks at him and without thinking, I turn toward the crowd and curtsy. I curtsied. What. In. The. Heck? I don’t know why I felt compelled to do it, but I did. And I can’t take it back now.

I’m pretty sure Goofy’s seen worse. I mean, I have, and I’ve only been here for five hours. But no matter what Goofy is inferring, the kiss was amazing. And not at all sleazy. Now, if I *had* thrown my legs around Evan, Goofy might have a point, but I didn’t, so the dog needs to step off.

The crowd is clapping like we’re Taylor Swift or something. I’m not sure what to do, so I’m glad when Evan takes my hand and pulls me toward the exit hole in the rope line maze. My heart is still beating erratically, and I can’t quite seem to get my breathing into a normal rhythm.

“Evan? Is that you?”

We stop in our tracks and Evan looks over his shoulder. “Mr. Jenkins?” His voice says *‘good to see you,’* but his expression says *‘son of a biscuit.’*

“Hey, I thought that was you.” Mr. Jenkins is an older man, probably in his late sixties. He glances at me, and his brows hitch up ever so much.

Evan nods. “Yep, it’s me. What are you doing here?”

Mr. Jenkins motions to the store on the corner. “The family is down for the holidays and the grandkids wanted to come to the parks.”

Evan nods, but our hands bounce lightly against his thigh. “Sounds like a fun time.”

Mr. Jenkins’ gaze flicks over to me again. “I don’t think we’ve met, but I’ve seen you coming in and out of Evan’s house the last few mornings.”

I smile. Holy Hannah, that sentence would put my mother in her grave, I’m certain of it.

Evan tips his head to the side. “Shay, this is my neighbor across the street.” His smile is completely fake. “Mr. Jenkins, this is my friend, Shay Taylor.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet a ‘friend’ of Evan’s,” he winks at me, and Evan’s hand tightens around mine. Mr. Jenkins looks back at Evan with amused eyes. “I thought it curious you didn’t go home for Christmas this year. But now it makes sense.”

Evan glances at his watch. “Oh, it’s almost time for our Lightning Lane pass. We better get going.” He flicks his chin up in a sort of dismissal. “I hope your family has a great time visiting.”

Mr. Jenkins waves. “See you two around.”

“I’m sure he will...out the front window,” Evan grumbles. “His gossiping is only superseded by his wife’s. The entire complex will know about this before the evening’s out. Heck, it will probably be in the community newsletter.”

I sigh. I’ve made a mess for him to clean up once I leave. That’s not why I came to Florida.

I’m practically jogging trying to keep up with Evan’s pace. I don’t want to give him a reason to drop my hand. I press my warm, tingling lips together. Nathan had never done THAT to them before. In fact, I can’t say that I ever felt remotely like this after kissing Nathan. Not even the first time. My heart is still racing and my whole body is shaky. I’m sweating and chilling at the same time.

But I want to experience it again because I don’t remember feeling this alive in a long time. How had I not realized how emotionless my relationship with Nathan was? I mean, he kissed me, but it was nothing like Evan. It’s embarrassing to admit, but it had been little more than a peck in recent months. How had I not noticed? Or had I just overlooked it for the sake of being married?

“I’m really sorry about that.” Evan huffs out. “I should never have allowed it to go that far.”

I look at Evan as it registers what he said. “You’re sorry? For what?”

He’s frowning—complete with a furrowed brow. Not really the look I’m hoping to get so soon after receiving or giving (who’s keeping track?) perhaps the best kiss of my life. But apparently, that’s only my opinion, because he looks almost sick.

I don’t really know what to say. But it turns out I don’t need to say anything. “For all that back there.”

I want to curl up in a ball and throw Big Green over the top of me and not emerge until spring. Or maybe summer. Or maybe just after Evan returns to New Hampshire.

Dang, Maggie, and Charolotte Lucas, and their erroneous advice. *Go for the rebound*, echoes in my head. Why do I keep listening to her?

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

EVAN

Things weren't as awkward as I thought they'd be after I kissed Shay at Magic Kingdom the other day. Apart from the few minutes afterward, which was only awkward because of nosy Mr. Jenkins, things have been comfortable. We haven't kissed again, but it's like we've been friends forever. Last night Shay even came out and worked on her computer while I was watching a college bowl game.

We've spent the last two days at the other parks, thinking up new names for all the employees. I don't think I'll ever look at a name badge the same way.

I've had more fun than I've had in years. And I can't deny that I like her. Not in a just-one-of-the-guys kind of way. But an I-can't-stop-thinking-about-her kind of way. I like-like her. And yes, I realize I'm sounding like an eighth-grade girl.

I guess if I'm speaking like a man, I'll admit that I'm might be falling in love with her.

I know I should never have let this happen. She was engaged to a good friend of mine. And even though I've come to realize that Nathan is a complete idiot and tool, it still isn't cool to be in this situation. But as much as I try, I can't figure out how I could have stopped it—shy of forcing her to stay at the drug-infested motel in the bad part of town.

To make matters worse, Nathan tried calling me yesterday. I was so freaked out that I rejected the call after two rings. So he probably knows I'm avoiding his calls. But I know I would have sounded like a numbnuts if I'd tried to talk to him while I'm this confused about Shay. I sigh. I'm not confused about how I feel about her. I'm just confused about what to do about it.

Nathan is an obvious moron where women are concerned, but he's really smart in the rest of his life. He'll know something is off and then the questions will start. Questions that I don't have the answers to. I'm not a great liar, and I'm terrible at making up excuses on the fly.

Trust me, it's just better to ignore his calls.

"Are you ready to go?" Shay asks with a bag thrown over her shoulder

and a big floppy hat on her head.

I pat the pockets of my board shorts. “Yep.” I point to her hat. “That should probably go in the trunk. I’m not sure if I’ll be able to see past it when I’m driving.” I playfully swat at the brim.

She sighs dramatically. “Fine. We can put it in the trunk.”

“Or you can just leave it home,” I say, like this is actually our home and not just a temporary living arrangement that she’ll be leaving on January 1st. It’s one of the many reasons that falling for her is a terrible idea. But I just don’t seem to listen to the extensive list of reasons against it. Especially not when she looks at me like she is now. “Cocoa Beach is often windy. That thing is just asking to be blown all the way to the Keys.” It’s truly a terrible hat and completely blocks her face from my view. Nothing good can come from it.

She slips into her room and sets it on her bed. “I bought it for nothing.” She pushes her lips out.

I shake my head at her. “You should have asked the expert. I would have told you it was a waste of money.”

We head out to the car, and I open the door for her. We’ve fallen into a good routine. I drive wherever we go, and she keeps up a lively conversation. I close my eyes, knowing this is all just a fantasy.

I take a deep breath, just as I pull my door open and settle into the driver’s seat. “Okay. Are you ready to get sand in places you never knew you had?”

She laughs. “Wow, you should apply to be the spokesperson for the Florida Tourism Bureau. With that kind of sales pitch, who wouldn’t want to visit?”

I tsk. “Just trying to set expectations,” I say and glance at her out of the corner of my eye. She looks amazing in her sun dress. But then, she looks great in everything I’ve seen her in. I’m just as drawn to her in her pajamas or leggings with little or no make-up as I am to her in this sundress, fully made up.

I just want to be with her. And that’s why I thank my lucky stars that she didn’t check into the drug-infested motel in the rough part of town after The Kiss. That’s what I call it because there’s no way any other kiss can measure up to it. It’s why I haven’t tried to kiss her again. It can only be disappointing, right? Any normal person would have decided that was a sign to keep kissing her and maybe take the relationship further. But not this guy.

I'm holding firm, even though I have a running marquee in my head that asks the same question over and over. *What if the next one is even better?* I need to pull the plug on that marquee because it's nearly driving me insane. And it doesn't help that I think my lips are actually going through withdrawal. Can you be addicted to a person's kiss after only one and a half kisses? I'm pretty sure you can. And I think I am.

"So when exactly do you head back to Utah?" I try for a casual tone, but I don't think I pull it off. It sounds more high-pitched and squeaky. Seriously, where is this inner middle-school girl coming from?

"My flight is scheduled for New Year's Day. I think it's at, like, noon."

"New Year's Day? Why not wait until the next day?" I grip the steering wheel knowing the answer before she says it.

"Nathan didn't want to have to take off any more work than possible."

"I bet you're excited to get back." Did that sound as pathetic as it feels? Like I'm pandering for her to say she wants to stay longer or that she'll miss me. I'm pathetic.

She shrugs. "I wouldn't say that."

Okay. So maybe sometimes being pathetic pays off. "When do you have to get back to work? I'm guessing you're one of the favorite teachers at the school."

She looks over at me with a creased brow. "What? I'm not a teacher."

"But I thought you said you worked with middle graders."

She grins. "Oh, yeah. I did say that." She flicks up her brows. "Wow, a man that actually listens. How novel."

I drop one of my hands and rest my wrist on the gear shift. "So if you don't teach, what, are you an aide or something?"

She shakes her head. "No, although I'm sure my mom would rather it. 'It would be a steady income, Shay. And provide benefits like insurance and retirement.'" She changes her tone of voice, so I'm assuming she's impersonating her mom.

She sighs. "No, I write middle-grade books. So I go on quite a few school book tours where I talk to the kids about reading and writing. I try to get them excited about books."

"That's one of the coolest things I've ever heard. It's like you're a celebrity."

She snorts out a laugh. "My nephews think I am because they can Google me and prove to their friends that they know me. But I'd hardly call that a

celebrity. Everyone can be Googled. You can probably be Googled.” She flicks her hand at me. I smile because she’s right. Pretty much everyone can be searched on the internet. But she obviously hasn’t looked for me or else she would know that several hits would come up. And none of them are my Facebook page or my home address. Those are all private and unlisted.

She sighs. “There are some kids who think I’m the funniest person on earth. And that’s pretty cool.”

I glance over at her. “I bet.” I tap my thumb on the gearshift. “So do you have to live close to your publisher?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. I can live anywhere, as long as I have my computer.”

My heart hitches up into my throat. Do I dare ask? “So does that mean you can stay a little longer?”

Her bottom lip pulls in between her teeth. “Don’t you have to get back to work? I thought the boss had to be there to make sure no one started an ugly sweater contest.”

I laugh. I guess I’m not the only one who listens. “I guess I should have said I *was* the boss. I actually sold my company about a year ago. And due to a non-compete agreement, I get to be on an extended vacation for the next three years.”

She shifts in her seat. “Really? No working for three years?”

I nod. “It’s why I took up furniture making. Just sitting around doing nothing was making me crazy.”

“So you don’t have any reason to go back to New Hampshire?” She sits back. “Although, you probably have to stay here until your manager comes off paternity leave, right?”

“Yeah, it ends on New Year’s. But I’d planned to spend the winter down here anyway.” Those words hang in the air as we both stare out the front window. There’s an unspoken conversation going on, but I feel like I’m missing every other word.

“Well, we’ll see how beach day goes. Maybe if you don’t do anything overtly manly, like splash me or try to pull me into the water, we can see about extending our trips together.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I try to keep my tone level so I don’t frighten her with my over-excitement.

I glance out my side window. What am I thinking? Her staying longer only postpones the inevitable. It doesn’t solve any of the problems on my list.

At least not the biggest one. If anything, it only adds new problems. Like, how do I keep from falling more in love with her than I already am?

I point out the window. “Look at the cruise ships.” Several large boats sit at the dock, one of them with very noticeable mouse ears.

“Oh my heck, they look huge from here.” She cranes her neck to see them as we drive past.

“We’re getting close.” We drive a little bit longer before I pull up into a complex of condos. I stop in front of one. Pulling the garage door opener out of the center console I press the button. The garage door opens and I pull the car in.

“You have a place here too?”

I shrug. “I needed to invest some of the money after the sale of my business for tax reasons. Rental properties seemed the best place to put it.”

“And this one isn’t rented? I would think this is high season.”

“Yeah, it is. But I always keep one available in case I want to come down. Or if I have friends or family that need a place to stay.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “So just how many rental properties do you own?” Her face reddens. “Sorry. That’s totally rude of me to ask.”

I shake my head. “Nah, it’s not. I own ten here at Cocoa Beach and ten in Orlando. Then I have four at Key West and four in Miami.”

Her mouth hangs open so far I can see that little dangly thing at the back of her throat. “You own twenty-eight rental properties?”

I just nod because it already feels kind of braggy. Like I’m thinking I’m all that or something.

I push open my car door and hurry around to her side. Once she’s out, I lead her into the house. “I thought this would be the best place because this resort has a private beach. It’ll be crowded but not like the public beach down the road.” We walk up the steps and come out in the kitchen area. The full wall slider gives a perfect view of the beach and water.

Shay sucks in a breath, and I have to admit, I’m a little proud. Not that I have anything to do with the view, but that she admires it so much. I’m happy I’m able to give her this. Okay, I’m sounding braggy again.

“We can come back here for lunch.”

“This is amazing.” She breathes out as she drops her bag on the couch and moves over to the windows. “Why did you stay in Orlando when you could have been here?”

“John is on paternity, remember?” Why do I not tell her about Nathan?

This is the perfect lead-in. But that revelation will ruin the beach day. And her staying longer is contingent on the success of beach day. I'll confess the next time it comes up. Because, unfortunately, there always seems to be a next time.

Besides, I don't like thinking about what would have happened if I had been here instead of Orlando. "And my house would have floated away."

She just nods, obviously content to stare out at the water. And I'm content to stare at her. It's a win-win.

She finally pulls her gaze away and looks at me. "Evan Barrington, you're a lucky man."

"I know." I smile at her. "It's weird how things work out, right? How different would our holidays have been if I'd been here." I frown. "Or if you'd picked a different rental."

She grins "Right? It's ironic because Nathan's the one who found your rental. And then he didn't even come." She grunts out a laugh.

"Yeah, that's ironic." I glance away, guilt worming around in my stomach. "Did he say why he picked it?"

She shrugged. "He just said it was a great location and the owner," she nudges me, "had a great rating."

Oh, crap. How great is that rating going to be if Shay ever finds out that Nathan and I were friends? Are friends. I mean, I may be avoiding his calls and think he's a complete idiot. But other than that, and falling for his ex, we're totally good.

She motions to the beach. "So, should we head down?"

I open the slider, and we walk down the stairs to the sand below. As I predicted, the wind whips at her hair and dress. We lay out our towels on the beach chairs set out by the resort. I slip off my shirt and toss it on the sand under my chair, reclining back. It's a little chilly for a beach day, but we're not the only people to brave the cold. (It's only seventy-two degrees, which in Florida degrees is like fifty.)

Shay pulls her dress over her head and I try not to watch. But I can't help it as my eyes wander over once or twice. I smile as I see that she's wearing a two-piece swimsuit, but it's not a bikini. I think they call it a tankini or something like that. Her top covers all her torso and most of her shoulders. I get an odd thrill when I think about how much Nathan would have hated it.

I like it more than fine. But I'm pretty sure it has nothing to do with the swimsuit.

She catches me watching her and her face pinks, but probably not as much as mine does at being caught. “Nice suit,” I say.

She looks down the front of her. “Thanks. Nathan hates this suit.”

I smile that I pegged him so accurately.

She lifts her chin. “But he doesn’t have any say in that anymore. I can wear what I want to wear.”

I nod. “Good for you.” I like her spunk, even if it’s directed at Nathan.

She lays down on the recliner. Her exposed skin is covered with goosebumps.

“Do you want to go into the house? We can light the fire and watch the waves. Or watch a movie.”

Her shoulders drop. “But I made you drive all this way. I feel bad leaving the beach after like four minutes.”

“We won’t leave yet. If it warms up, we can come back out.” It won’t warm back up. But she doesn’t need to know that.

“Can we walk out into the water so I can at least say I swam in the Atlantic Ocean?”

“Of course.” I stand up and hold out my hand to help her up. Yeah, that’s the only reason I did it. Not so I can touch her without it being creepy. Although, as I think about it in my head, it sounds creepy anyway.

She stands up but doesn’t release my hand immediately, which I’m completely fine with. I can be her hand-holding buddy or her kissing buddy. Whatever she needs. I’m a giver.

She takes a breath. “How cold is the water?”

“It probably won’t feel as cold as it does when it’s really hot.”

She glances over at me and scowls. “That didn’t really answer my question.”

“Cold-ish.” I shrug. “I don’t know what you consider cold.”

We walk side by side into the water. My hand is itching to take hers again, but I resist.

A wave comes in and covers our toes. She shrieks like a little kid but then looks at me abashedly. “Oh, it’s not as cold as I thought. But it isn’t really warm by any stretch of the imagination.”

She turns to smile at me and a bigger wave comes in, throwing her off balance. She grabs onto me, but only after she’s started to fall and there’s nothing I can do but fall with her. *Please, just don’t let me fall on*—I close my eyes as I land on top of her. For a split second, I stare at her lips. I could

get my lip fix in nanoseconds if I just dropped my head.

She splutters and coughs as the wave recedes. And then she starts to shiver. Like body-wracking shakes.

I quickly roll off her and grab her hand, pulling her to her feet. She comes up, grabbing onto my biceps to keep her balance. “Sorry, I pulled you down with me.” She stutters.

I bat it away. “You can pull me down anytime.”

She gives another whole-body shiver, and I reluctantly pull back even though I want to try using my body heat to warm her up. That’s a thing, right? “Let’s get you into the house and warmed up.”

She runs up the beach, a trail of drips following behind. Grabbing her towel, she wraps it around her.

“There’s a Walmart about fifteen minutes away. Do you want me to run and grab you some clothes to change into?”

She grins at me. “No.” Her teeth are chattering. “I came prepared. I have yoga pants in my bag.”

We walk to the condo and she stops at the bottom of the stairs. She jerks to a halt.

“What’s wrong?” I look over my shoulder. “Did we forget something?”

“No, it’s the stairs.”

I look and notice the stairs are missing the back risers. So maybe Nathan hadn’t been wrong about everything. “What about them?” It’s not like I can acknowledge her fear that I’m not supposed to know anything about.

“They don’t have backs on them.”

“Yeah, so what?”

She swallows and I can see her pulse throbbing in her neck in between convulsive shivers. Whatever Nathan’s belief, this is a real fear. She isn’t just trying for attention.

“I get a little freaked out by these kinds of stairs.” She chews on her lip like it will give her courage.

“Why?” Maybe if I know the reason, I can understand it better.

“I don’t really know. Maybe it’s that they seem less stable. I mean, they’re literally half a stair. Or maybe it’s that I’m afraid of falling through the hole. They just freak me out.”

I laugh. “But that isn’t what provides the stability. It’s the frame that does that.” I look her over. There’s no way I’m saying she’s too big to fit through the back. I don’t have a death wish. “And I’m pretty sure you won’t fall

through.”

She nods. “Logically, I know that’s true. But fears are rarely logical.”

I walk to the landing and lean against the railing. “But you walked down them fine.”

“I was watching the ocean and didn’t notice them on the way down.” She stares at me with big eyes. “Again, NOT LOGICAL.”

I shake my head. “Alright, you leave me with no choice.”

“No choice for what?”

I quickly snatch her up and throw her over my shoulder. Before she can do much more than scream, I race up the steps and deposit her on the deck above.

She stares at me. “What the crap was that?” Her eyes are nearly the size of saucers.

I wink at her. “I’ll always rescue you from riserless stairs, m’lady.”

“I don’t need to be rescued,” she murmurs quietly and looks at her feet. Oh no, I think she might cry. She hasn’t done that since the day I met her. But I was just trying to help.

I pinch her chin between my thumb and forefinger, tipping her head back so she can look into my eyes. “Shay, we all need rescuing sometimes. Just promise me you’ll be here when it’s my turn.”

She smiles up at me and nods.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Shay emerges from the bathroom after a hot shower. I have a pot of hot water on the stove and the fireplace turned on.

I’m watching a rerun of the curling Olympic trials. It’s oddly hypnotic.

“What are you watching?” She asks as she sits down next to me.

“Curling.”

“It’s kind of addicting to watch, isn’t it?” She scoots a little closer to me, and I can smell the shampoo that I keep in the shower for guests. “We have an Olympic training facility in Utah. It’s fun to go watch the different teams train.”

“You go there a lot?”

She shakes her head. “No. We went skating for a group activity once. I was terrible at it, so I mostly watched the speed skaters and the curling teams

practice.”

She stretches out with her feet propped up on the coffee table and puts her hands to her side, shifting slightly closer to me. But I notice she doesn't pull her hands back up into her lap.

My gaze keeps flicking down to her hand resting next to my thigh. Do I dare take it? I can't believe I'm having this debate. I've held her hand before. For the love of Pete, I've kissed her...one and a half times (I don't consider the first one a full kiss). But when I kissed her, I didn't realize I loved her. Somehow that makes a difference.

Taking the coward's way out, I let my hand fall to the cushion between us, resting it just millimeters away from hers. If she's open to me holding her hand, she'll make the move, right? It's probably better this way anyway. Then I don't have to feel like I'm always the one making the moves.

We sit quietly watching the curling competition on TV. Although, don't ask me who's in the lead or even what's happening because my sole focus is on the hands at my side.

Shay takes in a deep breath, and her hand shifts ever so slightly. Our pinkies are touching. A part of me wants to shout it out loud. *Our pinkies are touching! Our pinkies are touching!*

Is that her move? Should I reach out and take her hand? Holy Hannah, why am I so bad at this? It's like I'm on my very first date back in high school all over again. What happened to smooth Evan where the ladies are concerned?

In a surge of bravery or stupidity—the jury's still out—I move my pinkie over, lopping it around hers. If she pulls back, I'll pretend it was an accident. But if she doesn't? Well, I haven't planned that far ahead yet.

Shay smiles ever so slightly, and I turn to make my excuses, when she moves her hand, slipping it beneath mine and interlocking our fingers.

I fist my other hand at my side and give it a victory shake. Yes. We're holding hands. Again.

Shay doesn't look at me but continues to stare intently at the screen. And then she shifts and rests her head on my shoulder. I think the sandwich I ate might have been full of caterpillars and they have all just turned into butterflies in my stomach. I'm beyond pathetic. But as long as Shay is next to me, I don't really care.

I turn my gaze to the TV, but I pull our hands up and set them on my thigh. I don't want to hide our hand-holding down on the cushions between

us. I want it out in the open, even if it's only the two of us here.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

SHAY

So, we're holding hands now.

I send the text to Maggie.

After our beach day, it's become our thing. We still haven't kissed again. But I'm not going to read too much into that.

Maggie sends a gif of a guy screaming and waving his hands around his face.

Maggie

You're the rebound champ!

It doesn't feel like a compliment. I don't want to put a label on what we have because I really have no idea what the label should be. But I don't want to think of Evan as a rebound guy. However, I can't say this is anything more. I mean, how can it be? I just got out of a two-year relationship. Do I even know who I am anymore? And we have only known each other for six days. I'm not the kind of girl who just goes from one guy to the next, never allowing herself any time to just be herself. Or am I? That thought scares me more than it probably should.

I don't want a rebound.

While I've come to realize Nathan wasn't right for me, it hasn't changed what I wanted with him. No one knows this, but on the night Nathan proposed, I had planned to break up with him. Things were going nowhere, and I knew I needed to end it. But then he proposed, and it seemed like we were on the right track. I was going to get a husband that loved me and a family and a home.

It obviously didn't work out with Nathan. But I'm not going to get that with a rebound, either.

Maggie

Have I led you astray yet?

The jury's still out.

Maggie

Haha. Why aren't you happier? This is the first step in getting over Nathan.

But I think I'm already over him.

Maggie

That's what I was trying to tell you. Rebound for the win!

She isn't listening to me. Or reading me. But there's no point arguing with her when she's like this. Especially over text.

You're probably right. I've got to go. Universal today!

I send party hat emojis. I'm excited to go. Especially because I'll be hanging out with Evan. But there's a small, tight knot in my stomach. The kind that's so tight that even with long pointy fingernails, you can't seem to work it loose. I just need to put all this imagined drama in a drawer and slam it shut. Maybe even lock it for good measure.

Maggie

Have a blast and drink a Butterbeer for me.



Maggie

I bet the Hogsmeade Butterbeer is better than the Pinterest knockoff version.



I walk down the stairs and meet Evan in the entryway.

“Hey, you ready to go? I've already got my Butterbeer fix going.” Evan pats his stomach. “I haven't had one in months.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Will you think less of me if I tell you I don't like it?”

“What?” He looks appalled. “How can you not like Butterbeer and call yourself a Potterhead?”

I shrug. “I don't know. I just don't.”

“Do you trust me?” He narrows his eyes at me.

I narrow my eyes back at him. “I don't know. I have yet to see those

brownies from my big sweater win.”

“Hey,” he holds his hands up in front of him. “I offered to make them on Christmas but you were too full and then fell asleep. Remember? I think it should count.”

I give him a shoulder bump. “Okay. You’re right. I guess I trust you. Why?”

He shakes a finger in front of my face. “Oh no, you don’t. It’s a surprise.”

“Well, then I suppose we should bust this joint.” I grab my fanny pack with my lip balm, hand sanitizer, and face sunscreen. Then sling my phone case over my head so it can hang down messenger style across my chest.

He grabs his wallet and car keys off the front table, and we head out the door.

As we drive through the Orlando traffic, I glance over at him. He’s smiling out the front windshield.

“Evan, I’m sorry you’ve had to be my holiday buddy. I’m sure you’ve had to cancel a bunch of plans with your friends just so you can humor me.”

He glances over. “Actually,” he cringes. “I had no plans. I’m not normally down here for the holidays, so I hadn’t reached out to anyone. And when I finally did try a few people, they were already busy.” He flicks wide eyes at me. “So I think what I’m saying is you saved me from being a complete loser.”

I have a hard time believing this. Evan is a blast to hang out with.

The parking at Universal Studios is just as busy and organized as Disney World was. But even still, it takes us nearly fifteen minutes to park the car. Then there’s the forty-mile hike from the parking lot to the front gate, and I’m not even exaggerating. At least not very much.

We stand just inside the entrance and Evan holds his hands out and up, like he’s some evangelist preacher. “I give you Universal Studios. What do you desire to do first, my lady?”

I look at him like he has lost his mind. “Are we using our formal voices?”

“I thought perhaps I might choose our game today?” He grins like a little boy.

I lift my brows. “Oh, please, do explain.” This is a new development. No one ever plays my games with me, let alone makes one up for us to play. It makes my little heart go pitter-patter.

“What if we only speak in accents for the whole day?” He looks as if this is the best idea he’s ever had.

“But I don’t speak in any accent well enough to sound convincing.”

“Neither do I, Miss Taylor. But that’s part of the fun, is it not?” he says in a terrible British accent.

I can’t help but laugh. “People will think we’re complete idiots.”

“Indeed,” he lifts his shoulders. “And the problem with that is?”

I blink at him like five times, my mouth hanging open like a doofus. I feel completely out of my element. I mean, I knew that we looked like dorks in our ugly sweaters, but an ugly Christmas sweater contest is actually a thing. But this feels very...I don’t know, juvenile? Or maybe just exposed.

I look at him and see the excitement and anticipation in his eyes. He’s been such a good sport to do all the lame things I’ve asked him to do. Why am I even hesitating?

“All right, guv’na,” I say in the absolute worst accent ever. I do a little jump and heel kick like I’m the star of *Oliver* or *Billy Elliott* or something.

Tears fill his eyes as he laughs. “That was terrible.”

“Ey, now. You didn’t use your accent, mate.” If I’m going in, I’m going all in. All or nothing here, friends.

“Beggin’ your pardon, Ma’am.” He tips a non-existent cowboy hat and shifts to a Western accent of a non-descript location.

I motion ahead of us. “To ‘Ogsmede, then?”

“Righty-o,” he does a little jig that looks like it could be from *Mary Poppins* or something similar. So apparently choreography is part of this game too.

People are already staring at us and pulling their children closer to them until they get far past us.

He grabs my hand and tugs me down the sidewalk. I know I should feel completely idiotic, but I have to admit, it’s some of the most fun I’ve ever had. It’s not that we’re acting like complete idiots that’s fun as much as being with someone that’s okay to have fun and not be worried about what people think of us. It’s like we’re Phoebe on *Friends* when she’s running in the park. I don’t care if I look like a moron if I’m a moron with Evan.

We go on several rides in Hogsmeade before getting in line for the Hogwarts Express. Once we’re settled in our car, I turn to him. “So, if you sold your company, you must be pretty smart.”

He shrugs. “Pretty smart, pretty lucky. It’s not always easy to see where one ends and the other begins.”

I lightly smack him on the arm. “Whatever. You invested in rental

properties. That shows some degree of intelligence.”

He frowns. “Seeing as one of said properties is currently ripped down to the studs, I might not agree with you.”

“But when it’s finished, you’ll be able to charge more, I bet.”

He shrugs. “Maybe.”

“Did you go to school?”

He nods. “Yes. And I even graduated from high school.” He gives me a straight face.

“No college?” Not that I care, it just doesn’t fit with the picture I have of him in my head.

“Does it matter?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m just curious.”

He grins. “I did my undergrad work at Stanford and my master’s at M.I.T.”

“So what you’re saying is that you just barely graduated from high school?” My brows raise. That’s more what I had pictured as both schools exceed my expectations. “Stanford, huh? That’s where my ex-fiancé went.”

Evan stiffens slightly next to me. Maybe I need to stop mentioning Nathan. I’m sure Evan doesn’t like hearing about him. I know I don’t want to hear about any of his exes. Which feels completely not rebound-y. “Sorry, I won’t bring him up anymore.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not a big deal, really. And Stanford’s a great school. Your ex must have been smart. What did he major in?”

Now I’m the one who doesn’t want to talk about Nathan. “Business,” I say. “So M.I.T., isn’t that mainly like an engineering school?”

“They have great engineering programs, but they have other ones, too.” He switches to a German accent that mixes with a little Russian.

“What was your major at Stanford?”

“Computer systems.”

I have no idea what that entails, but it sounds impressive. “Cool,” I say in a very profound-sounding voice.

He grins. “You mean boring.”

I shake my head. “No. I’m sure it’s fascinating for you.” We’re pulling into the station at Diagon Alley. “What was your master’s in?”

He sighs. “Do you really want to know?”

“Of course. Why would I ask if I didn’t want to know?”

“Because you have to. You can’t really end the conversation at Stanford,

can you?”

I guffaw. “Um, I totes can. We’re at the station and there are plenty of things for me to change the subject to.”

“Okay. I did a double master’s in civil and environmental engineering and organizational processes.”

I stare at him. “I have no idea what any of that means, but I’m duly impressed.” I lightly slug him in the arm as we step out onto Platform 9 3/4. “See, you are a smarty pants. A super smarty pants, even.”

He shrugs it off and takes my hand, possibly as much to keep me from slugging him as from a desire to hold it.

Again, I’m struck by how different he is from Nathan. I mean, I don’t get the idea that Evan is embarrassed by his education. But it doesn’t define him. It doesn’t make him who he is. It was a means to an end to get him where he is now.

Within moments of our introduction, Nathan had worked his Stanford and then Yale education into the conversation. He wore his education as a badge of superiority. That meant that in an argument, disagreement, or even a simple debate, he automatically won by virtue of *his better education*. Even if he wasn’t, in fact, right.

“Did you go to college?” he asks, and I wonder if he really wants to know or if he just wants the attention off himself.

“Yeah, I went to a local university.”

He perks up as we walk toward the center of Diagon Alley. “What did you major in?”

“I did a double major,” a loud roar and stinging hot air interrupts me and I let out a yelp. “What in holy heck is that?” I forget my accent. But Evan doesn’t call me out.

He just laughs and points up at the dragon perched atop the Gringotts Bank. “Sorry, I should’ve warned you.” He takes my hand and pulls me toward a shop across the street. “In here,” he opens the door for me and ushers me inside. There’s a serpentine-style line inside to get to the counter.

“Ice cream?” I ask.

He nods. “Special ice cream.” We take our place in line, and he keeps a hold of my hand. I can’t even put into words how much I love the feel of his hand. It’s soft but not too soft. It’s not dry but also not sweaty. And it’s the perfect size for my hand to fit comfortably inside. “So you double majored? Now who’s the smarty pants?”

“Excuse me,” a woman behind us asks. “Where are you from? I can’t quite place your accent.”

I bite my cheek to keep from laughing out loud as Evan looks a bit like a deer caught in headlights. He can’t seem to answer the question.

“A little town in Bavaria,” I say in a horrendous German accent.

“Oh?” her brow furrows and I’m worried she might actually be from Bavaria. What are the chances? Thankfully, she just smiles. “What brings you to America?”

I have no idea what makes me do it, but I snuggle up to Evan and smile. “We’re on our honeymoon, actually.” I mean, that’s true for me, so it’s only a half-lie. But this lady is already looking at us like she thinks we may be unstable. I really don’t need to burden her with my tale of jilt and misadventure.

Evan looks at me with amused eyes and I think he might not play along. But then he snakes his hand around my waist and rests it on my hip as he pulls me closer. “Yah,” he says. It’s the most German-sounding thing either of us has said. He presses a kiss to my temple. “It’s our turn to order, my little Strudel.”

My lips are twitching like crazy and when I look up at him, he’s a bit fuzzy due to the tears in my eyes.

“Congratulations,” the woman smiles warmly at us. “I wondered if you were newlyweds. I could tell the moment I saw you look at each other. You make an adorable couple.”

“Zank you,” Evan says sounding much more French than German. He turns to the lady behind the counter and holds up two fingers. “Deux Butterbeer cones, *s’il vous plaît*.”

I snort as I glance behind us at the woman’s furrowed brow. She’s apparently quite baffled. Maybe she’ll just think we’re trilingual?

The girl behind the counter ignores our terrible accents and just hands us our cones. “Gracias,” I say as Evan pays. Then we hurry out of the shop before anyone can ask us any more questions.

As the door closes behind me, I burst out laughing. “You totally switched to French in there.”

He’s laughing, too, in between licking his cone. “I know. I realized when I got to the counter I had no idea the German words for ‘two’ or ‘please.’”

We disappear around a corner, lest we bump into the ice cream lady as she leaves the shop.

I run my tongue around the cone, trying to catch it before it starts dripping. “Hey, this is really good,” I say and look up, only then noticing Evan watching my every move. I suck in a breath. Ice cream. Who knew it could be so alluring? Granted, it can lead to nothing because, hello, dairy breath.

“Didn’t I tell you to trust me?” he asks in a low voice.

“I shall never doubt you again,” I glance away. The look in his eyes makes me nervous because it mirrors the way I’m feeling. “I can’t believe tomorrow is supposed to be my last full day here.” If ever there was ice-cold water dumped on us, that’s it. It’s way worse than falling in the Atlantic.

“Yeah, it’s kind of a bummer.”

I look at him from the corner of my eye. “We had discussed extending our vacations?” It comes out as more of a question than a statement. I’m not sure if that conversation was serious.

“Do you want to extend our vacations?” he asks.

Does his tone say he wants me to extend or that he’s trying to be nice? “I’m open to the idea. What about you?”

He nods, again watching me as I lick around the cone. “I’m open to it.”

I run my tongue over my lips to erase any ice cream traces. “Okay, when we get back to the house tonight, I’ll look and see what my options are.” Did I just call it ‘the house’? Like we live there together as a couple or something?

I must be completely crazy. My mom’s going to think I am. Maggie’ll be on my side, but I’m not one hundred percent that’s a plus. But maybe Mags can help talk my mom off the ledge after I tell her.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

EVAN

New Year's Eve at Universal Studios in Orlando is nothing short of chaos. There are people everywhere. But tonight I don't really mind them. Shay is with me, and I have a firm grip on her hand so we don't get separated. Loud music blares all over the park, which makes it hard to carry on a conversation while we walk. Not to mention the sheer volume of the crowd.

But it's all worth it because not only do I have someone to kiss to usher in the new year, but that someone is Shay. We checked out flights, and she was able to rebook a flight for a week from now. We'll be spending our first day together moving our stuff into the unfinished, formerly flooded townhouse. The people who have rented it will be arriving the day after tomorrow and will now stay in my house. We'll have a busy day, but I can hardly wait.

We go on a few rides and then we head over to Diagon Alley before the Hogwarts Express shuts down for the day. Shay says she can't leave Florida without having at least one more Butterbeer ice cream. I was happy to oblige her.

"What are we going to do next week? I mean after we finish moving our stuff and cleaning the house?" I love the way she makes it sound like it's our place. And that makes me nervous on so many levels. I'm already seeing her as a permanent fixture in my life. And I don't seem to care that someone else is taking possession of my stuff...my house. That's crazy.

I shrug. "We can go back to Cocoa Beach for a few days. I also thought that maybe it'd be fun to visit Cape Canaveral. There's supposed to be a launch next week."

She wraps her free hand around my upper arm, and it makes me go all gooey inside. Man, I'm falling fast and hard. "Ooh, that does sound fun," she says.

"Is there anything else you want to do?" I ask. We've made our way back to Hogsmeade and it's starting to get darker and the lights on the rides are starting to blink on.

"I don't know. I hadn't really looked at much because I knew there wasn't time to do anything else."

I point to one of the many roller coasters. “Do you want to go on that? Then it should be time for our dinner reservation.”

She stares at it. “Is it wise to make yourself sick right before dinner?”

“I suppose it’s better than doing it right after.” I grin down at her.

She lifts a shoulder and swallows. “Okay. Bring it on.” She hunches down slightly as if it gives her an added look of fierceness and it will somehow help her conquer the coaster. The lines are long but not as bad as I’d expected. I’m guessing a lot of people are watching the live band play.

We only have to wait about thirty minutes before we’re loaded into the car and our buckles are checked.

I glance over at Shay. Her face is pale, and I think she might...what? Barf? Cry, Or maybe just freak out. “What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I’m super claustrophobic,” she whimpers.

I raise my brows. Yes, I know this already because there were several rides at Disney that we skipped because of it. “Why does that matter? We’re completely out in the open.”

She tugs on the safety harness pressed down on our shoulders. “I know but this is pressed down so tight, I can’t breathe in all the way.” Her hands are shaking and she’s breathing erratically. Oh, my crap. This is really scaring her.

I reach over and grab her hand. “First, you need to exhale. You’re holding your breath and it’s making you bulkier.”

Her shoulders lower a fraction and I can see her breathing regulate better.

“Now, lay your head back and close your eyes. If you stay relaxed, the harness will not feel so tight. We’ll only be on here for a minute, max. And then it’ll be over.”

Just then the car screams out of the loading station and races through several loops and corkscrews. Shay screams but keeps her eyes pinched shut the whole time.

I would laugh if I wasn’t so worried about her.

The car jerks to a halt and the safety harness releases.

Shay takes in the deepest breath I’ve ever seen.

“Are you going to be okay?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she nods. “I’ll be shaky for a little while, but I’ll be fine. I can breathe now.”

“Did you know that was going to freak you out?” Why would she agree to go on it knowing how much it was going to scare her?

She drops her eyes. “Kind of. Intense roller coasters usually do that to me because the harnesses do have to be so tight.”

I stare at her. “Then why did you agree to go? We could have skipped it.”

She shrugs. “You looked like you really wanted to do it. And after you’ve done all the dumb things I’ve asked you to do, it didn’t seem right for me to pull the claustrophobia card.”

I think that card is an important card. Like the draw four of the deck kind of card.

I put my hands on her shoulders and stare at her. I don’t know what to say. She knowingly freaked herself out just for me. I should be flattered, and I am, but I also feel terrible that she put herself through that just to make me happy. She should know that I wouldn’t think differently about her if she didn’t go on the ride, right? I frown because I don’t like the answer.

“Next time, will you just tell me first?” I pull her into a hug, and I can still feel her body shaking.

This is further proof to me that Nathan is a lying sack and dumber than a box of rocks. How am I friends with this guy? Have I changed so much since college while he has stayed exactly the same?

I no longer feel bad about warning him not to get married and not just because I want her for myself. But because he shouldn’t have married the woman he described to me. I just don’t know who that woman was, because it wasn’t Shay.

We pull apart and start walking toward the restaurant, holding hands. I’m glad she’s extending her trip. I want to know more about her, and I want her to learn more about me so she doesn’t scare herself half to death over an amusement park ride.

I don’t want to know just holiday Shay. But average Monday Shay. And date night Shay. And even Groundhog Day Shay. What are they like? How are they different from the Shay I know? The Shay that I—I swallow—that I’m falling for?



THE CROWD around the bandstand is huge. Everyone is scream-singing and dancing to the music. I think I’d be just as happy watching all this at home, but Shay wanted to see what it’s all about, and I’ve realized I have very little

backbone where she's concerned.

"Is it everything you were hoping for?" I yell at her, just so she can hear me.

She shakes her head. "It's pretty dreadful, isn't it? It's just so loud and people-y."

I grin and tug her hand. "Come on, let's move a bit farther back." We have to walk a ways to actually get to a place where we can hear ourselves talk in a normal voice. But we're still close enough that we'll be able to hear the countdown when it starts.

It's relatively dark, at least compared to the near daylight put off by the stage lights. Here there are only a few small street-type lamps lighting the pathway and some lights from a nearby coaster. Shay looks amazing in the glow of the low lights. Not that she doesn't look amazing at other times, but this gives her an otherworldly vibe that I'm surprised to admit is very enticing. "Sorry it didn't live up to the hype."

She shrugs. "It's okay. I'm still glad we came. I'll always be able to say I've done the big New Year's celebration thing, and I won't have to feel like a dork when I say I want to stay home."

"I like the way you think. If it wasn't so close to midnight, I would say we should just go now."

She waves a finger in front of me. "Oh no, you don't. You can't claim to have been to the big festivities if you leave before the countdown even starts."

"Don't worry, I'm not leaving. If we did, I would miss my New Year's kiss." I flick my brows up in quick succession. "And there's no way that's happening."

Her phone pings, and she pulls it out. She swipes a finger across the screen and squints down at it.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

She looks up and smiles awkwardly. "Nothing. It's just my friend, Maggie, wishing me a happy New Year."

"Do you want to message her back?"

She shakes her head. "No. I will later."

The crowd by the bandstand starts the countdown and even from where we are, we can hear it clear as a bell.

"Nine, eight," she whispers as she takes a step closer. Is she anticipating this as much as I am?

“Six, five, four,” I reach out and put my hands on her hips, tugging her to me. My hands sweep across her hips and meet at the small of her back. Her arms come up and encircle my neck.

“Two, one, Happy New Year, Shay.”

“Happy New Year, Evan.”

I lean forward and she reaches up on her tiptoes, meeting me halfway. I’m grateful for those mistletoe kisses because nothing about this one is awkward. I cover her lips with mine, and, unlike the previous times, I don’t hold back. I’m not worried that I’m taking liberties she isn’t prepared for because I can feel her responding with as much enthusiasm as I’m giving. My shirt is crumpled up in one of her fists, and the other one is moving around in my hair at the back of my neck. I’m not sure where I end and she begins, we’re so tightly intertwined with each other.

I’m so absorbed in the kiss that I can hear Shay’s name echoing in my ears. For a moment I think I’m saying it, but then I realize there’s not enough time between kisses for me to say her name.

But then she pulls away.

I lean in to pull her back, but she tilts her head and looks around me. “Awe, crap,” she folds her arms across her chest. “He found me.”



SHAY

I CAN’T BELIEVE Nathan is here. How did he figure out where I was? Maggie promised in her text message that she hadn’t told him, just that she’d seen him at the Gas-N-Go on his way to the airport. I have no idea why it took so long for the text to be delivered to my phone.

I glance up to see confusion etched on Evan’s face.

Nathan calls my name again and Evan jerks around. “Nathan? What are you doing here?”

Nathan comes to a stop and puts his hands on his hips. “I could ask you the same thing, Evan? What are you doing kissing my fiancé?”

“Wait,” I put my hand on Evan’s arm. “How do you know Nathan?”

His face flushes, and he looks away. What the crap is going on here? I

turn my back to Nathan, my mood souring to the point of being downright bitter with every passing second. “Evan, how do you know Nathan?”

Nathan scoffs. “We were roommates at Stanford.”

I shake my head and glare at him over my shoulder. I’m so not in the mood to deal with him right now. “No, you said your roommate’s name was Barry.” I put my hands on my hips.

“Yeah, Evan Barrington. Barry. It was his nickname.”

“One that I hated,” Evan mutters.

I jerk around, staring at him. Wait a minute. Has he known this whole time who I am and who Nathan is? He let me say things knowing the whole time who I was talking about? I suck in a breath. I can unpack that in a minute. But first I need to know why Nathan is here.

I turn on him. “What are you doing here? How did you even know I was here?”

“I’ve been over to your apartment like five times trying to talk to you, but you never answered the door.”

I give him a bland look. “Well, duh. I wasn’t there.”

“I know that now.” He shakes his head and gives a mirthless chuckle. “I can’t believe you came on our honeymoon without me. That’s presumptuous. But don’t worry, I won’t make you pay me back or anything. I get that you were in a bad place.”

“Pay you back? Are you serious right now?” I scream at him. Streams of people are flowing past us as the park gets ready to close, but, not surprisingly, they’re giving us a wide berth. “I paid for everything but the rental car, which you canceled. I should make *you* pay *me* back.” I poke my finger into his chest because otherwise, I think I might throat-punch him, I’m so mad.

“I don’t think this is really the time for who owes who what. But really, this is all your fault.” He waves between the three of us. “If you would’ve texted me back, I wouldn’t have had to take such drastic measures.”

“My fault?” I put my hands on my hips. “Wait, what do you mean, drastic measures?”

“I had to use the tracker app I put on your phone.” When he sees my wide eyes and pinched lips, he back peddles. “I only put it on there for emergencies, Babe. I didn’t want anything to happen to you.”

I step closer to him, and his body relaxes until I raise my finger and point it in his face. “How dare you invade my privacy like that. You had no right.”

“You’re my fiancé,” he puts his hand on my shoulder and I swipe it off with a hard slap.

“No, I’m not. I’m nothing of yours any longer.”

Evan comes and stands behind me. “Yeah, I think you lost that right when you didn’t show up for the wedding.”

I turn on Evan. “You butt out. I’m not any happier with you, right now.” I look at him, and my lips start to quiver. Stupid girl emotions. “Did you know all along?” I motion back to Nathan. “You knew who he was to me?”

“Of course he did. Why do you think I picked his place to rent?” Nathan tips his head to the side, a feigned look of sympathy on his face. “He’s the one who told me I couldn’t marry you.”

I give Evan a long blink. I don’t even know what to say to him.

He drops his gaze and nods.

“How could you not have said anything?” My voice comes out kind of froggy sounding because the lump in my throat is the size of Texas, and I’m not sure if the tears are out of hurt or building anger.

“When you got here, you weren’t exactly in the mood to talk. And then when you moved into my townhouse—”

“She what?” Nathan steps forward nearly bumping into Evan’s chest.

“Oh, shut up, Nathan.” I give him a shove away from Evan and me. “In fact, just go home. I don’t need or want you here.”

“But you owe me an explanation.” He glares at Evan. “Both of you.”

I laugh and I realize that it sounds a bit maniacal. But I can’t help it. Is he really this stupid or does he just think that I am? “I owe you nothing. *You didn’t show up for our wedding.*” Each word is strongly enunciated. “And as if that isn’t bad enough on its own, you left no note, no text, nothing. That’s when you lost all rights to demand anything from me. Now leave me alone or I will see that a restraining order is issued before the plane wheels touch down.”

He tilts his head and grins. “Come on, Babe. You wouldn’t do that.”

I narrow my eyes and for a minute he reminds me of Prince Humperdink at the end of *Princess Bride* when Wesley is holding him at sword point. Nathan gives a little hop to the side, out of the range of my hands. It’s the best decision he’s made all night.

“Well, when this,” he waves his finger between Evan and me, “falls apart, don’t come crying back to me because I won’t be available.”

“You have my word,” I smirk at him. “Now please leave us alone.”

He glares at Evan. “Dude, this is a low thing to do.”

Evan shrugs. “You abandoned her first. It’s not my fault I figured out what a mistake you made before you did. You had your chance.”

“So did you.” I look at Evan, the tears falling now. “I don’t really even know you. This wasn’t real. It’s just a big mistake. You’re just a rebound.”

He shakes his head. “No, it isn’t. It’s real for me.”

I scoff and wave my finger between the two of us. “This is what the book world calls Instalove. It doesn’t happen in real life, which is why readers hate it.” I shake my head. “I shouldn’t have allowed myself to think it was anything more, but I just wanted....” I look away. “Bye, Evan.”

“Shay, wait. Let me explain.”

I shake my head. I just can’t do it. Maybe in a week or a month, I can sit down and evaluate how and exactly where my life took such a hard left turn and ended up in the crapper.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

EVAN

I shoulder my backpack and step out of the plane. A blast of cold, New Hampshire air blows through the crack between the airplane and the jetway. It's fitting for my mood. I feel pretty cold and frosty inside and out.

I pull my carry-on behind me, and it bumps over the shoe of a person standing nearby. Obviously too nearby. "Ouch," they mutter.

"Sorry," I throw over my shoulder without even stopping to see if they're okay. I'm being a complete jerk, but I can't help it. I have this constant knot in my stomach, and I'm not sleeping well. The repairs on my townhouse are taking way longer than I thought, which means Orlando is out for the near future. Although I'm not really keen on being there anyway. Everywhere I look in my townhouses, I'm just reminded of Shay.

"Shay," I mutter on a sigh. I haven't heard from her since she left Universal early on New Year's Day. I've tried to text her, but she has totally ghosted me. Not that I completely blame her. But I thought she knew me well enough to know that I wasn't trying to hurt her. Maybe that's the real problem. We really don't know each other very well. But I thought— I shake my head.

I haven't heard from Nathan either, but that one I'm not losing any sleep over. I'm not sure how I missed what a tool he is. I mean, I knew he was a player in college, but I guess I just thought he'd grow out of it. The rest of us did, why didn't he?

I think more than anything I'm just disappointed in myself that I believed anything he said about Shay. Although, if he hadn't said what he said, then I wouldn't have said what I said, and the two of them would probably be married right now.

That thought makes me break out in a cold sweat and doesn't make me feel any better. I still feel like garbage.

"Hey, Evan. Over here." I hear Keaton call me from down the line of cars. I told my Dad I could just catch an Uber home, but he insisted on coming to pick me up. Or send someone to pick me up.

"Hey, man." I give Keaton and then Lowell a bro hug. "How was

Christmas?”

“Good,” Lowell shrugs.

“Not as good as yours,” Keaton waggles his eyebrows. “So, where’s your hot girlfriend? You didn’t bring her home?”

“How many times do I have to tell you that she isn’t my girlfriend?” I shove my bags into the trunk of Keaton’s 1990 Lexus. Shay isn’t my girlfriend. Not that I wouldn’t take her as one in the blink of an eye. “She went home. Her vacation was over.” Even as I say the words out loud, something pierces my heart, and I have a hard time taking a full breath.

“Are you going to fly out to see her soon?” Keaton nudges me before he walks around to the driver’s seat. He’s not nearly as sly—or subtle or whatever the vibe he’s going for—as he thinks he is.

“Hey, aren’t you supposed to be back at school?” I ask as I duck into the front seat.

He shakes his head. “No, next semester doesn’t start until Monday.” He rubs his hands together and grins. “That gives us the whole weekend together.”

I stifle my groan. That’s the last thing I need.

I turn to look at Lowell. “What about you?”

He smirks. “I’m a senior. It’s not like I really even have to go to school anymore. I’ve fulfilled all my requirements for graduation. Now it’s just stuff like Home Economics.”

I grin at him. “You’re taking Home Ec.?”

“Uh, yeah. We eat like every day in there. Why would I not take a class like that?”

“Awe, little Lowy’s learning to cook.” I lean back and try to ruffle his hair, but he leans away from my reach and glares at me. At least everything here is the same. I take a small amount of comfort in that.

“Dude, don’t touch the hair.” He looks annoyed at me.

Keaton is quiet as he pulls out into traffic. Once he settles into the flow, he glances over at me. “You look like crap. What happened?”

“Don’t be a jerk,” I say and look out my window.

“Okay, sorry. But you don’t look great. You have dark circles under your eyes.” He reaches over and tugs on my arm until I look at him. “You’re not sick, are you? Like sick, sick?”

I feel bad for calling him a jerk. After mom’s cancer, I think we’re all a little sensitive about looking unhealthy. “No, I’m not sick.” At least not

clinically. My heart feels a little under the weather, though. “I haven’t been sleeping well this last week. The work on my rental is going really slow.”

“Are you sure that’s all?” Lowell asks from the back seat.

“Yes, that’s all,” I say a bit too emphatically.

Keaton flicks his gaze back to me. “Okay, so tell us the truth. Nothing happened between you and the hot girl?”

“Nope, we’re just friends.” I hope that sounds convincing because I really don’t want to talk about it anymore.

“Friends? Really?” Lowell leans forward as much as his seatbelt will allow. “What did you do wrong? Because I can’t imagine she’s the problem.”

I scowl back at him. “Thanks for having my back, bro. Sheesh, with a brother like you, who needs enemies?”

“I’m just saying, she seemed really nice.” She was—is. But I messed everything up. I’ve gone back over that week a thousand times, looking for times when I should have told her. They were there, I was just a big fat chicken.

“In the five-point-two seconds that you saw her on my computer, you’re already on her side? Thanks,” I sigh. “But you’re right. She is really nice. I think that was the best Christmas I’ve had in years.”

Keaton’s hand flies out and smacks me in the chest. “Now who’s being the jerk? Are you saying Christmas with us sucks?”

“No. But you know how it is. Even though Dad’s tried to change everything so that it’s not like it was with Mom, it still feels like something is missing. But I didn’t feel that way this year. It was just...kind of perfect.” I’ve had a lot of time to think the past few days since Shay left. As I took down the Christmas decorations she made, I thought about keeping them and putting them up again next year. And that’s when I realized she had been right about my dad. Putting up the decorations she made would only torture me next year. They would remind me of everything I’d had and lost.

It must have been the same for my dad. He just couldn’t bear to have those memories—memories of when life was at its best—replayed year after year when life was less than best.

“Whatever you did to mess it up, you need to fix it because you need to marry her.” Lowell hits me on the shoulder and laughs at his own funny joke in the back. But his words make my chest constrict even more.

Fix it? If only I could.

I’ve got to change the subject, or I may just end up crying like a little girl.

And while I'm secure in my masculinity, my brothers are not. I think it has something to do with underdeveloped prefrontal lobes or something. Regardless, they will never let me live it down. "Hey, I know. What do you say to me taking you out to the Tap Public House for pizza and wings?"

"You're buying?" Lowell asked suspiciously.

"Yep. My treat."

"Cool!" Keaton grips the steering wheel a little tighter. "Because Dad is working late."

I nod, not surprised by that revelation. "I guess it's just the Barrington boys out on the town tonight." Now I just need to pretend for the next four or five hours that nothing is wrong. Man, I'm exhausted already.



SHAY

"YOU LOOK TERRIBLE," Maggie says as she leans on the edge of her desk.

I smirk at her. "Thanks for the self-esteem boost." I run a finger under my mascara and eyeliner-smudged eyes. I should have cleaned myself up a little better before I dropped by her school. But it's all I could do to leave my apartment.

"Is this still about the hot landlord?"

I tip my head. "His name is Evan." I sigh. "I just miss him."

"Then why did you leave?"

"He lied to me, Mags. I can't have a relationship with a person I don't trust."

"It's a relationship now? I thought he was just a rebound."

I glare at her. "That was your term. Not mine." At least I'd never called it that to her. Just to Evan.

"So he didn't tell you he was friends with Nathan. In the scheme of things, I don't think that's really that bad. Or even really a lie. At least, not technically. Come on, Shay, do you blame him for not wanting to admit he's friends with Nathan? I mean, if you're going to hold something against him, it should really be his choice in friends."

"You're not completely wrong there. Can you believe Nathan tracked my

phone? It's so stalker-ish."

"Uh, yeah." She nods. "But back to Evan. If you miss him so much, why don't you just go back to Orlando and talk to him? You can't really blame him for not telling you."

My brow crinkles. "How can you say that?"

"You were a hot mess when you got on that plane. I can only imagine the travel accentuated it." She folds her arms. "Let me ask you this. How would you have reacted if he had said he was Nathan's friend right when you got there?"

I shrug. This is not a line of questioning I am anxious to pursue. "I don't know. I probably wouldn't have liked him."

"Exactly—"

"But he told Nathan not to marry me."

"And you're complaining about this...why? You have already admitted that you and Nathan should not be married. The way I see it, you should be thanking Evan for saving you from the biggest mistake of your life. Plus, you needed to see him, not as Evan, Nathan's friend, but as a really great guy. A guy who helped you have a very memorable Christmas." She sighs.

"But why didn't he tell me after that, once we were friends?"

"Face it, you wouldn't have liked him once he told you, *until* you were good friends and knew he was nothing like Nathan. Which is exactly when you found out."

I sigh. I hate it when she uses logic against me. "How do I know he isn't just a rebound? Or that this isn't some fake Instalove thing. It's not real, you know."

She scoffs. "Oh? I knew before my first date with Dean was over that he was it. He was the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Are you saying what we have isn't real?"

I blink. She's never told me that. And I know when she's lying because she's a terrible liar.

"How long does it take to know it's right? Two years didn't make any difference with Nathan. I think when you know, you know."

I scratch my nose because I don't have a reply.

She smiles. "All I'm saying is if you don't snatch him up," she gives me her teacher look, "someone else will. And then how will you feel?"

I cover my face with my hands. "But I've only known him a week."

She hops off her desk. "I'm not saying you should fly out there and ask

him to marry you. But why not try dating him and see where it goes? You've lost your apartment, so what other signs do you need?"

Yeah, I'm trying not to think about losing my apartment. It's some of the collateral damage from not actually having a wedding and moving in with a husband.

I peek through my fingers. "Oh, Mags. I called him a mistake and 'just a rebound'. I was so mean to him. He probably never wants to see me again."

Maggie opens her laptop and starts typing.

"I'm sorry, am I boring you?" I ask in annoyance.

She smiles up at me. "No," she turns the laptop toward me. "But you'll never know for sure if he hates you if you don't ask him. Now, pick what time you want to fly out."



YOU DON'T THINK I booked a flight right then, do you? Do you think I learned nothing from this experience? I've learned many things. But the relevant ones for right now are: One, Maggie is too impulsive. And two, I have to make my own decisions.

I don't even know where Evan is. For all I know, he could be back in New Hampshire, and I don't know where in New Hampshire he lives.

That thought makes my fingers still on my phone. But that's what I'm supposed to be doing, right? Spending more time with him and getting to know him better so that I know things like where in New Hampshire he lives.

I pull up my contacts and find the number. My hands shake because I don't even know how to start this conversation.

I close my eyes and funnel all my courage into my fingers and thumbs.

Hey Nathan, I need a favor.

As far as openers to conversations go, it's not terrible. It contains a pleasant greeting and then gets right to the point.

The dots appear next to Nathan's picture.

Now, the last thing I want to do is talk to him. But he's a means to an end. I should make him a t-shirt that says that.

I swallow my pride, and my gum as it turns out, and type again.

Please?

Nathan

Well well well look whos talking to me

I roll my eyes so hard.

Yep. I'm talking to you.

I would really like to add a few choice names at the end of that, but it feels like pressing my luck on the favor.

Nathan

I told you not to come crawling back to me but I've missed you so I accept your apology

Uhhh

Okay, this is awkward.

Actually, I'm hoping you'll text Evan for me and find out if he's in Orlando or New Hampshire.

Nathan

text him yourself

I don't want the first he hears from me to be by text. We need to talk face-to-face.

Three dots appear and then disappear. Then appear again and disappear again. Apparently, Nathan was not anticipating my response to his kind offer. Finally, words appear.

Nathan

why would I do that

Because you owe me.

Nathan

I think you have that backward you cheated on me with another guy

No. You left me first. It was my right to start dating again.

Nathan

Days after we were supposed to get married and with my best friend

I think 'supposed to' are the keywords there.

No dots.

Will you help me or not?

Nothing.

Okay, I'll make you a deal. You help me get in the same place as Evan and we'll be even. I'll even talk my parents out of suing you for half the cost of the wedding.

My parents have said nothing about suing Nathan. I may have mentioned it a time or two, but I don't mind making him sweat it a little bit.

Nathan

I dont know why you think he will tell me we didn't exactly part on good terms

Just bro talk him. Talk about the good old days at Stanford.

Nathan

Bro talk him what does that mean



Nathan

fine but if he doesnt tell me we still have a deal.

Fine. But don't tell him I want to know. I want to surprise him.

I stare at my phone, willing Nathan to text back Evan's location.

Finally after what feels like forever, but according to my clock is only twelve minutes, the dots appear.

Nathan

hes in new hampshire

Do you happen to know where in New Hampshire? It's a whole state, after all.

Nathan

he lives just outside of concord but i think you fly into manchester or maybe boston

I hug my phone to my chest. For the first time since ending my New Year's kiss with Evan, I feel like things might just work out.

Nathan

hey shay

Yes?

That should be read with skepticism. What else could he possibly want?

Nathan

do you really think us not getting married was for the best

Definitely.

Nathan

you could have at least paused first

Nathan

for the record im sorry I didnt leave a note or even text you that wasnt cool

I stare at his words for a minute. That's his take away? I just nod because I have no words.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

SHAY

“Can I help you with your bags, Miss?” A man probably in his early thirties leans into my row and motions to the overhead compartment I’m ducking under. I don’t even look to see if he’s wearing a ring because I don’t care.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m good. I just have my backpack.” Yes, I realize that may not be a good idea. If Evan wants me to stay, I’m kind of hosed, because I only have one change of clothes shoved into my backpack. But if, as I fear, he wants nothing to do with me, then I don’t have to awkwardly pull a suitcase down his long driveway. Yes, I may have found his house on Google Earth. Don’t judge me.

The guy smiles at me. “Where are you headed? We can share an Uber.”

I smile and lie. “Thanks, but my husband’s picking me up.”

He looks down at my empty finger—not at all discreetly—and then back up at me. “It’s okay. You don’t have to lie.”

I tip my head to the side. “Sorry, it sounded better than the-guy-I-hope-will-be-my-husband.”

He nods. “Ah, a boyfriend that won’t commit?”

I shrug. Dude, just leave it alone already.

He pulls a card out of the front pocket of his briefcase and hands it over to me. “If you get tired of waiting, give me a call.” He smiles at me again as he joins the herd of people bumbling their way down the aisle. I was in a hurry, but now I think I’ll put a little space between us.

Where was this guy when I was freshly dumped and vulnerable? I watch his head as he ducks out the door and disappears. Could it be that the Universe doesn’t hate me? Maybe it’d been keeping me available until I bumped into the right guy. Maybe the Universe and I aren’t enemies after all.

There’s finally another hole in the crowd, and I hop into the aisle and sling my backpack onto my shoulder.

If my Universe theory is right, Evan is just waiting for me to come to my senses, and this will all be tied up nice and neat before the day is out. Oh, please let the Universe like me.

I put a little giddy-up in my step and make my way out of the plane.

“Thanks for flying with us, Ma’am. Have a great time in New Hampshire.”
The flight attendant gives me a perky, albeit, fake smile.

I smile back. “I plan to.”

I pull out my phone and take it off airplane mode. Pulling up my text messages, I text Nathan.

I just arrived.

Nathan

are you sure about this

Yep.

Nathan

positive

Yep.

I watch my phone, my eyes darting up to the lane in front of me so I don’t bump into anyone. But I’m just about to pass the point of no return without a ticket and I’ve still not heard from Nathan.

????

Nathan

he isn’t replying

Can you call him?

Nathan

if he isnt texting me back do you really think he will answer my call

Just try it. I have to put the location in before I can order an Uber.

Nathan

fine give me a minute

My screen stays empty for several minutes and I move over to the side of the walkway and wait.

Nathan

he answered what am I supposed to say



Tell him you want to apologize for being such a jerk.

Nathan
watch it

Nathan swears and I roll my eyes.

Nathan
HES AT THE AIRPORT

What? Is he going back to Orlando? What Airline? What flight number? I haven't left the secured area yet.

My heart is racing. Maybe the Universe and I are truly friends!

Nathan??? Where am I going?

Nathan
I just heard an announcement for a flight to Chicago

Nathan
It sounded like they said Gate G-5.

Maybe he should change occupations and work as a phone background decoder (That's not a real job, right?).

G-5. Got it. Thanks, Nathan!

I take a deep breath. Why is Evan going to Chicago? Maybe this isn't serendipity. Or is it kismet? I can never get those two straight. Maybe it isn't either of them.

Nathan
I hope he makes you happy babe

I ignore the 'babe' and send a thumbs-up emoji. Time to head back toward Gate G-5.



EVAN

I CAN'T SEEM to get Nathan off the phone. He said he's sorry he was a jerk, which is nice of him. He was a jerk. But I was kind of one too. So we both apologized. But now he's just rambling about—well, I'm not sure because I tuned out after he complained that Shay's parents were going to sue him. I can't hear about Shay right now. I'm already way too nervous to see her again as it is. I don't need to think about her parents suing people.

“Oh, yeah?” I say methodically. I don't know if it even applies to what Nathan said. How long until they begin the boarding process? I'm beginning to think that's the only thing that will get him off this call.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we're about to begin boarding our non-stop flight to Chicago. We'll start with those people needing special assistance and families with young children and babies.” Aren't babies young children in actuality? It feels repetitive.

“Hey, Nathan. They're calling my flight. I need to let you go. But we can talk when I get back, okay? I'm really glad we patched things up.”

“Okay, I guess we can talk later.” He sighs, but doesn't hang up. “Are you going on your trip alone?”

“Yeah. But I'm hoping to meet a friend once I get there.” I pause. What's he waiting for? Just hang up already, man.

“Cool.” He's quiet for a minute. “Okay, well I guess I better let you go.”

I nod even though he can't see me. “Thanks again for calling. Bye.” I end the call before he can say anything else. I don't think Nathan and I will ever have the same relationship that we had before. I know what a tool he is now, and I've lost a lot of respect for him. But if I manage to get back together with Shay, it's possible we'll bump into him if we're with her family, right? At least this way it won't have to be awkward.

I sling my messenger bag strap across my chest and grab the handle of my carry-on. I may as well wait closer to the podium for my group to be called.

I step into the walkway and a person looking at their phone collides with me.

“I'm so sor—,” we both say at the same time.

I stop with my hand halfway out to steady her when recognition dawns. “Shay?”

She swallows. “Hey, Evan.” She glances around her like she’s looking for an escape.

“What are you doing here?” Manchester airport is not really a layover to anywhere. If you’re here, it’s pretty much because you want to be here. Which means she came here on purpose. My chest tightens when I think about what this could mean.

“Well, I was hoping to meet you in a more private location. But it seems this is the place it’s going to be.” She gives a nervous laugh.

“We will now board Group one. Please have your boarding pass ready, Group one.”

I glance over at the flight attendants checking people in for the flight.

“You’re going to Chicago?” Shay’s voice is unnaturally high.

I shake my head. “No, that’s just my layover.”

She nods but her brow is creased in confusion. “Oh. Sounds fun.”

I shake my head. “Not really. But there are no direct flights from Manchester to Salt Lake City.” I should’ve probably figured out what she’s doing here before I put it all out there. But I’m losing time. I either need to get on that plane or stay with Shay. And I really want to stay.

“You’re going to Salt Lake?” She licks her lips and my lips ache for them.

“Yeah,” I reach down and pull out a metal tin from my carry-on bag and hand it over to her. “I’m not one to bail on a deal until it’s done.”

She grins and the Shay I’m used to seeing peeks out from beneath the nerves. “What is this?” She opens the tin and peels back the foil-wrapped package inside. Her smile earlier was nothing compared to what it is now. “Brownies?”

“Do you think we can find some Ben and Jerry’s around here?” I shrug in uncertainty. “The truth is, Shay, I realized I wasn’t worthy of you if I didn’t even try to win you back.” I grimace. “But it’s a fine line between fighting for you and stalking you. So I really hope this doesn’t feel like the latter.”

She takes a step forward. “Don’t worry, this feels like fighting.”

My heart thuds in my neck and wrist. I don’t think she is totally opposed to the idea of us. “You never answered my question about why you’re here.”

She hikes her backpack up farther on her shoulder but then drops it on the floor at her feet. “I need to ask you a question. And face-to-face seemed the best way to do it.”

I lift a brow. “Yeah? What’s your question?”

She bites the side of her lower lip and distracts me for a moment. “I wondered if you might be open to dating me?”

My breath comes out in a whoosh, and I can’t stop the grin that spreads over my face. If I wanted to stop it, which I don’t. “I can honestly say I’ve never been more open to anything in my life.”

She grins and takes another takes a step toward me.

I take three steps and close the distance between us. What are we doing? Why am I not kissing her yet? I wrap my arms around her and lift her up so her face is even with mine. “In fact, I plan to date the crap out of you.”

She laughs and glances over her shoulder. “You know, it seems like there’s never mistletoe around when you need it.”

“Mistletoe, shmistletoe.” I dip my head and cover her lips with mine, pouring all my stress and longing from the past few weeks into it. She’s here in my arms and I can hardly believe it. I never want to let her go again.

A cacophony of clapping and catcalls breaks us apart. We look sheepishly over our shoulders to see most of the people in the three surrounding gates standing and gawking, cheering for us.

Shay ducks her head into my neck. “I’m sorry. I think you might have missed your boarding group.”

I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not going anywhere.”

She looks up at me. “I’m sorry I said you were a rebound and that what we have isn’t real.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Nathan. You should have had all the information and used it to make your decisions.” My brow hikes up. “Although, by the end, it was getting pretty hard to remember why Nathan and I were friends.”

“Were friends? I thought he called and apologized for being a jerk.”

I pull slightly back and look her in the eyes. “Huh. Those were his exact words.”

She lifts her shoulders. “It’s Nathan. Sometimes he needs coaching.”

I chuckle. “Then it’s no coincidence that he called me today?”

“He may have been my inside man.” She whispers it in my ear, and I’m tempted to kiss her again. But these people have had too much of a show already.

I set her down and move to take her hand, but her coat opens slightly. I throw my head back and laugh. “Hey, nice sweater.” She’s wearing the slightly less terrible Christmas tree sweater I gave her.

She looks down at it. “Thanks. A good friend gave it to me.”

I pull her back to me and narrow my eyes at her. “Friend?”

She puts her hand behind my head and twirls a piece of hair around her finger. “How about friend with kissing benefits?”

“That’s a start,” I growl into her neck.

I pull back quickly, knowing if I start kissing her again, we might never leave the airport.

“Are you okay staying with me or should we find you a nearby hotel?” We lived together for a week, so I’m not sure that a hotel is necessary. But then, I had not been granted ‘benefits’ then.

“Whatever’s easiest. I didn’t really give you any notice that you’d have a house guest.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you’re not a house guest. You’re coming home.”

EPILOGUE

EVAN

I can't believe we're here. It's two days before Christmas, for goodness sake. But then, I can't believe Nathan is already getting married after only dating this girl for nine months. Although he dated Shay for two years, and it didn't work out. So maybe time isn't a big deal.

I sit in the chair of the hotel ballroom, looking around at all the decorations. Is this what Shay's wedding with him had looked like?

I don't like thinking about it. I glance over and pick up her hand, resting it on my thigh, just as a reminder that she picked me.

When we got the invitation, I asked Shay if she wanted to blow it off. But she said she was completely fine. So here we are. I wasn't sure I believed her at first, but as I sneak sly glances at her, she seems completely unaffected by the wedding. She really doesn't care that Nathan is marrying someone else.

I lift her hand to my lips.

She smiles and I subconsciously pat my pocket, making sure my little surprise is still there.

Nathan isn't the only one that will remember this day.

We sit and wait. The crowd is getting a little restless. I stretch my legs out in front of me as much as I can and glance at my watch. I let out a gasp and Shay frowns at me. Not so much an angry frown as a what-is-wrong frown.

I lift my watch to her, and her brows raise. The ceremony is more than thirty minutes late.

"He wouldn't," I whisper to Shay.

"I can't say I'd be surprised." She glances back down the aisle. "The mother of the bride is running around like a crazy person back there," she says through closed teeth.

I fold my arms, tucking Shay's hand against my chest. "He's such an idiot. Did he learn nothing the last time?"

She looks at me like that's the dumbest thing I've ever said. Which it probably is. "Has he said anything to you?"

I shake my head. "We don't talk about women anymore. It's for the best." I watch the best man standing at the front of the room. I know him, vaguely. He and Nathan work together. The guy's gaze is pinballing all over the room.

He obviously doesn't know what's happening. Or maybe he does and that's why he won't make eye contact.

"Was that guy supposed to be the best man at your wedding?"

Shay squints up at the front. "No. I don't know that guy very well." She lifts her brows. "Jeremy was supposed to be Nathan's best man at our wedding. He was so mad at Nathan, I don't think he would agree to do it again."

"This guy might not either."

We wait for another hour before the mother of the bride comes in and tells everyone that the wedding has been canceled. She looks a combination of hostile-angry and brokenhearted—likely for what her daughter is going through. I can't say I blame her.

The crowd files out. They whisper and cast curious glances at Shay. I slide my arm around her and pull her into me, not wanting any of them to think she isn't better off.

We wait for everyone to leave, just like we do on the airplane. Shay is a big fan of being the last person out of anywhere.

Finally, we stand up and I stretch my back.

"It's a shame this is all going to waste." Shay pushes out her lips, her hands on her hips.

That's right. This beautifully decorated room is just going to sit here with no one getting married. No one making happy memories. Unless—I pat my pocket. This isn't what I had planned, but maybe it's even better. It's definitely warmer than the outdoor ice rink.

I grab Shay's hand and lead her up to the floral arch where Nathan and Sabrina were supposed to say their vows. Now's the time. I'm going to do it.



SHAY

EVAN LEADS me up to the rose and lily arch at the front of the Grand Ballroom. Oh. My. Heck. Is he going to propose? I've been dropping hints like crazy, but I thought he hadn't noticed. Which is dumb, because he notices and remembers everything.

I wonder which ring he got me?

I know I shouldn't feel grateful that Nathan blew off another wedding, but this backdrop is just so pretty, I can't help it. I'll send Sabrina a box of cupcakes to assuage my guilty conscience.

Evan drops down onto one knee and slips his hand inside his jacket. "Maryeshayne Taylor, I have loved you almost since the day I met you. You'll make me the happiest man in the world if you'll consent to be my wife."

My free hand moves to my mouth as Evan slips the most beautiful emerald-cut sapphire ring I've ever seen onto my finger. He looks up at me and I start to cry like an idiot. I drop down to my knees so I can look him straight in the face. Putting both my hands on his cheeks, I nod. "I never knew what true love was until I met you. Nothing would make me prouder or happier than to be your wife."

He runs a finger along my cheek and wipes away the tears.

It's interesting. This is my second proposal, and I'm surprised at how different they feel. With Nathan, I was excited. I mean, we'd dated for two years. It felt like the next step. I was going to get my family and home. But I hadn't shed a single tear. This isn't to say people must cry when they get engaged.

But for me, it's telling that right now I'm blubbering and look like a complete mess. With Evan's proposal, I'm excited too. But it's different. This isn't just the next step. It's the only step I want to take. I get to share my life with this man, and I can't think of anything better. He'll be the father of my children and we'll grow old together.

This time I'm so full of joy that I literally cannot keep everything inside.

This time it's right.

And this time there will be no jingle bell jilt.

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And to this story. I started this book at a time when I was completely drained of all creativity. Or that is what I thought until it started flowing from my brain. It has been my palette cleanser and my reward for finishing my other projects. I LOVE this book. It still makes me chuckle, which is saying something after how many times I've read it!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mindy loves all things history and love, which makes writing romance right up her alley. Since she was a little girl playing in her closet “elevator,” she has always had stories running through her mind. But it wasn’t until she was well into adulthood that she realized she could write those stories down.

Now they occupy her dreams and most every quiet moment she has.

Her kids are used to being called names they have never heard and they use words like ‘vexed’ and ‘chagrined’.

When she isn’t living in her alternate realities, she is married to her real-life Mr. Darcy and trying to raise five proper boys. They live happily in the beautiful mountains of Utah.

Want more? Sign up for Mindy’s newsletter [here](#) to receive updates, deals, and new releases. If you want to listen to the audio books you can find them on my Youtube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@mindyburbidgestrunk7846> Or your preferred audiobook retailer.

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