

THE McCORMICKS

*Our Perfect*

MOMENT

ELENA AITKEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

OUR PERFECT MOMENT

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The McCormicks—Book Six

ELENA AITKEN

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## Chapter One

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AMBER MCCORMICK NAVIGATED her rental car onto the side of the road under the sign that announced she was entering Crystal Creek. What the sign didn't say, but what was evident by the landscape, was that the town was in the middle of nowhere. Or, more specifically, what looked to be the middle of a frosty field in Northern Saskatchewan. She still couldn't figure out why her best friend had decided this was an up-and-coming market to flip houses, but she wasn't there to pass judgment. She was there to visit her friend and have a little break from her life.

Amber pulled her cell phone out of her purse and powered it on. She made it a rule never to drive with her phone on in case she was tempted to look at it. Not only was distracted driving incredibly dangerous, it was also against the law in most places now, and Amber was definitely a rule follower. She was proud of the fact that she'd never broken a law. Ever. She didn't even have a parking ticket on her record. And she would happily keep it that way.

Immediately, the screen lit up with missed texts and calls. No surprise—most of them were from her friend, and former roommate, Josie Price. She ignored the voicemails and dialed Josie's number.

Her friend answered on the first ring.

“Seriously,” Josie said. “It wouldn't kill you to keep your phone on.”

“No,” Amber answered smoothly. “But it could kill someone else. What’s up? I just got to town.” It had taken her all day to fly halfway across the country from Toronto, rent a car, and drive out into some farmer’s field, but she’d made it.

“Oh no.” Josie groaned.

“Oh yes.” Amber ignored the prickle of concern that popped up. She wasn’t going to let anything ruin this trip. She’d finally planned something spontaneous and she was going to enjoy every minute of catching up with her friend. The irony that she’d *planned* a spontaneous trip wasn’t lost on her, but for Amber, leaving on a *mostly* unplanned vacation to visit a friend in the middle of nowhere in Saskatchewan, when what she really should be doing was figuring out what firms to apply to if she wasn’t offered the position she was so sure she’d get, was out of character. *Way* out of character. Besides, she should have already been offered the job. The panic that she’d been fighting for the last week since *not* getting the call about the job when she’d expected it started to well up again, but Amber swallowed hard and focused on Josie.

One problem at a time. And it did seem as if Josie were about to present her a problem. She had a feeling she was going to regret her only slightly planned and very spontaneous by her standards trip.

“Remember?” She said the word slowly. “That was the plan.” She took a breath and squeezed her eyes shut tight. “Please tell me you remembered I was coming.” Amber loved Josie like a sister, but to say her friend was a bit scatterbrained would be a major understatement. It definitely wouldn’t be the first time Josie totally spaced on their plans.

“Of course I remembered.”

“Good.” Relief washed over Amber, but it only lasted a moment.

“Only I’m not there.”

Panic punched her in the gut. “What?” Amber took a deep breath and then another. She focused on breathing in through her nose and out through

her mouth just like her yoga teacher had taught her. She'd been working hard on not letting herself get worked up by small things. Or any things. It was still a work in progress to be sure, as she still found her stress level rising in the smallest of situations. *But this situation isn't small.* She exhaled hard. "Where are you, Josie?"

"Well...here's the thing."

"Where are you?"

"Vancouver."

"Vancouver? Why are you in Vancouver?"

"Well, more specifically, a suburb of Vancouver. And honestly, it's not that big of a deal. I'll be back in a few days and we'll hang out just like we planned. If I could have done anything about it, I would have. But I have a property here that I was renting and the renters left without any notice, and the place is in shambles. I need to fix it up and get it organized to rent again before I lose more money on it. I really am sorry, Amber. I promise I'll be there in a few days, and—"

"When?" She needed something specific because if it was going to be too long, she could get back on a plane and—do what? For the first time in her life, she had nowhere to go. Without the job offer, there was nothing for her in Toronto. All of her things, what little she had, were in storage. For the first time in her life, Amber didn't have a plan, and that scared the hell out of her. But she couldn't get worked up. At least not yet.

"I promise it will only be a few days at most," Josie was saying. "I have some people lined up to help me out and an agency that will handle the rental. It shouldn't take too long."

Josie had been Amber's roommate for their first two years of college before Josie had dropped out to join the real estate market. She'd actually been fairly successful, even with the bust of the market. She attributed her success to her personal involvement and her knack for finding up-and-coming markets that were mostly overlooked by the bigger firms. Which was

why she was in Crystal Creek. The local economy was starting to rebound from the recession and was becoming a hot market for young couples who wanted a small-town feel to raise their families in. She'd found herself a little house in desperate need of a facelift and although the physical labor didn't appeal to Amber in any way, a tiny town—tucked away from everybody and everything—did. At least for a few days. If you had no place to go, nowhere was a good place to be.

“I promise I'll be back as soon as I can,” Josie said. “Don't even think about leaving before I get there.”

How did she know that had been Amber's first thought?

*Because she knows you better than anyone.* Amber would have laughed at herself and the situation she found herself in if she wasn't so freaked out. “Josie, I can't just stay in a strange town. I don't even have a—”

“Oh my goodness,” her friend interrupted her. “Of course you can. Crystal Creek is like the safest town ever. There's zero crime and I bet you'll be there not even five minutes before someone knocks on the door with fresh baked muffins. The key is under the pot next to the door.”

Amber shook her head and forced herself to bite back the response that was on the tip of her tongue. *It wasn't 1968; you couldn't just leave your doors open, or keys under flowerpots. There were people who...* She forced herself to take another deep breath.

“Don't be all weird about it, Amber,” Josie continued, as if she could hear Amber's thoughts.

“I'm not.”

Josie laughed. “Right. Well, trust me. There's not really even a reason to lock the door at all, but it's what everyone there does.”

“If everyone does it, you might as well not lock the door at all.”

“That's exactly what I'm saying.” Her friend laughed again. “Look, I have to go, but make yourself at home, okay? I put a pile of blankets on the couch, or you can stay in my room. There are fresh towels in the bathroom.



Whatever you need, help yourself.”

Amber sighed. She knew enough to know when she'd been beat. Besides, she *was* tired and the thought of driving all the way back to the city, sitting at the airport and hoping for another flight out...well, it was just easier to spend the night. “Okay.”

“You'll be fine, Amber. Besides, I know you, and I know you need a little time to think things through. Consider this time alone a little gift, a chance to sort things out.”

*Josie really did know her better than anyone.* Amber smiled and nodded. “Love you. See you soon.”

She hung up the phone and immediately powered it off before she stuck it back into her purse. She looked at the directions she'd printed out. Josie's house was just on the edge of the small town. It shouldn't take her too long to get there. Thankfully the roads weren't too snow covered. In fact, there wasn't much snow at all for the middle of November. Not that Amber had spent much time in Saskatchewan, but she'd anticipated it to be a lot colder, with a lot more snow.

She tilted the rearview mirror down so she could see her reflection. “Pull yourself together, Amber.” She took a deep breath. “You don't need to be in control. Just trust. You will be fine.”

It was silly. Ridiculous really, but it was a mantra she'd been repeating to herself for the last few days ever since she'd decided to go “off plan” for a little bit. If Josie had heard her, she would have laughed because she'd been telling Amber that for years. But Amber didn't care. Because as much as she loved her best friend, Josie didn't understand Amber's need for control. She never had. But then again, Josie's whole world hadn't been blown up when she was young. At a time when her family life was spinning out of control, the only thing she actually had any say in was managing all of the day-to-day details of her life. So she did.

And it had worked, too. For a while.

But more and more, Amber had been feeling as though something needed to change.

She was stuck. She'd been stuck for a long time. And although she had no idea how to get unstuck, she did know that she couldn't keep doing what she'd been doing.

Something needed to change.

The problem was, she still didn't know what.

---

COLE PRICE WAS sure his little sister wouldn't mind if he crashed at her house. Well, he was *pretty* sure Josie wouldn't mind. After all, she'd invited him. The fact that he'd screwed up on the dates and was a few weeks earlier than he'd told her he was coming wouldn't be a big deal.

Probably.

Either way, it didn't matter because she wasn't home when he let himself in the front door with the key he'd guessed to be under the flowerpot on the front porch. He'd laughed when Josie told him she was doing a flip in a tiny town in Saskatchewan. It didn't really seem like a hotbed for real estate, but just driving through the little town of Crystal Creek, even a guy like Cole, who was anti everything quaint and small town, could agree that it was probably a good investment. The town was cute, like a made-for-television movie. There seemed to be a handful of new businesses on the main street and people were walking around everywhere. Picturesque was the word that came to mind—some people liked that. Cole wasn't one of them, but he did like his little sister and after almost two years of backpacking and working in Australia, he actually missed her.

He unlocked the front door with a click and hauled his backpack and the one small bag of supplies that he'd stopped at the store for inside. Josie told him the house needed a lot of work—most flips did—but she'd insisted that

this one was livable. Her plan was to live in the house for a few months while she did the needed repairs. Cole had only taken a total of three steps into the house, but that was all he needed to see to know that the work would take longer than a few months.

The exterior paint was peeling badly, and he'd counted more than one shutter hanging askew. Never mind what he'd find when he looked a little closer at the roof and gutters. Although the outside was one thing, the inside was a whole other thing altogether.

Cole didn't bother to take his boots off as he walked across the seventies gold-flecked linoleum into the kitchen, where he was greeted with more seventies influence in the way of mustard-yellow appliances and matching golden oak cupboards and Formica countertops.

"Wow." He shook his head with a laugh as he opened the fridge to put his beer inside. "At least it works," he said. "There's nothing worse than warm beer." And since he was on the subject...he grabbed a can from the six-pack before he put it on the empty shelf inside.

He'd already been back in Canada, traveling for almost two weeks. He'd spent his time visiting old friends and paid an obligatory visit to his parents. He suffered through the guilt-filled conversations about how Dad was slowing down and could really use some help in the shop so he didn't have to work so hard. Just like every time he spoke with his parents, he tried to plant the suggestion that they just go ahead and sell the family store. Hell, it was more than suggestion, he'd come right out and said it more than once.

Mostly, Cole just wanted to visit with Josie. Despite their two-year age difference, they'd always been close. He would have been happier to spend more time with his little sister, but she'd been so busy with her flipping business. He'd take what he could get before he headed back to Sydney, hopefully before Christmas. Australia would be even better than it already was if it wasn't so damned far away. Although, the fact that it was on the other side of the world had definitely been one of the selling features of

buying the original plane ticket almost two years earlier. The farther he could get from his family, their expectations, and a life of responsibility and predictability, the better. And it had worked, too.

The irony of it was that now that Cole's parents had finally started to accept that he was never going to live the life that they wanted him to, he was starting to change his mind. Living and working in Australia had been everything Cole thought it would be. He worked when he needed to, loved when he wanted to, and moved on when it was time. But more and more, he'd been thinking that maybe there was something more out there.

He just didn't know what it was.

Hopefully a little time with his sister would help him sort out what his next step would be. He hadn't seen her since the last time he'd crashed on her couch when she was still in college, right before he'd left. They were definitely overdue for a catch-up. And by the looks of things, Josie would be able to use his help for a few days, too.

With his beer in hand, Cole walked through the house, taking a mental inventory of what needed to be done. The tour didn't take long, and when he was done investigating the upstairs, which really only had one usable room at the moment considering the others were full of fixtures, boxes, and cans of paint, he plopped down on the couch. At least Josie had a little bit of furniture and a TV. He flicked on the television and flipped through the channels until he found a football game. It didn't matter who was playing, especially because within thirty minutes, he could barely keep his eyes open. He managed to flick the television off before he stretched out and fell asleep in the dark room.

## Chapter Two

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DESPITE THE EARLY EVENING HOUR, it was already dark by the time Amber pulled up to the little house. She'd made the last-minute decision to stop at the grocery store in town to pick up a few supplies to get her through the night. She was looking forward to a hot shower and a quiet night in.

With the grocery bag balanced in one arm, she pulled her suitcase behind her and up onto the porch. Using the light from her cell phone, Amber found the key under the flowerpot, just the way Josie said she would. She opened the door and tucked the key back into her pocket. There was no way she was putting it back under there. It was ridiculous to leave a key to your home right there on the porch where anyone who happened to be walking by could get it. Especially considering Josie said everyone in town did it.

*Craziness.* And there was no way Amber would have anything to do with that kind of blatant disregard for her own personal safety.

She made her way into the little house, left her suitcase by the front door and took the bag into the kitchen, where she unloaded the few things she bought. She opened the retro fridge to put her orange juice inside, but there wasn't much in there, which was a bit concerning for Amber. *Wasn't Josie eating properly? She never did. She was always so thin, but could survive on potato chips and beer. Speaking of beer...*

Amber eyed the beer in the fridge. It had been a long time since she'd let

herself indulge in alcohol. Five months, three weeks, and two days to be exact. Not that she was counting, because she really wasn't. But she remembered the last time she'd had any alcohol at all, because her boyfriend Randy had bought a bottle of champagne to celebrate her graduation from college. The bubbles had tingled and popped on her tongue, and two glasses had made her head fuzzy, but not so fuzzy that she didn't sober up immediately when he broke up with her by telling her he didn't want to settle down to a boring and predictable life.

And that's all she offered.

They'd dated for over two years. She thought he was going to propose that night. After all, it was the next logical step. She'd graduated from school. Marriage should be next.

*Logical.* Everything she did was always logical. Planned. Organized. Despite the fact that he was an asshole about it, Randy was right. Life with her would have been boring and predictable. She couldn't blame him for not wanting that. Heck, *she* didn't want that. And it was her life. His leaving had been a shock to be sure, but Amber could honestly say that she didn't miss his presence. Which not only told her everything she needed to know about the relationship, but also gave her a bit of a shove in the right—hopefully less *logical*—direction.

She grabbed a beer and cracked it open. She was done with being boring and predictable. Before she put it to her lips, she paused and grabbed a tea towel to give the can a wipe. Okay, she wasn't totally done with being predictable and boring, but she was working on it.

She'd spent the last few months finishing her internship in Toronto at Wallace and McKwade, the accounting firm she'd expected to be offered a job at. She'd been so sure that she'd get the job that she hadn't even bothered to apply anywhere else. A move that she was regretting more and more every day. Because the offer hadn't come. And now, instead of being excited about the possibility of working at Wallace and McKwade, she was nervous and

uncertain. Six months ago—heck, even a month ago—she would have jumped at the opportunity to stay in Toronto and take the job, but she couldn't deny that Randy's words to her had sunk in.

Boring and predictable.

*Is that all life had to offer?*

Amber took a deep drink of her beer, grimacing a little at the sour taste. She'd never been a big beer drinker. It was all too much to think about for one night.

"One thing at a time," she told herself. After all, she'd just taken a plane halfway across the country, to a strange town in the middle of nowhere, to visit a friend who wasn't even there. If she was looking to burst out of her comfort zone, she'd done enough bursting for one day. There would be nothing wrong with sitting in front of the television and doing a bunch of nothing for the rest of the night.

Surely Josie had a television.

She took her beer, and the packaged salad she'd bought at the store, and made her way into the room she assumed would be the living room. She flicked the light switch.

Nothing.

*Of course.* Electrical was probably on the list of things Josie would be fixing. Hopefully the TV would work.

With her hands full, Amber did her best to navigate her way through the room. Her shin bumped into the coffee table. She set her beer and salad down and picked up the remote control she felt next to it. When she clicked it, the screen came on and illuminated the room enough for her to back up and plop down on the couch.

"Oomph! What the hell?"

Amber screamed as she jumped up. "Whoever you are..." Her eyes wide, she pressed her back against the wall, wielded the remote in her hand like a weapon, and turned to see whatever—or more likely, *whoever*—had made

the noise when she'd sat on what was decidedly *not* a couch. "You're trespassing," she continued, keeping her voice as steady as she could. "And I have a weapon." She wielded the remote in her hand like the weapon she didn't have and crouched into an attack position as she focused on the form on the couch.

As she watched, the man unfolded himself and got to his feet. He raised his hands in the air. "I'm not going to—"

"Don't move! Stay right—Cole?" Amber took a step back until she bumped into the wall. If running had been an option, she would have turned and ran all the way back to Ontario. But running wasn't an option because her body had gone from shock to fear to...full-on arousal.

---

COLE BLINKED ONCE and then again, hard. He'd been having a very nice dream that involved the Australian beach, a surfboard, and a woman in a very small bikini. Being woken by someone sitting on him wasn't exactly the way he'd been hoping that particular dream would end.

The voice sounded familiar, but in his sleepy fog, he didn't quite register who was staring at him, threatening him with... *a remote control?*

"Cole Price? What the hell are you doing here?"

*And there it was.* The icy formalness that could only be Josie's old roommate. "Amber."

"Yes. Who else would it be?"

He pulled himself to a sitting position and scratched at the scruff on his face. It had been at least a few weeks since he'd shaved. "Well, I don't know," he said. "For starters, I might have been expecting my little sister." He rubbed at his face, trying to wake himself up completely. "This is her house, after all."

Amber scowled, but he could see the flush working its way up her neck.



Cole tried not to smile, but he remembered very well the effect he'd had on his little sister's roommate two years ago when he'd visited. The attraction wasn't entirely one-sided, not by a long shot, not that he'd ever admit that out loud. She was his sister's friend, and she had a boyfriend. A particularly stuck-up douchebag, if he remembered correctly. But still, it wasn't his style to get involved with unavailable women.

"Josie isn't here." Amber's voice trembled just a little. "You should know that."

He shook his head. "Nope. Didn't know that."

"Then why are you here?"

He chuckled. "My sister's house. Remember?"

The flush moved up to her cheeks. But it wasn't Amber's cheeks that Cole was looking at. It was where the heated skin disappeared beneath her sweater, which pulled tightly over her currently heaving chest. His cock twitched. *Damn, she was definitely hot in that stick up your ass, wound up tighter than a top kinda way.*

"That doesn't explain why you're here." She jabbed the remote in his direction.

Cole moved to stand, but Amber's gestures with the remote got a little wilder so he held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, I'll sit. But you should too. And put that remote down before you hurt someone. I come in peace, I promise." He stopped himself before adding something crude that she probably wouldn't appreciate. Too many months spent on an Australian cattle ranch had left him a little rougher around the edges than usual.

He didn't really think she'd sit down, but to his surprise, she did. In a hardback chair across the room. Far away from him. The remote control was still clutched in her hand, but at least it wasn't pointed at him anymore.

"Amber, I'm not going to hurt you. You know me."

She looked as if she were going to say something but then her face turned an even brighter shade of red and she shook her head. "Tell me why you're

here,” she said after a moment. “Josie invited me to stay with her for a few days, and I just spoke with her. She didn’t tell me you’d be coming and I know she would have mentioned it. She knows how I like to...”

She let the sentence trail away, but she didn’t need to finish it. Amber always had been the *planner* type. The exact opposite of Josie, and him, for that matter. He wasn’t surprised that she was thrown off by his appearance. And now that he thought of it...the fact that Amber had a trip planned was probably the very reason Josie told him not to come for a few more weeks when he’d called the other day. His sister wasn’t stupid. She would have seen the way her roommate had reacted to her big brother the last time they’d been together. And as much as she loved him, there was no doubt that Josie thought Cole would be a bad influence on her straight-laced friend.

He laughed a little to himself at the ridiculous idea. But when he looked across the room at Amber—at the way her breath was still coming a little too quick, and the sexy flush that was starting to fade a bit—a very recognizable flash of desire fired low in his gut.

*Maybe Josie had a reason to be concerned after all?*

Cole cleared his throat and forced all dirty thoughts out of his mind. At least for the moment. “I arrived a little earlier than planned,” he said. “But don’t worry, I’m only here for a short visit and then back to Australia. Now, since you seem to have more information than I do, are you going to tell me where my sister is?”

“Right.” Amber, clearly resigned to the fact that Cole wasn’t going anywhere for the moment, reached forward and exchanged the remote control for the beer on the coffee table. “She’s in Vancouver to fix up a rental she had that went bad. It was last minute and she should be back in a few days. So maybe if you came back then, you’ll be able to—”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

She paused, the beer halfway to her lips. “You have to.”

“No I don’t.”

“But I’m here.”

“And?”

“You can’t be here when I’m here.”

He laughed out loud. “Why not? You seem to be perfectly comfortable helping yourself to my beers.” He pointed at the can in her hand. “Why not with my presence?”

She quickly put the can on the table and sat up, her back stiffer than ever.

“You can drink it.”

She shook her head and must have realized she was being ridiculous because she quickly added, “Thank you. And, just so you know, I’m not uncomfortable with you being here.”

He tilted his head and raised his eyebrow.

“I’m not,” she insisted. “I was just a little bit unprepared is all.”

“A little bit?”

“Okay...a lot.” She picked up the beer again and took a drink this time. “But really, if you could just come back after I leave...”

“I have nowhere else to go, sweetheart. So it looks like you’re stuck with me.”

---

SWEETHEART? *Sweetheart?!*

*Who did he think he was, calling her a name like that?*

Needing a little space to think, Amber disappeared into the kitchen. She couldn’t just sit there across from him like that. Not when he was looking at her with those eyes. Those green eyes that always seemed to look straight past every wall she’d ever put up.

She opened the fridge, practically threw her prepackaged salad inside, and slammed it shut again.

*Sweetheart.*

*Dammit.*

The worst part was, she'd liked it when he'd called her that. A lot. The word had sparked some kind of full-body reaction and she knew she was blushing again. Cole had that effect on her. He always had. Well, the only other time she'd met him, anyway. But that had been enough to fuel her dreams for months. Okay, longer than months. She'd just started dating Randy when Cole had come to visit Josie. She felt guilty even now remembering the way she used to think about what it would have felt like to have Cole's hands on her instead of Randy's, his lips on—*no!*

She needed to stop that. She couldn't allow herself to think about Cole like that. Not again. Absolutely nothing good could come out of that. Especially with him in the next room.

"Are you hungry?" His deep, slightly Australian-accented voice called from the living room.

Was she hungry? *Was she hungry?* If the way her body was vibrating was any indication, the answer was *yes. Hell yes.* She was really damn hungry.

"No," she replied, keeping her voice as steady as possible. "Not even a little."

"Well, I'm starving."

She whipped around to see him leaning against the doorjamb, looking even sexier than he had lying on the couch. *How was that even possible?*

"Let's go into town and get some food. I saw a pub when I was coming through. I bet they have wings."

At the mention of a little deep-fried goodness, Amber's stomach growled. *When was the last time she'd indulged in something like pub food?* She usually stuck to salads and chicken breasts. Wings would be good. *But going out with Cole?* That probably wasn't a good idea. No, it wouldn't be a good idea at all.

He must have seen her waver, because he added, "Come on. My treat. Besides, it'll give us a chance to discuss the arrangements here. I'm sure

you'll want a plan."

*Was he teasing her?*

Yes. One look at the cocky, but admittedly very sexy smile on his face, told her that he was definitely teasing her. But it didn't slip her notice that he remembered that detail about her. *Had he thought about her at all over the years?*

Amber almost laughed out loud at the ridiculousness of that thought. *Why on earth would Cole Price ever have given a second thought to his little sister's uptight roommate, who he met briefly two years ago?*

The thought was hilarious. But wings actually did sound like a pretty good idea. And teasing or not, Cole was right: she was going to need a plan. Or, in the interest of trying not to over plan everything, she needed some idea of what they were going to do because it certainly didn't seem as if either of them would be leaving.

"Okay," Amber agreed after a moment. "But give me a minute to freshen up. It's been a long day."

"Take all the time you need."

He didn't move from the doorway, so she had to walk directly past him, turning to the side to squeeze by. "Excuse me." He grinned, but only stepped back slightly. Despite her best effort to avoid him, Amber's breast brushed his chest, and the zing of electricity between them almost dropped her to her knees. She couldn't be sure how, but somehow she kept walking and grabbed her suitcase.

"Amber?"

She froze, her hand on her bag.

"Just for the record," he continued when she didn't turn around. "I don't think you need any time at all to freshen up. You look great."

## Chapter Three

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“JOSIE, ANSWER THE PHONE.” Amber held her phone tight to her ear and looked around her friend’s bedroom. She hadn’t known where else to go to freshen up. There were no other usable spare rooms and there was no way she could stay down there with *him*. “Josie, pick up...pick up...pick—” She paced the floor of the tiny space in an effort to slow her heart rate, to calm her mind, to...stop thinking about those eyes and the way they looked at her.

*Dammit.*

She was in so much trouble.

She was just about to hang up when finally her friend’s voice came across the line. “Amber? Are you—”

“What the hell, Josie?” Amber didn’t waste any time getting right to the point. “You didn’t tell me your *brother* was going to be here.”

“Cole?”

“Is there another one?”

God help her if there was more than one.

“What’s he doing there?”

“You tell me.”

“He’s not supposed to be visiting for a few weeks. Christmas. I was going to have him help me out while he was here, but I was hoping to enjoy a bit of time with you before he came to—”

“Well, he’s here *now*.” Amber stopped pacing and stared at herself in the mirror. Her blonde hair was disheveled from travel, and had started to unravel from her tight French braid. The effect left her looking slightly wild, at least by her standards. But not as wild as the look in her eyes. Is that what Cole did to her?

*Was that a bad thing?*

“Oh.”

“Yes. Oh.”

“Okay, well, it’s not ideal, but—”

“Right?” Amber exhaled with relief. Thank goodness Josie realized that it was definitely not okay that Cole was there with her.

“I’ll send him a text right now.”

“Thank you, Josie.” Amber worked it out in her head. Josie would text him and tell him that he had to leave. She could get through one night with him in the house and he’d be gone in the morning.

“He can get started with a few things before I get back.”

“I just think it’s better if he’s not—wait.” Amber froze again. “What did you say? Get started?”

“Yes. With the house,” Josie said. “I mean, it’s not ideal that he arrived while I’m not there, but I really do need his help with a few things so I might as well—”

“You want him to stay?” She realized she sounded ridiculous. Of course Josie wanted her brother to stay.

“Of course I do,” she said, as if she’d just read Amber’s mind. “He’s my brother, Amber. Is that okay? I mean, there’s no problem with him being there, is there?”

She couldn’t be sure, but Amber could have sworn there was a trace of suspicion in Josie’s voice. There was no way she could explain to her best friend that she found her older brother intensely, dangerously sexy. Like, to the point of distraction, sexy. The kind of sexy that could get her into serious

trouble. *No*. She absolutely could not tell Josie that. “No,” Amber said quickly. “There’s no problem. At all.”

She hoped her voice sounded a whole lot more relaxed than she felt.

“Oh, good, because this trip is going to put me behind with my timeline and if I can’t get this house sorted out quickly, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I need the rental income to get the Crystal Creek house finished. Can you ask him to call me when he has a second?”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Great, because I was hoping to be out of here by tomorrow, but now the carpet is...anyway, it doesn’t matter. I could actually really use Cole here, but as long as he’s in Crystal Creek I might as well use his talents on that house, right?”

“Right.” Amber agreed, although her mind immediately went to a different kind of talent she was sure Cole possessed. The kind of talent that Amber couldn’t help but be very interested in.

Josie prattled on for a few more minutes about how things were going with the house repairs in Vancouver. Amber put her on speakerphone and only half listened as she changed into a fresh blouse from her suitcase and brushed her hair out before tying it back into a tight braid.

“I’m really sorry, Amber.” The shift in conversation caught her attention and she picked up the phone again.

“For what?”

“I know how you don’t like surprises,” Josie said, her voice sincere. “I know with everything over the last few months, this must be—”

“It’s fine,” Amber cut her off as she assessed her reflection in the mirror.

“It is?”

“It really is.” It wasn’t a total lie. After all, Amber *had* told herself that things had to change. Boring and predictable were out. New and spontaneous were in. Maybe the more she said it, even to herself, the more she’d actually start to believe it. “I’m trying something new.”



“Really? Then maybe you’d like to—”

Amber laughed at the skepticism in her friend’s voice and cut off her idea before it could take root. “I said I was *trying* something new, Josie. One step at a time, okay?”

---

LESS THAN AN HOUR LATER, Amber and Cole were seated in a faded red plush lined booth in the back of the only pub in town, the Tipping Cow. There wasn’t much to it, but the music was good and the beer was cold, and as far as Cole was concerned, those were the two most important things for a night out in a small town. Aside from the company, of course. “To us.” Cole raised his mug of beer and waited for Amber to join him in the toast. To his surprise, he didn’t have to wait long.

“To us,” she repeated. “Although, I have absolutely no idea why we would toast to us.”

She took a sip of her beer. Another surprise for Cole. When he’d offered to order a jug of draft, he thought for sure she’d want to order a glass of white wine or a martini or something. She was full of surprises. Not that she shouldn’t be. After all, they barely knew each other and spending a few days in someone’s apartment two years earlier didn’t mean he knew anything about her at all.

But dammed if he didn’t want to know everything there was to know. Something about her buttoned-down, scared-to-jump, uptight schoolmarm look that she had going on made Cole want to know a whole lot more about her. More specifically, what exactly was hiding under that hard shell.

“We’re toasting to us,” he said after his own sip of beer, “because we’re here. Together. And if that isn’t a reason to toast, I’m not sure what is.”

“Oh.” She blushed and kind of half choked on her beer before her fingers came up to her mouth and Cole had to force himself not to stare. “I didn’t—”

“I know you didn’t expect, or maybe even want, this.” He cut her off smoothly. “But that’s what we’ve got and I, for one, don’t think it’s such a bad thing.”

She tipped her head and examined him for a moment. “You don’t?”

“No. Not at all. In fact, I can’t think of a better way to spend a few days before Josie gets home than with her best friend.” He actually could. He could think of a whole lot more specific ways to spend the time with her—notably in bed, or up against a wall. He wasn’t picky. But he was pretty sure if he said those things out loud, she’d either slap him in the face or turn around and run out of there. Neither of which were things he wanted.

As it was, Amber blushed. But her blouse was buttoned up all the way to the collar and he was robbed of seeing the sexy warm skin on her neck that he knew was hiding under the thin fabric.

“Don’t tell me you can think of something better, then?” he challenged her. “Because this seems pretty good to me.”

The tension between them was thick, but not uncomfortable. Quite the opposite. He liked it. Because a sexual tension that strong meant only one thing: the release—when it finally came—would be dynamite. That being said, Amber wasn’t like the other women he usually flirted with, and for a moment, Cole worried that maybe he’d pushed her too far, too fast. Amber was definitely the type who would spook easy. Like a frightened kitten. It was entirely possible she would run and hide. But he could see a strength in her, too, and he was counting on the glimmer of a tiger inside that would keep her from running. Because despite the fact that he’d like to get a little closer, he’d meant it when he said he couldn’t think of anything better than spending time with her. He couldn’t. After a few weeks of couch surfing with old friends who he’d completely run out of things in common with, and dealing with his parents, flirting with Amber for a few days would be a very welcome distraction.

Before Amber could answer properly, the waitress arrived and slid a

basket of wings between them. Amber sat back and smiled at the woman, thanking her, and just like that, the tension between them was broken. She grabbed one of the wings and bit into it.

“I thought you weren’t hungry?” Cole laughed and chose a wing of his own.

A moment later, she tossed the bones on a plate. “I was wrong.” Her voice was low, and unlike he’d heard it before. “I’m actually quite hungry.” She watched him with heavy-lidded eyes, and when she put her finger in her mouth and slowly—oh so slowly that he wished he were that finger—licked it clean, Cole finally realized what she was talking about.

He sat back, his chicken wing forgotten, trying to process what had just happened. *So much for frightened little kitten.* She’d transformed in front of his eyes, in a millisecond. It was a transformation he wasn’t entirely sure he trusted, but it was interesting for sure. He reached across the table and took her hand. “Why don’t we start with wings and beer and see where it goes.”

Just as he expected her to, Amber stiffened slightly, giving herself away. *Welcome back, little kitten.* Cole chuckled a little to himself and released her hand. “It’s okay, Amber. I’m not going to bite.” Ironically, he had to bite his tongue to keep from adding, *Not unless you want me to.* That would be *way* too much, *way* too soon.

She didn’t respond, but instead went back to the wings. This time, she ate a little less seductively, using her napkin to wipe her fingers. It was disappointing to be sure, but Cole forced himself not to stare. He waited a few minutes before he shifted the conversation to a much safer topic. “So, what have you been up to for the last few years? Unlike my sister, I assume you stayed in school.”

“Why would you assume that?” Her voice hardened and she stiffened her shoulders. “Because I seem like the *school* type? The super predictable type?”

“Whoa.” He held up his hands in defense as he clearly hit a nerve. “I

didn't mean anything by it at all. It's just that Josie dropped out and I would hope, or think anyway, that most people have a little more common sense than her when it comes to things like their future."

"Do you?" she challenged. "Have more sense than her?"

He laughed. "Good point. I suppose as the big brother, I don't set the best example myself."

Cole hadn't even graduated from post-secondary. He'd finished a semester, but it hadn't been for him. With every class he took it just felt like he was inching closer and closer to a life he didn't want. So he'd quit, bought a ticket to Australia, and left.

"Not really," she agreed with him. "But dropping out didn't turn out too badly for her. Josie's killing it and she seems really happy bouncing from place to place." Her eyes took on a faraway look for a moment. "And besides your poor example," Amber refocused on him, "she sure seems to think the world of you."

It would have been Cole's turn to blush, if he were the blushing type. Which he wasn't. He took a sip of beer and refilled both of their glasses from the jug. "I don't know why she does," he said finally. "But the feeling is totally mutual. If it wasn't for Josie, I wouldn't be back in Canada at all. I tried to get her to come out to see me, but she said she was too busy. Judging by the fact that she isn't even here, I guess that's true. But you didn't answer my question. Are you still in school?"

"Yes and no." She dabbed at her lips with the napkin.

"What does that mean?"

"I was in school," she clarified. "I no longer am. I graduated," she added before he could ask. "In the spring. I just spent the last six months finishing up an internship."

"Congratulations." Cole raised his glass to toast her. She reluctantly met his cheers. "That's fantastic. So now you're an..."

"Accountant. Pretty exciting, isn't it?"

“Honestly?” He laughed. “Not really. But I know that some people love that kind of thing. You strike me as one of those people who get excited by numbers.”

She made a noise halfway between a laugh and a snort. It was oddly sexy. “I would strike you as that type, wouldn’t I?”

“Am I wrong?” She sighed, and Cole got the distinct impression he’d said something very wrong. “I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m sorry if I—”

“No. You’re not wrong.” She interrupted him. “But you’re not right, either. I used to love numbers. I loved the idea of looking at them every day and making a career out of it. I mean, they’re black and white. Right or wrong. There is no gray or in between. I liked that about accounting. But lately...I’m not so sure. I’m just not really sure anymore that I want to spend the rest of my life being boring and predictable.”

Something in her tone told him there was a lot more behind her words than what she was saying. “And you think that being an accountant would be boring and predictable?” Hell, *he* knew it was. Just saying it out loud was boring. But obviously it was a new development for Amber.

“Can I tell you something?” she asked, instead of answering the question.

“Of course.”

Amber fiddled with the napkin in her hand for a moment. “I’ve only just graduated, and I already think I made a mistake.” She swallowed hard. “For the last few months, I’ve busted my ass for my internship. I got there early; I stayed late. I was always available on weekends and I did everything I could to learn everything I could because I just *knew* that I wanted the job that I was absolutely sure they’d offer me. It’s the most prestigious firm in the country. It would be an amazing career move.”

“That’s great.”

“Is it?” She picked up her glass and drained it.

“Of course it is.” Cole didn’t really think so, but he wasn’t Amber. And from what he knew of Amber, it seemed as if it would be great.

“Well, they didn’t offer me the job when I left,” she said. “They said they had a few decisions to make and they’d get back to me.”

“Oh.”

She nodded and then shrugged. “But I think that might be okay, because I’m not so sure about it anymore.”

That took Cole off guard. “Why not?”

Amber gestured to the jug, so he dutifully filled her empty beer mug. She took another healthy gulp before she answered. “I’m sick of being boring. I’m ready for a little excitement in my life. Something fun and unpredictable.” The way she slammed her glass down, as well as the tone of her voice and the way she was looking at him, told Cole she’d definitely had just enough to drink to be chatty. And maybe to make some poor decisions, too.

As much as he would love for her to make some poor decisions with him, he was way too much of a gentleman for that.

He slid the basket of wings across the table. “You should probably have some more to eat.”

---

AMBER KNEW she was drinking too much. She was also talking too much, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. More importantly, she didn’t *want* to stop herself. She wanted to drink, talk, and flirt, and...*maybe more*.

That idea came out of nowhere. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. From the moment she realized it was Cole she’d sat on, her hormones had been in overdrive. Because it was *Cole*. Something about the man simply oozed sex. From the moment she’d met him years ago, he’d been the unspoken standard she’d always set for sexiness. Unspoken, because there was no way she could ever tell him that she thought he was the sexiest man alive. Never. And she could definitely never tell Josie.

That being said, Cole was the only man she'd ever fantasized about. Ever. Even when she was with Randy—okay, *especially* when she was with Randy—it was often Cole she was picturing.

But the only reason she'd let herself fantasize about Cole was because he was *safe*. Untouchable—a fantasy. Nothing would or could ever happen between them. For one, Cole had been living on the other side of the world. Second, and most importantly, he was her best friend's brother. Which was exactly why there was no way she would ever act on any attraction she might have for him. Not that she actually would, anyway. She didn't *do* things like that. Never mind the small—yet very important—detail that there was zero point zero zero chance that a man like Cole would ever be interested in a woman like her. They simply were not a match.

Amber ate two more wings before Cole spoke again. “For the record, I don't think you're boring.”

She almost choked. “Yeah, right.”

“It's true. I don't.”

She shot him a look. If he was trying to tease her, she wasn't in the mood. “Everyone thinks I'm boring. Always have.”

*Because that's what you've always been.*

“Why would they think that?”

She sighed and weighed whether it was worth it to say anything or not. It's not as if they really knew each other, after all. Of course, maybe that made him the perfect person to say something to. “Thing is,” she began before she could stop herself. “That's kind of always been my thing.”

“Your thing?”

“Boring. Predictable.” She shrugged. “When I was in high school, my friends used to call me Mom because I always had things lined up and figured out. Like a walking day planner. It was...still kind of is...the way I am.”

“Always?”

She nodded. “Well, not always, but it feels that way.” She laughed at herself and shook her head. “At any rate, I’m over it. It’s time to shake things up. No more boring.”

Amber expected Cole to laugh along with her, but instead he just shook his head slowly and lifted his beer to his lips.

“Seriously, Amber,” Cole said after a minute. “I mean, maybe you’re not the most adventurous, crazy, no-holds-barred woman I’ve ever met, but you’re certainly not boring. Obviously I didn’t know you when you were younger, but would a boring woman agree to stay in a house with her best friend’s brother who she barely knows and help him with some renovations?”

She couldn’t disagree with that. A predictable woman would *never* do that. “No, I guess not.” She looked down into her drink. “I mean, it’s not that—wait.” Her head jerked up as she realized what he was doing. “What? I didn’t agree to help with any renovations.”

“You didn’t?” He grinned and took a wing from the basket. “I could have sworn you did.”

When Cole winked at her, it took all the willpower she had not to melt into a puddle right there under the table. Was it possible that *he* was flirting with *her*?

*No.* There was no way.

She took a moment to compose herself, and then another as she tried to clear her beer-clouded brain enough to formulate a thought. *If Cole was really flirting with her, then maybe...no...it was still a bad idea.* It was still a no. There was definitely reason number two to deal with. Even if, for some miraculous reason, a guy like him was remotely interested in a woman like her, he was still Josie’s brother. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t have a little fun flirting for a few days. Totally innocent.

And maybe it would be good practice for the new *fun* version of Amber. She had the rest of her life to be boring and predictable. A few days of flirting would definitely not hurt. Maybe it was the beer, or maybe it was the fact that



she was fresh out of a loveless, and super boring, relationship. Or, more likely, it was a combination of everything. Either way, Amber had nothing more to lose. So she tilted her head and smiled at him. “Maybe I will help with some of the renos.” She waited a beat and added, “That is, if you help *me* with something.”

She knew she was playing with fire, but she couldn't stop herself. More than that, she didn't want to, especially when she saw the way his eyes lit up and his nostrils flared with her words. She wasn't the only one having a reaction.

“Oh yeah?” He reached across the table and took her hand. It took everything in her not to self-combust on the spot. “And what's that?”

“I'll help you with the renos...if you take me to the festival.” His face fell and his eyes clouded with confusion. Amber tried not to laugh as she pulled her hand away and pointed to the poster that hung behind him.

“The First Frost Festival?” He read the poster and turned back to her. “You want me to take you to some small-town festival?”

She nodded and couldn't help the smile that crossed her face. “I do.”

He turned around and read some more. “Sleigh rides, an ice castle, and a...” He looked at her. “Frosty Frolic? What exactly is that?”

Amber shrugged. “I don't really know. But it could be fun. Either way, you don't have to take me to everything. Just a few things.”

A sly grin crossed his face. “And do I get to pick which things I take you to?”

She leaned forward and looked him straight in the eye. “I guess that depends on what you pick.”

## Chapter Four

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THE SMELL of coffee worked its way into Amber's consciousness and her eyelids fluttered open. It took her a moment to remember where she was.

Josie's house.

Josie's bed.

Josie's *brother*.

Amber flipped over to stare at the other side of the bed and instantly wished she hadn't.

It was empty.

She flopped back against the pillow and squeezed her eyes shut in an effort to recover her dreams.

They'd been so real. Cole was lying next to her, kissing her, touching her...

*No.*

It had been a dream.

Of course it had been a dream. She wasn't about to sleep with Cole. No matter how many beers she'd had and how sexy he was and how much she'd flirted with him the night before. And...she *had* flirted.

Her face grew hot with the memory of her tipsy flirting. There was a reason she never behaved that way. She pulled the quilt over her head and groaned.

*That was it. She was never drinking again.*

Thankfully, it was just her pride that was aching and she didn't have to deal with any kind of hangover, only a small headache. Nothing a shower couldn't fix. As quietly as she could, so as not to draw any attention to herself, Amber slipped out of bed and cracked the bedroom door. She peeked down the hallway, but the coast was clear. It was an old house, and she sent up a silent prayer that the floor wouldn't creak as she tiptoed to the bathroom down the hall. It was bad enough having Cole in the house with her; he didn't need to see her in what could only be described as a morning mess, fresh off a *very* sexy dream about—

“Good morning.”

Amber jumped back as the bathroom door opened. A cloud of steam with a half-naked, still dripping Cole emerged as if she were standing in the middle of a Hollywood romantic comedy. Amber forgot about her own current state of half dress as she stared at him.

If she thought he was sexy fully dressed—and she did—she was absolutely not prepared for the raw sex appeal of Cole Price with only a towel hung low on his hips, inches from her, smelling like soap and...man.

“Amber?”

She nodded, closed her mouth and tried—fairly unsuccessfully—to pull herself together. “Hi,” she managed to say. “I mean...good morning... I mean...I didn't think you'd be...I smelled the coffee and...I was just going to...”

“You were going to shower?”

She nodded again and tried hard not to look at the dip on his hips where the towel hung oh so low. “I didn't think you'd be up here.”

His eyes traveled up and down her, no doubt taking in her flannel pajamas and her tossed hair. His lips twitched up into a grin as his eyes finally landed on hers. “I can tell.”

Her skin exploded in a full body flush, not that he'd be able to tell—she

was fully and properly covered up. Still, Amber tugged at her pajama top and crossed her arms over her chest. Very aware that as covered as she was, she wasn't wearing a bra. "Right. Well, I think I should just..." Amber moved to walk past him into the bathroom and put an end to the awkward moment. But when he didn't make any motion to get out of the way, she stopped and started again. "Excuse me, Cole."

"Right." His smile was wicked and just a little too dangerous. "I'll be downstairs." He finally stepped forward a little bit, but not enough to let her pass without having to turn to the side and shimmy past him. "We have a busy day ahead of us," Cole added just before she closed the door. "I'll make us some breakfast. I have a feeling we're going to need the energy."

---

AS PROMISED, Cole whipped up a huge breakfast, doing the best he could with the little he found in his sister's cupboards. He was thankful for the distraction, although try as he might, he couldn't get the perfect image of a sleep-tousled Amber out of his head. Even in her perfectly proper, completely typical flannel pajamas, she sparked something deep inside him. Something he would love to explore a little bit more. Just the way he'd love to explore exactly what she was hiding under those pajamas.

*Damn that woman.*

Cole forced himself to focus on the breakfast preparations. Amber was the exact opposite of everything he'd ever been attracted to. He preferred his women to be outgoing party animal types, wearing skimpy clothes, throwing themselves at him...always up for a good time. But definitely not a long time.

*Maybe it's time for a change?*

He shook his head and laughed at himself before he flipped the pancakes. Even if it was time for a change, Amber was definitely *not* going to be that change. She wasn't the type of girl who did flings. And time for something

different or not, he wasn't looking for that kind of different. Not one that tied him somewhere, to someone. That wasn't his style. Besides, Josie would kill him if he messed with Amber. And the last thing he needed to do was piss off the only family member he actually cared about.

*No.* A little flirting would be fine, but nothing more. He was smart enough to know when to draw the line. Except, when it came to Amber, the line should have been drawn from the moment he laid eyes on her again. Because it was starting to get a little blurry.

"It smells fantastic in here."

Cole flipped the pancakes onto the plate and turned around to see Amber in the doorway. She was dressed simply in jeans and a T-shirt, with her signature tight blonde braid down her back. It had been nice to see her hair tossed and dissolved from the bed earlier. Something about it made him think instantly about what her hair would look like after spending a night in bed *with him*. The image filled his brain and sent an electric shot straight to his dick. *Damn.*

So much for drawing that line.

Somehow Cole managed to recover his senses enough to speak. "It's just a little something I whipped up." He put the plate on the table and retrieved the other dishes from the oven, where he was keeping them warm. "I hope you like your eggs scrambled. I found some bacon in the freezer, too."

"It looks fantastic." She took a seat at the table. "And I'm starving." Cole poured her a cup of coffee before he sat across from her. "Thanks." She smiled at him and shook her head with a small grin.

"What? Why are you shaking your head?"

"It's nothing." She chuckled a little as she cut a piece of pancake. "I'm just really surprised, is all. You don't seem like the type of guy who cooks breakfast. Or really, cooks at all." She popped the pancake in her mouth and Cole had to force himself to look away from her mouth.

It wasn't the first time he'd heard something similar. "Well, I don't know

why the kind of men you know don't cook, but I think it's a pretty important skill to have." He laughed. "Besides, working on the ranches in Australia, it kind of becomes a necessity. At least as far as backcountry cooking goes. And it doesn't hurt with the ladies."

"Well, I think it's pretty awesome." She took another bite and closed her eyes as she did so. "This is delicious, Cole. Really."

"I'm glad you like it." It was the truth; he was pleased that she was enjoying it. Despite the fact that Amber seemed to be having a full body experience with her breakfast, it was refreshing to cook for a woman who actually ate. Most of the women he'd cooked breakfast for just pushed the food around the plate while chugging their coffee. And that was after keeping them up all night. *What kind of appetite would Amber have after a night together?*

The thought slammed into him and he was glad he was sitting because there was no way he'd be able to hide the effect she was having on him. Amber was different, that was for sure, even if he couldn't quite put his finger on what made her different. "Eat up," he said in an effort to distract himself from his growing erection. "We have a big day today."

She grinned at him. "Is that right?"

"It is. I spoke to Josie this morning and she gave me her list of things that need to be done, so we're going to get started with some of the small stuff."

"Like what?" Amber held a piece of bacon poised at her lips.

He tried not to look at her, but it was a losing battle. "The first thing we're going to do is pull up some flooring." It would be hard, dirty work. Nothing sexy about it at all. The perfect distraction. "Are you up for it?"

She chewed her bacon slowly before she shrugged. "Of course. And then later..."

Instantly, Cole's mind raced with the possibilities for *later*.

"There's a sleigh ride."

It took a moment for Cole to push aside a dozen or so dirty thoughts that

filled his head and catch up with what she was saying. “A what?”

“A sleigh ride.” Amber repeated herself. “Although I don’t think there’s quite enough snow for it. Besides, you did say you’d go to the festival with me, didn’t you?”

He laughed. “I did. But I believe I said that I would pick the activities.”

Amber put a scoop of scrambled eggs on her plate and shrugged. “Well, just in case you forgot, I thought I’d help you out.” She nodded toward his mostly untouched plate of food. “You better eat something.” She winked. “We have a big day ahead of us.”

## Chapter Five

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“I’M SO SORRY, AMBER.”

“It’s fine, really.” Amber paced the small hallway and examined the faded yellow linoleum. Cole had gone out to the garage to get tools. Whatever tools one required to pull up flooring. She really had no idea at all. The fact that she’d even agreed to help was almost laughable. No doubt Cole would regret asking her because she had absolutely no experience with such things.

“You’re really going to help Cole with the floor?”

“I guess I am.” She laughed as she walked to the open door and leaned against the doorjamb, where she could watch Cole in the detached garage. “Maybe I really am full of surprises.”

Josie didn’t even bother hiding her laughter on the other end of the line. “Right, Amber. I love you. But when I think of you, I do not think of someone full of surprises.”

Amber straightened up and frowned, despite the fact that her friend couldn’t see. “You never know,” she said. “I just might be.” Cole turned at that moment and smiled in her direction, sending her insides into some sort of somersault meltdown. “Remember, I told you I’m trying something new. I need a change.”

“And house renos are where it’s at, huh?”



“They might be.”

“Whatever.” Josie chuckled again. “But do me a favor, okay?”

“What’s that?”

“Keep my brother out of trouble while he’s there.”

Amber’s face flushed. “What do you mean?”

“You know my brother. He can be a bit of a...well...” Josie sighed. “I’d really appreciate it if you kept him away from any ladies in town. I’m new and if I want this house to flip, I really can’t afford to make any enemies. It is a small town.”

“So you want me to keep him from hooking up with any *locals*?” Amber was splitting hairs, and completely playing with fire, but she also kind of didn’t care. Intellectually, she knew Josie might be pissed if she fooled around with Cole. But then again...she did seem more concerned about Cole getting into trouble with the locals, and as long as Amber knew what she was getting into...well...there would be no trouble. Besides, no one seemed to believe her that she wanted a little adventure, and maybe Cole being here at the same time was fate’s way of lining up just the adventure she needed.

“Exactly,” Josie said. “I can’t think of anything worse than Cole getting involved with one of the locals.”

“I think I can keep him away from the *locals*.” Amber bit her lower lip while all sorts of dirty thoughts raced through her head. It wasn’t a great idea. Getting involved with Josie’s big brother was a *terrible* idea, even if it was for a little no-strings-attached fun. She knew that. She sighed with frustration and walked into the kitchen where she wouldn’t be able to see the subject of their discussion. She’d never be able to go through with it anyway. That was the *real* problem.

“Are you okay, Amber?”

She nodded before she realized Josie couldn’t see her. “I’m fine. Don’t worry, I’ll keep Cole out of trouble and we’ll get some work done around here. You just take care of whatever it is you need to take care of.” She tried

to put a smile into her voice. “Don’t worry about a thing.”

“Thank you.” She could hear her friend’s relief across the line. “Again, I’m so sorry about not being there. The First Frost Festival in town is supposed to be really fun. You guys really should go to some of the events. Please don’t work the whole time—I’ll feel terrible.”

Amber picked up the flyer she’d grabbed from the bar the night before. Her eyes skimmed the list of events. “Don’t worry. I think we’ll check out the sleigh ride tonight, although there isn’t any snow. This is kind of a strange time for a festival, don’t you think?”

“It is,” Josie agreed. “When I asked about it in town, it seems that it started almost fifty years ago when the mayor at the time was trying to one-up the neighboring town with their Holiday Festival.”

“So by doing it early...”

“Exactly.” Josie laughed. “I’m not even going to pretend to understand this small-town stuff. But I do think it’s pretty cool.”

Amber nodded. She was starting to agree with her friend. “When are you going to be back? Please tell me it’s in time for the big dance on Sunday. There’s supposed to be a Snow Ball.” She laughed as she said it out loud. But silly name or not, she did like to dance. Some of her best memories of college were when she and Josie would dance the night away at campus parties. It would be a perfect way to end the week.

“That’s my plan,” Josie said. “I don’t want to miss it if I can help it.”

“Good. I’m really looking forward to seeing you.”

“Me too. It’s been way too long.” There was a voice in the background and then Josie said, “Amber? But I have to go now, but don’t hesitate to call if you need anything. And thank you again for all your help.”

Amber hung up the phone right as Cole walked through the door. “Was that my sister?”

“It was.”

“Did you ask her about the floor?”

Amber shook her head. “What about it? I thought we were pulling it up.”

Cole laughed and handed her some work gloves. “We are. I just wondered how much she wanted us to do. I guess we’ll see what we can get through.”

“Right.” She followed him back to the front foyer and watched while he squatted and turned his attention to the job. She tried to focus on what he was doing, and not on the way his jeans pulled taut against his backside, but it was a battle she was losing—quickly. “We should get to work,” Amber said, more to herself than anything else. She blinked hard and squatted down next to him. With her gloves on, she gripped the edge of the linoleum he’d loosened.

“Okay,” Cole said. “On my count, we’ll pull up and see what happens. Ready?”

She looked over to see him watching her intently. Amber couldn’t help herself. Something about him made her flirty in a way that was totally unlike anything she’d experienced before. “I’ve never been more ready.” Something flashed in his eyes, and she licked her bottom lip a little before looking away.

Where had *that* come from?

Amber had to force herself to stay where she was when all she really wanted to do was jump up and run away. She *never* behaved that way. *Ever!*

It took Cole a moment, but he cleared his throat and told her to pull.

Fortunately, once they started working, Amber didn’t have time to think about anything else, except for yanking, pulling, and scraping the old yellow linoleum from the floor. It was harder work than she’d expected, but the time went quickly and she was surprised that hours had gone by when Cole finally rolled up the last of the old floor and tossed it out into the yard.

“Good work, partner.” He wiped the back of his hand along his forehead and leaned up against the wall. Despite the cool weather outside, they’d both worked up a sweat.

“I think we deserve a drink.” She draped her arms over her knees where

she sat on the floor and tipped her head back.

“I think we deserve more than that.” Cole crossed the floor until he stood over her.

Despite her exhaustion, her heart sped up by his nearness and she was thankful they were already overheated so he wouldn't notice the flush that he never failed to bring out in her. She took his outstretched hand and allowed him to pull her up to standing but he didn't release her right away.

His other hand brushed over her face and moved a stray hair off her forehead. Despite herself, she shivered under his touch. He didn't remove his hand, but instead let it trail down her cheek to rest on her shoulder. For a moment, Amber was sure he was going to kiss her. And she would have kissed him back, because he was right: they deserved more than a drink. They *deserved* that kiss, and surely Josie would have to agree.

But then he pulled away, leaving her feeling oddly unsettled on her feet. “We deserve to go on that sleigh ride I promised you.”

Her mind spun as she tried to process what he'd just said. “The...what?”

He chuckled. “There's no way you forgot already.” His smile only made her feel more foolish. “I promised if you helped me out, I'd take you to the festival, remember?”

“Of course I remember. I just thought...never mind.” She shook her head and straightened her shoulders in an effort to pull herself together before she made an even bigger fool of herself. She laughed, and hoped the sound came out naturally. “We should probably get changed and get moving so we don't miss it.”

---

AFTER A QUICK SHOWER AND CHANGE, they hopped into Cole's rental truck and headed into town in search of the First Frost Festival. Not that Cole had any interest at all in a festival of any kind. Sitting on a sleigh, or

whatever it was they were going to use, sounded like a certain kind of hell as far as he was concerned. But Amber seemed to be excited by the idea, and for reasons that he still couldn't quite put into words, the prospect of making Amber happy had become more important than anything else.

They stopped at the cafe for a hot chocolate and directions out to the sleigh ride, which was to be held at one of the resident's farms.

"It's at the Stevens' place," the girl behind the counter said when they asked, as if they should know exactly where the Stevens' place was. She gave them a slightly annoyed look and swallowed down a sigh when Cole asked for directions.

"Thanks for your help." He handed the girl a tip that put a smile on her face, and made the annoyance of having to give directions go away completely. "I don't think I've ever been in a town this small," Cole said to Amber as they made their way back out to the truck. "I thought she might pull a muscle from rolling her eyes when we asked where the Stevens' place was."

"Teenagers." Amber laughed. "But I do think it's cool that there's definitely no fear of strangers here. Everyone seems welcome."

"It's kind of nice." He opened the truck door for Amber and was rewarded by her beautiful smile. "It reminds me of the friendliness of Australia," Cole continued when he climbed into the cab of the truck next to her. "I like it."

She smiled again. In fact, Amber was smiling a lot, which was perfectly fine with Cole. Amber was beautiful when she smiled. Hell, she was beautiful all the time, but when she smiled...there was something particularly sexy about her. Especially because she seemed to just let herself go instead of thinking so much. Cole got the distinct impression that she spent far too much time thinking about things and he'd like to know why.

"Here you go, navigator." Cole handed her the sheet of directions out to the farm and turned out onto the gravel road. As it turned out, they didn't

need many directions at all. Signs attached to snow-covered hay bales had been set up all over the highway, pointing the way, and soon enough, Cole pulled the truck into the yard where the festivities were already in full swing.

“Are you ready for this?” Amber eyed him across the cab of the truck with a tilt of her head. She still had her hair in a tight braid, but Cole hadn’t missed the little bit of makeup she’d put on for their—it’s not really a date... but he might like it to be—date.

“Am *I* ready?” He laughed. “You forget I’ve been living on ranches in the Outback for the last few years. Rides pulled by horses are my favorite way to relax.” It was a lie and they both knew it, but Amber’s eyes sparkled as she played along.

“Is that right?”

“In fact, I am the king of hayrides. Never met one I didn’t like.”

“This is a *sleigh* ride, not a hayride.”

“Are you sure about that?” He raised an eyebrow and tipped his head in the direction of what looked like a large wagon covered in hay bales. “So much for a sleigh, right?”

She shook her head. “I’m not surprised, though. There isn’t enough snow for a sleigh. Either way, it’ll be fun. Besides, you’re the king of hayrides.”

She laughed and slid out of the truck.

Cole shook his head and joined her outside. He’d done a whole lot more shoveling of hay rather than riding on any. And as far as he was concerned, there wasn’t anything fun or romantic about hay, not that it needed to be romantic...after all, they were just friends going out to enjoy the festival.

*Still.*

“Let’s go check it out.” He took her hand in his and started to walk in what looked like to be the right direction. She stiffened immediately at his touch and her hand tensed in his. Cole looked down at their joined hands before looking up to her pretty face currently lined with shock. “Oh, Amber. I’m...” He let his thought trail away because he wasn’t sorry and he was

definitely not going to apologize for holding her hand when it actually felt like the most natural thing in the world to do. So he didn't. Instead, he winked and squeezed it a little. "I'm excited about this." When she didn't pull away, Cole tugged gently and led her toward the crowd.

People were everywhere, laughing and talking and just having a great time. Most of them seemed to know one another, which wasn't a surprise, but it became quickly apparent that even those who didn't know anyone—notably Amber and Cole—would be welcome. They were greeted with handshakes and smiles and more introductions than either of them could remember. When Cole explained that his sister was remodeling a house in town, he was handed business cards and pieces of paper with names and numbers for people willing to help with manual labor, pickup trucks, or supplies of all kinds.

It took a few minutes, but finally Cole managed to extract himself and Amber from the main crowd. He found a small table where he'd been told *Moon Juice* was being sold.

"What exactly is *Moon Juice*?" Amber asked the woman behind the table. She crossed her arms and looked more than a little skeptical about the jars of liquid in front of her. "I mean, I have a feeling that I *know* what it is, but...do I want to know?"

The woman behind the table laughed good-naturedly. "I'm not sure if you do. *Moon Juice* is a local specialty, and it definitely has a kick, but I promise you'll love it. We even have a First Frost flavor, iced blueberry."

"That doesn't sound very frosty."

"It's blue." The woman shrugged. "Besides, it's the local favorite."

Cole couldn't disagree with that, so he handed over the cash and they each selected a jar before they moved over to where the horses and wagon were pulling up.

"I'm not entirely sure what iced blueberry *Moon Juice* is supposed to taste like," he said to her. "And seeing how you handled your beer last night,

I'm not really sure this is a good idea at all." That wasn't true. He'd loved her flirty little attitude the night before and he would definitely not complain to see a little more of it.

"Don't be so serious." She swatted at his arm and laughed. "Besides, anything blueberry flavored can't be that bad."

He hopped up on the wagon, turned and held out his hand to her to assist her up into the stacks of hay. Despite the fact that it wasn't a sleigh, the wagon was strung with pine boughs and wooden snowflakes that had been painted white. Blankets had been strewn around the wagon, to protect against the chill that was definitely in the air.

Cole found them a spot at the back that wasn't very crowded and they settled down with a red flannel blanket before he turned to her and tugged on her braid. "I think it's more than a little ironic that the woman with her shirt always buttoned right to her neck and a braid as tight as this one is telling me not to be so serious. Don't you?"

She assessed him for a moment, the smile fading off her face before she nodded slowly. "Okay. Fair point."

"You agree?"

"I do." There was no trace of laughter in her voice as she spoke, and for a moment Cole regretted saying anything at all. He'd been enjoying their light banter. "There's more to me than tight braids and seriousness, you know?"

He tipped his head and examined her. "Is there really?"

"There is. Here." She thrust the jar of Moon Juice at him and before Cole could ask what she was up to, she reached around to the back of her head, pulled out the elastic and unwound her long blonde hair from the confines of the braid. He watched in wonder as Amber threaded her fingers through it and shook out her golden tresses, which resulted in long, wavy locks that were more than a little bit sexy.

Cole swallowed hard and opened his mouth to speak. But no words came out. He didn't think he'd ever be able to speak again. She was gorgeous. And



if Cole had been attracted to Amber before, he was now completely at her mercy. There was no way he'd be able to stay away from her now.

She flipped her hair upside down and shook it a little before flipping it back over her head and looking at him. "Better?" She challenged him with her eyes and there was a whole lot more behind that one little word. "I mean, there's not much I can do about the buttons." She gestured to her zippered winter coat that was hiding what he knew was a tightly buttoned blouse. But just the thought of her unbuttoning it had his blood raging hot through his veins and straight to his groin.

Again, Cole swallowed hard, momentarily rendered useless. After a moment, he regained control of himself and reached out to her. He slid a lock of her hair between two of his fingers, being sure to brush her cheek as he did so. She shivered under his touch, but she definitely wasn't cold. "You're absolutely stunning." If it had been anyone else, he wouldn't have hesitated to slip his hand around her head, cup her cheek and draw her in for a kiss that showed her exactly how stunning he thought she was.

Hell, that wasn't true at all. If it had been anyone else sitting there with him, he would never have been attracted to her the way he was, because he'd never been so drawn to anyone before. Not. Even. Close.

Cole let his fingers linger, and for a moment considered going in for that kiss after all. But the horses chose that moment to lurch forward and the wagon began to move. He pulled his hand back and handed her the jar of Moon Juice that he'd balanced on his. He tried not to look, or read too much into it, but he was fairly sure in the dimming light he saw a flicker of disappointment in Amber's eyes.

## Chapter Six

---

HE WAS GOING *to kiss her*.

But he didn't.

It was for the best.

Or was it?

He was still Josie's brother, after all.

*Damn.*

Amber purposely turned away, so she looked out over the edge of the wagon. She took a deep breath, inhaling the crisp evening air, put a smile on her face, and unscrewed the lid of her Moon Juice. She turned and tapped her jar to Cole's. "Cheers. Happy First Frost."

He returned her smile. "This kind of makes us locals, doesn't it?"

"Hardly." She laughed and took a small sip of her drink. Not really sure what to expect, Amber guarded herself for the harsh burn that she was sure would follow, but the blueberry flavored-alcohol was surprisingly delicious, so she took a bigger swallow. "But maybe this drink makes us locals. This is delicious. Don't you think?"

"Delicious, but...strong." He shook his head sharply.

"Be careful," a man across from them offered. "Mandy's Moon Juice will sneak up on you."

"What is it?" Amber took another sip. "Because it's delicious."

The man laughed. “No one really knows the recipe, but it definitely is delicious.”

“Which is what makes it so dangerous.” The woman next to him laughed. “Welcome to town. There’s a bonfire down by the river tonight. You two should check it out.”

“That sounds fun.” Cole looked over at Amber for confirmation. She nodded. It *did* sound like fun.

And with the way Cole was looking at her and the warmth of the alcohol in her belly, Amber was pretty sure she’d say yes to anything he suggested.

“Great,” the woman said. “The sleigh ride will take you straight there.”

“The sleigh?” Amber couldn’t help but ask. “What’s with the hay wagon?”

The woman laughed. “It’s always been a wagon. Even when we have lots of snow by now. It’s just easier and you can fit more people on it, but the festival organizers insist on calling it a sleigh.” Her smile was warm. “I hope you aren’t too disappointed?”

“Not at all,” Amber answered honestly and instinctively moved a little closer to Cole.

The woman winked at them and went back to snuggling with her man.

The couple looked cozy and sweet and a twinge of jealousy hit her. Ever since breaking up with Randy, there’d been more than a few moments where Amber missed the togetherness that came with being a couple. The companionship that having someone special in your life afforded you. Not that she and Randy ever cuddled the way that couple was. In fact, Randy would never have joined her on a hayride, let alone pulled her close in any kind of public display of affection. There’d been a time when she thought that was a good thing. She used to look at couples who hung off each other, held hands or kissed in public, and turned up her nose. *They must need to prove to the world that they’re in love*, she’d think. It embarrassed her now to remember how judgmental she’d been of that love. But now she knew better.

She hadn't been unimpressed with their love; she'd been disappointed in the lack of affection in her own relationship.

The power of the mind was actually a pretty impressive thing. She'd managed to convince herself for years that her loveless relationship was actually the gold standard. She'd been so foolish. But it made sense. At least, according to the last therapist that she'd seen briefly after breaking up with Randy. After hearing about her mother and father's relationship and the way they'd always been so open about their love, even after coming out with the news that her father had a whole other family, it had bothered her as a young woman. A lot.

Amber could never understand how they could behave in such a way that would hurt so many other people. According to Doctor Shultz, she'd begun to think of that outward display of affection, or any real affection at all, as a betrayal.

Of what, Amber didn't really know. But she couldn't fully disagree with the therapist. That was probably a big part of it. But she couldn't blame all of her issues on her messed-up family life. She knew it wasn't all their fault. It was also her fault. And her choice of partner. Randy just hadn't been right for her.

Amber didn't mean to, but she couldn't help but watch the young couple and the easy way they leaned into each other. The casual way the man put his hand on her thigh and squeezed. *Would she behave that way with the right partner?* She sighed deeply and forced herself to turn away. She pulled her gaze back to Cole, who was watching her carefully.

"Hey," he said gently. "What's going on?"

She forced a smile. "What do you mean? We're on a—"

"Where did you go?" He interrupted her. "Just now. You looked like maybe you were lost in your head there for a moment."

She dropped her gaze, but only for a moment before making the decision to be honest with him. "I was just thinking about something I used to have

and don't anymore." She took a sip of her drink before wiping her lip and adding, "No, that's not true. I was thinking about something I never had. And thought I did."

"I'm not sure I understand. Why did that make you sad?"

"It didn't." Amber shook her head gently, enjoying how the waves of her long hair hit her face. It had been so long since she'd worn it down. Years, really. "You know what, it didn't. I just realized that what I thought I had wasn't so great after all. And not at all what I want, or deserve." She looked Cole straight in his eyes. "I'm looking forward to the future, having a little fun and just...well, seeing what happens."

His hand slid across the hay to hers. He didn't take it in his, but she could feel the heat from it, and it sent a thrill racing through her. After a moment, one finger stretched out and wrapped around hers. "Good," he said slowly. "Because I've built a whole life on having fun and seeing what happens and not settling down."

"You don't believe in settling down?" She didn't know why she asked. After all, it's not as though it mattered. Not really.

He shrugged. "I guess I haven't thought about it much. But I definitely don't believe in labels."

"Labels?"

He laughed. "When you label things, they tend to lose their fun. Don't you think?"

She could lose herself in his eyes and his words, but only moments before she let herself fall, she caught herself. "But there's more to life than just having fun, isn't there?"

He chuckled. "Spoken like a true accountant."

"Maybe." She ignored the twinge of hurt she felt at his words. *Boring. Predictable.* "But I think I'm starting to see that it should be a balance. I'm twenty-four," she said. "And more and more I'm thinking that there's no reason that you can't have both. Fun *and* responsibility."

He nodded slowly. “Have you ever had any? Fun, I mean?”

Her first instinct was to clap back with a sharp retort. Of course she’d had fun. Tons of it. But...had she? Really? After a moment, Amber took a breath, and answered honestly, “Not enough. Growing up, our family was kind of a mess. It’s a long story really, but basically my dad had two families. Finally, he left his first family for us, but then it was messy, with a lot of hurt feelings, and...well, I didn’t want to make any waves. I thought that if I could just be the *good girl*, then my older brothers would like me instead of blaming me for breaking up their family.”

“Wow.”

She nodded. “Yup. It was a lot of wow.”

“So you didn’t do anything rebellious?”

Amber laughed. “That was my little sister, Chelsea’s, job. I never did any of that wild and crazy stuff you’re supposed to do when you’re a teenager.”

She hadn’t intended on getting into her family life with Cole. It was never easy to explain to people that she and her younger sister were the products of a long-running affair and when their father finally left his other family to be with them, it had basically destroyed the lives of all six kids. She’d mostly come to peace with the situation, but there was no denying that the choices of her parents had shaped who she was.

As if he could sense that she didn’t want to get into any more details, Cole squeezed her finger with his and smiled. “Well, it’s never too late. We both have some Moon Juice and we’re at a festival in a town where no one knows us. I can’t think of a better time to have a little of that wild fun, can you?”

“No.” She laughed. Maybe it was the Moon Juice, or the night sky, or sitting next to Cole, or a combination of everything, but in that moment, Amber had never felt more free. “I can’t.” They each raised their jars and drank deeply. In the back of her head, Amber knew it was a bad idea to let loose completely, but the part of her that no longer cared was a lot louder

than the part that did. She took another drink right as an eerie howl split the peaceful night. She jumped up and her drink splashed over the edge as she scooted closer to Cole on the wagon.

“What was that?”

Cole chuckled and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “I imagine it was just a coyote in the distance. Don’t be scared.”

She wasn’t. At least, she wasn’t scared of any faraway coyotes. No, if Amber was scared of anything at all, it was the way her stomach fluttered and her body burned at Cole’s touch. That was downright terrifying.

---

COLE LIKED his arm around Amber. He liked it a lot.

So much so that he didn’t bother moving it until the wagon arrived at the river and the bonfire. He helped her down from the wagon and once more took her hand in his. It felt natural. As if it belonged there.

Everything about spending time with Amber felt natural. Even though he definitely wasn’t interested in rushing into anything, he couldn’t help but think that despite what he’d said earlier about being the type of guy who had lived his whole life without being serious, maybe he could be. Serious. At least when it came to a girl like Amber.

The fire was roaring and it looked as if the entire town gathered around the flames. The two of them slipped into the crowd, chatting and laughing with the locals easily, as if they’d always lived there. The entire time they mingled, Cole was very much aware of Amber’s presence next to him. Every time he looked at her, his attraction spiked a little more. With her golden hair framing her face and bouncing in loose waves over her shoulders, and the way her smile lit up her face in the firelight every time she laughed, she was completely mesmerizing.

Finally, Cole was done making small talk and listening to stories about Crystal Creek. Maybe it was the Moon Juice he'd had, or the beautiful woman by his side, but he was more than ready for something a bit quieter.

They'd been separated by some of the locals, and Amber was talking to a group of women when Cole slid up behind her. He smiled as charmingly as he could at the women and bent to whisper into Amber's ear. "Come with me for a minute. I need to steal you." He had to physically hold himself back from nibbling on the creamy skin of her neck. As it was, he inhaled her scent deeply and it definitely wasn't the alcohol that had him off-balance. Without waiting for an answer, Cole took her hand and with a quick apology to the women, pulled her away from the crowd.

"Where are we going?"

"I just don't want to share you anymore." He winked at her. "Besides, we should enjoy this fire a little bit, don't you think?"

She nodded and squeezed his hand tighter as he led her through the crowd. The bonfire was huge, with most of the party gathered on one side. But as they circled the fire, it was clear that the opposite side was going to be much more private. Piles of hay bales stacked high created seating both near the fire and a little farther away, toward the mostly frozen river. Cole found a quiet spot and climbed up on the hay into a private nook where they were both close enough to the fire to keep warm and far enough away that they weren't likely to be interrupted.

"You don't want to *share* me?" Amber asked once they were settled into the hay. She leaned in toward him.

It may have been the Moon Juice, which definitely was more potent than he'd expected, but she'd been flirting with him all night. It was subtle, but she was definitely flirting. A fact he didn't mind at all.

"Are you having fun?" He answered her question with another one.

"I really am." She nodded. "Thank you for bringing me."

"A deal is a deal." He reached over and took her hand, slipping his



fingers between hers. “Besides, I’ve really enjoyed myself with you tonight. A lot.”

He couldn’t be sure in the dim light, but he was fairly sure she blushed. The idea of her skin flushing because of him turned him on. With his spare hand, he reached up and stroked her soft hair. “You look beautiful tonight.”

There were so many reasons he shouldn’t do it, but the reasons that he should outweighed any objection he could think of. Before he could let himself be talked out of it, Cole leaned in and pressed his lips to hers.

She tasted like blueberry and something even sweeter. Something that was all Amber. Her lips yielded to his and he deepened the kiss, cupping her cheek with his hand to hold her to him. A small moan escaped her lips, sending a spark through him directly to his core. He pulled her tight, needing her closer still.

It was clear that one taste wouldn’t be enough. Cole deepened the kiss. His tongue traced the seam of her lips until she opened to him. And when their tongues twined together, Cole was sure it was the most erotic thing he’d ever experienced. He pressed her back into the hay, settling into the kiss.

He could have kissed her all night. Only it didn’t take him long to realize that when it came to Amber, he was definitely not going to be satisfied with only a kiss.

Reluctantly, he pulled away and sat back to look at her. Her eyes were still closed, her lips parted and moist, but only for a second before she realized he was gone. She brought her fingers to her lips and opened her eyes.

“What?” She shook her head slightly. “Why...why did you stop?”

“I just thought that maybe I—”

“Oh.” Amber’s hands fluttered in front of her face as she sat up. “Of course.” She turned away slightly and smoothed her hair back off her face. “You’re right...we shouldn’t...okay...” She nodded. “I get it. You’re not... I’m not really...”

“What?” He shook his head in confusion over what exactly was going on

with her. He couldn't help it and he laughed a little, which only seemed to fluster her more. "What are you talking about, Amber? What's going on?"

"This...you...me..." She took a breath and attempted to compose herself. "I get it," she said after a moment, finally turning to look at him again. "This is silly. We shouldn't do this and I'm not really your type and we probably —"

There was no way Cole was going to let her finish that thought. He moved quickly and in an instant he straddled her body with his legs, so she couldn't move. A second later, he took her face in both his hands and kissed her deeply and thoroughly. When he was done, there was zero room for doubt about whether or not she was his type.

When he was finally sure he'd made his point, and Amber's chest was heaving, her breath coming in short pants, Cole pulled his mouth away but didn't make any move to leave her personal space. With the firelight dancing over her face, he looked directly into her eyes so she could see that he meant every word of what he was about to say. "Don't ever doubt that you're my type, Amber. I can honestly say with one hundred percent accuracy that I've never wanted any woman the way I want you right now. Not. Even. Close."

Her lips turned up into a sexy smile, but she still didn't look convinced. "Then why did you stop?"

"Because I just thought that maybe—"

"Josie." Her face fell. "Of course." She shook her head. "Your sister. I'm a terrible friend."

"Stop." He held her face so she was looking at him again. "I didn't stop because of Josie. In fact, I can tell you that when I was kissing you, my sister was the very last thing I was thinking of."

"But I mean, you're her brother."

He nodded.

"And I'm her best friend."

He nodded again.

“And—”

“I don’t see how one has anything to do with the other.”

Her eyes squeezed closed for a second. “I promised her I would keep you away from the local women.”

Cole laughed and swung his leg over her so he sat next to her again. “I think you did a pretty good job of that, don’t you?”

It took her a moment, and then she joined his laughter. “I guess I did.”

“She didn’t say anything about you staying away from me, did she?”

Amber shook her head.

“Good.” He twisted his fingers in her soft hair and pulled her gently toward him. This time, instead of tasting her sweet lips, he moved to her neck.

“But I think that maybe—oh...”

Cole trailed kisses down her skin, biting and licking his way down her neck.

“Maybe she meant that I should—ohhh...”

He got to the zipper of her jacket, which he moved easily down and out of the way so he could ease the buttons of her blouse from their holes until finally, his lips had access to the deliciously tantalizing swell of her breasts. He continued and deftly unfastened the next button, exposing her cotton bra.

“I just don’t know if we—oh, that feels good.” She shuddered under his touch, encouraging him.

Her breasts fit in his hand perfectly. He couldn’t wait to see them properly. But that would have to wait. For the moment, he’d settle for teasing her to the point of distraction. Cole nibbled his way along the top of her bra before he pushed it down to expose her pebbled nipple. His body reacted to her sharp intake of breath as he swirled his tongue around the peak before he popped it into his mouth and sucked gently.

“Do you think that Josie—”

“Okay.” Cole sat up. The last thing he wanted to do was leave her

beautiful, perfectly pink nipple, but he couldn't listen to one more second of her talking about Josie. "We can either talk about my sister," he said pointedly. "Or we can do this." He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head. "But we can't do both."

He waited for her to answer, but he didn't have to wait long because a second later, Amber reached up, wrapped her arms around his neck, and pulled him down to her.

## Chapter Seven

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IT SEEMED AS THOUGH it took forever for them to get back to the little house after the bonfire. Not that Amber was complaining. Because with every minute that passed before they could get home to Josie's little house and into a proper bed, her desire built until finally she thought she might explode with her need for the man whose kisses sent her into a spiral and whose touches lit a fire in her that she didn't even know existed.

Finally the wagon returned them to the farm and Cole's truck. A short drive later, they were at the front door and Amber was fiddling with the lock. The entire time, Cole hadn't stopped touching her.

"Don't tell me you locked it?" He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight as she tried to manipulate the lock.

"Of course I did. It's..." She stopped herself. Maybe locking the house was safe, but what she was about to do with Cole was decidedly *not*. And she loved it.

Finally she managed to turn the key and open the door. Amber barely had a chance to step inside before Cole had spun her around and pushed her up against the wall. He twisted his fingers in her hair and tipped her head back to expose her neck. Her knees buckled beneath his attentions.

"I've been wanting to do this all night." He nibbled and licked and finally pulled back to unzip her jacket and tug it off her shoulders.

Earlier, after he'd unbuttoned her blouse, she'd left it, even after zipping up her jacket to ward against the cold November air. It was so simple, but it made her feel daring and a little sexy and risqué just having her blouse undone, her breasts exposed in such a way.

But as sexy as she had felt earlier, it was nothing compared to the way she felt as Cole finished unbuttoning her blouse. The hungry look in his eyes as he exposed her bare flesh to him sparked a hunger of her own in her.

Had she ever been wanted in such a way?

Not even close.

Nor had she wanted a man the way she wanted Cole.

Amber had just enough Moon Juice in her system to allow herself to shut off that annoying little voice that earlier had tried to talk her out of doing exactly what she was about to do. But she was plenty sober, and as Cole leaned forward and pressed his lips to her skin, Amber was glad she was because if this was going to be a one-time thing, she planned to remember every single second of it.

A low moan escaped her lips as Cole continued kissing her. First the swell of each breast, then between them, until his mouth traveled down her stomach and to the waistband of her jeans.

His fingers made short work of the button before slipping beneath the denim to cup her cotton-clad bottom. She stiffened and a shiver ran through her.

*Was he going to...*

"Amber?" He must have sensed her hesitation. Still on his knees, he looked up at her, a question in his eyes. "Do you want me to—"

"No!" She yelled the word and immediately clamped a hand over her mouth. He laughed and she couldn't help but join him. "I mean," she tried again. "No. If you were going to ask me if you wanted me to stop. The answer is no." *It's definitely a no.*

"You seem a little..."

She shook her head and bit her bottom lip a little, annoyed at herself for stopping him when it had been feeling oh so good.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Honestly. I’ve just never...”

His eyes flashed with desire and a slow smile crossed his handsome face. “You’ve never?”

“I mean, I have. Of course.” It had never occurred to her that her sexual inexperience would be an issue. And it wasn’t as if she and Randy hadn’t had sex. Of course they had. It was just...*boring*. Dammit, she hated that word! She swallowed hard. She might as well get it all out there. “I’ve just never done, well...”

“This.” He lifted one eyebrow mischievously and in one quick movement shoved her jeans down over her hips into a puddle at her feet. A second later, his hands still on her ass to hold her in place, he leaned forward and, using his teeth, he tugged on the elastic of her panties.

A shiver ran through her. *Damn, she was in trouble.*

His hands moved around her waist. Two fingers slipped under the waist of her panties, but before he did anything more, Cole looked up and met her eyes with an unasked question. She nodded in response and it was all he needed to push her panties out of the way, too, leaving her fully and completely exposed in front of him.

Instead of being embarrassed, the way she thought she might, his reaction only emboldened her. She took a few steps and freed herself from both her boots and her clothing so she could spread her legs to keep from falling over.

Not that she would, with the grip Cole had on her hips. He made a noise that could only be described as a growl before pulling her to him and kissing her between her legs.

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SHE WAS ABSOLUTELY DELICIOUS. Everything about her. But when

Cole pressed his mouth between her legs to taste the sweet juices there, he was completely lost. He forced himself to move slowly, taking his time with her. He'd guessed she was probably not that experienced in the bedroom, but even so, he may have underestimated how much she'd been missing out on.

He planned to rectify that.

At once.

With his hands gripping each of her thighs, opening her to him, he used his tongue. Slowly at first, and then, as she began to respond to him, faster. She was so responsive, so completely trusting of him, and willing to let go. It was sexy as hell.

But not nearly as sexy as when she threaded her fingers in his hair and pressed him into her with an unspoken request for more. A request he was more than happy to deliver on.

He focused his attentions on her swollen nub, sucking gently before swirling his tongue in circles. He could feel her tense beneath his grip as her orgasm neared. Cole knew he'd be the first to make her climax this way, and he was determined to make it memorable. Keeping one hand firmly gripping her hip, he used his other to slip first one finger and then another inside her.

She gasped as he pressed into her tight heat. Before her legs gave out, she wrapped them tightly around him and groaned as he hit the sensitive spot deep inside her. Cole pressed her up against the wall to keep her from sliding and at the same time took her throbbing clit into his mouth. Seconds later, she came completely undone around him, screaming out her release as her climax overtook her.

He smiled as he finally pulled away. He hadn't expected her to be a screamer, but then again, Amber was full of surprises.

And he liked it.

A lot.

Reluctantly, Cole got to his feet because as much fun as he was having, he was still completely dressed, including his winter coat, and things were



definitely starting to heat up.

He took a moment to watch her as she recovered from her orgasm. Her eyes were squeezed tight, her palms pressed flat against the wall, and her chest rose and fell with her breasts straining against the innocent cotton bra she still wore as her breath began to slow. He knew now, despite the innocent cotton undergarments, she was anything but. And he liked it.

“You are without a doubt the sexiest woman I have ever met.” The sound of his voice caused her to open her eyes, a blush instantly covering her skin. Before she could move to cover herself, a situation he definitely did not want, Cole reached out and cupped her cheek, letting his thumb trace her lips. “I mean it, Amber. Damn, woman.”

Her lips flicked up a little into a grin. “That was...” She shook her head, unable to form the words.

“Incredible?”

Amber nodded. “Very.”

“I’m glad.” He pressed his thumb between her lips and she sucked it before biting it ever so slightly, a move that made his cock stiffen. A painful reminder that he was still fully clothed.

And not anywhere near done with her yet.

He stripped his jacket and boots off, leaving them scattered in the hallway before leading her to the couch.

“You still have far too many clothes on.”

He grinned. “I do, don’t I?”

“Let me help.” Amber reached out and tugged his T-shirt up and off his head. She ran her hands down his chest, sending thrills through him, directly to his core. Her fingers slowly worked the buttons on his jeans, and after what felt like forever, she got them undone and slid the denim over his hips, along with his boxer briefs.

Her eyes widened appreciatively as his jeans hit the floor, a detail he definitely noticed, and liked, very much. But not nearly as much as when she

wrapped her hand around him and squeezed before walking back toward the couch. She reached behind her back and unclasped her bra, releasing her gorgeous tits.

As much as Cole wanted the evening to go on forever, he had his limits, too. And he'd just about reached them.

After a quick dig through his wallet for a condom, he sheathed himself and joined her on the couch. There were probably more romantic places, but it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was being inside her, feeling her around him, and looking into her eyes.

Her blonde hair was splayed out on the cushion beneath her, making her look every bit the sex goddess he was quickly coming to believe she was. But she was also so much more. She was Amber.

He looked straight into her eyes as he sank deep inside her. He saw the want in her eyes, the need...and something else that both sent a thrill through him and scared the hell out of him at the same time.

## Chapter Eight

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COLE SLEPT REMARKABLY BETTER with Amber in his arms than he had the night before on the lumpy couch with her a flight of stairs away. A lot better. And it didn't have anything to do with the location of his slumber.

He didn't want their night to end. After their lovemaking session on the couch, they'd moved upstairs, where Amber fell asleep with her head on his chest. He'd never been the type to linger after a hookup. And he most certainly wasn't the type to spend the night cuddling. But with Amber, it was different. *He* was different. It was the craziest thing, but the more and more time he spent with her, the more time he wanted to spend with her. She was definitely more than a hookup.

She was...

Waking up.

Next to him, Amber stirred a little and a sweet sound, almost like a sigh, escaped her lips.

The sun was starting to peek through the old blinds that covered the window. If he had to guess, it was probably just after seven. Too early. The night wasn't long enough for him to soak in every bit of having her body pressed into his. The silkiness of her hair splayed over his chest. The gentle inhale and exhale of her breath as she dreamed.

He snuggled Amber closer to him and kissed her bare shoulder. She

mumbled in her sleep and wiggled a little into him. Cole tightened his grip and stroked his hand down her bare arm. “Good morning,” he whispered in her ear.

Amber turned in his arms and looked up at him. She really was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. The very fact that he was thinking that way should scare the hell out of him, but it didn’t. In fact, it was exactly the opposite. With Amber, in only a few days, he felt oddly settled in a way he had never felt before. She actually had him thinking things he’d never thought before...relationship things. And *that* was the scary part. Because he knew it couldn’t last. A thought he didn’t feel like exploring yet.

It took her a moment to wake up completely. She blinked her eyes a few times and finally offered him a tentative smile. “Hi.”

He kissed her softly. “Hi yourself. Did you sleep okay?”

She nodded, but the peace he was feeling wasn’t reflected in her eyes and he knew exactly what the reason was. Morning-after regret. But he’d be damned if he let her feel even a moment of regret for what had happened between them.

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” She blinked hard and shook her head.

“Don’t feel bad about...well, anything. Because I don’t. And if I remember correctly, you enjoyed yourself, too.”

She blushed, but it was followed by a laugh. “I did.” She took a moment before she added, “And I don’t regret...well, that.”

“Good.” He kissed her quickly.

“But it’s not just that.”

He was a little slow on the uptake, but Cole put the connection together about what she really felt badly about. Relief that it wasn’t him she regretted washed through him, but only for a second. “No,” he said with a shake of his head. “Amber, please don’t worry about Josie, okay?”

“I’m not.” She tried to turn away, but he caught her face.

“You’re a terrible liar.”

“I know. It’s just...”

He waited and when she didn’t finish her thought, he offered a solution. “We don’t have to tell her.”

“What?” She scooted back to the other side of the bed.

“Just hear me out,” he said quickly. “It’s not like we planned it to happen. She’ll be here tomorrow and the reality is, I’ll be going back to Australia soon and you’ll be...”

“Getting a job.”

“Right. You’re going to get that kick-ass job offer in Toronto’s most prestigious and exciting accounting firm.” He didn’t mean to sound sarcastic, but it definitely came out that way. “At any rate, technically I don’t think you’re breaking any kind of friend code or anything. But since you’re worried about it, maybe we just shouldn’t tell her?”

Amber pulled the sheet up higher on her body, a fact he really didn’t appreciate because Amber’s body was something that should never be covered up, and eyed him warily for a moment. “I guess you’re right,” she said finally. “I mean, it’s not like this is going to actually *be* anything more than a little festival fun anyway.”

Her words hit him in the gut despite the fact that she was right—that’s all it would ever be—but hearing her say it out loud took him off guard and her words stung. Not that he was going to say anything about it.

Cole watched as a smile slowly crossed over her face. The sheet slipped a little, revealing just enough of her creamy white breast to make his body stand up and take notice. And when instead of reaching to pull it back up, Amber crooked a finger and beckoned him toward her, it was all the invitation he needed.

---

AFTER A VERY LATE SLEEP IN—NOT that they actually did much sleeping—Amber fixed them both a quick breakfast of instant oatmeal and coffee so they could get some work done on the house. She didn't say anything, but Amber was definitely feeling like helping Josie out was the very least she could do for her after...well...after Cole. It didn't matter what he said about it; she couldn't help but feel guilty about sleeping with her best friend's brother.

On one hand, Amber knew her friend would be excited for her that she'd finally let loose long enough to have a little fun. *And man, did she ever have fun.* Just thinking about the way Cole made her feel with a few kisses and touches on her body was enough to make her body vibrate with need again. She'd had a few lovers before, if you could count one fumbling high school hookup and Randy's thirty seconds of *moves*—which she didn't—but she'd never experienced anything even close to what she'd experienced with Cole.

Of course, leave it to *Miss Plan Everything Out Perfectly* to finally let herself relax enough to have her first wild fling with her best friend's brother. She could have blamed it on the Moon Juice, except that even though the drink was strong, she was completely sober the night before. And this morning. Not only that, she *very* much wanted all of it to happen.

She snuck a glance at Cole across the table, where he was finishing his coffee.

Oh yes, she'd very much wanted that to happen. And she wasn't going to lie—there wouldn't be any complaining from her if it happened again. None whatsoever. The future could be dammed because living in the moment felt damn good.

Amber could hardly believe her own thoughts and how far she'd come in such a short time. She liked it. A lot.

“So what are we going to do today?” Cole gathered their dishes from the table and piled them in the sink.

“I thought you said something about pulling all the baseboards and

moldings off?” Amber sipped her coffee and looked at him in confusion. “You’re running this show,” she added. “At least until Josie gets back.”

Cole laughed. “I meant, what First Frost Festival events are we going to take in today?”

“Festival?”

He crossed the floor and kissed her forehead sweetly. It was such an intimate and unexpected gesture; something flipped in Amber’s tummy. *Just temporary*, she reminded herself. He’d said so himself. He was going back to Australia and she was going to take a super boring job at a super boring accounting firm and go back to leading a super boring life in a big city where she was just another face in the crowd. It didn’t matter whether she was trying something new by trying to break out of her mold a little. It was only temporary. She was destined to be boring and predictable.

And even if that was true—which it was—there was no reason that she shouldn’t have a little fun while she could. Because that’s all this thing between them was. *Fun*.

“Did you still want to go to the festival?”

“A deal’s a deal, Amber. Of course I want to go.” He returned to the sink and ran water over their dishes. “What’s going on today?”

She smiled and quickly ducked her head so he couldn’t see how much it pleased her that he wanted to go, but she was too slow and he turned around and caught the grin on her face.

“What?” Cole grabbed a tea towel to dry his hands. “What’s that look for?”

“Nothing.”

He moved quickly, crossed the room in two steps, pulled her up from the chair and kissed her. Hard. She couldn’t stop the way her body responded immediately to his kiss. “Tell me,” he said. “What are we doing today?”

Her stomach flipped and her whole body quaked with desire just from being in his arms. She took a deep breath. “You have two choices.”

“If either of them involve spending time with you, I don’t care either way.”

Again, her stomach danced. “Are you sure?” She liked playing with him, because as soon as he heard the choices, she was fairly positive she knew what he was going to pick.

He looked straight into her eyes and spoke with such an intensity that for a split second Amber forgot that what they were doing was temporary. “I’ve never been so sure of anything, Amber.”

She swallowed hard and worked to keep her composure. “Okay. Two choices. We can go to a Polar Bears versus Arctic Foxes paintball fight this afternoon and do the baseboards later.”

“Or?”

She grinned, because she was absolutely positive he’d like the second option the best. “We can take care of the work around here first and then go for a drink tasting at the Tipping Cow.”

“That’s the bar we went to the other night?”

She nodded. “And after that...there’s a thing called a Frosty Frolic. I’m not really sure—”

“Sold.” He kissed her neck and moved up to her earlobe, where he whispered, “If it involves you and frolicking, I’m absolutely in.”

“I thought so.” Amber laughed and as much as she didn’t want to, wiggled out of his grasp. “Then we better get to work.”

After a little bit of convincing and the promise that she would finish up the dishes, Cole reluctantly left Amber to get started on the baseboards. He seemed much more motivated to get the work done with the promise of some frolicking. Amber was still chuckling at the look on his face when she’d presented the options to him, when her cell phone rang. Assuming it would be Josie, she picked it up without looking at it. “Tell me you’re on your way.”

“Well, since I have no idea where you are, that would be pretty hard.”



“Declan!” Amber shrieked into the phone. She hadn’t heard her half-brother’s voice in months. Way too long, as far as she was concerned. She’d been so busy finishing school, and up until the last few months, her brother’s activities with his nonprofit foundation had him in some third world country, making things better for those who were less fortunate. They just hadn’t had time to connect.

“Hey, little sis.”

“Just because I’m twelve months younger than you does not mean I’m your little sister.”

Declan laughed. “That’s exactly what it means.” The fact that they were half siblings and their father had been living two lives at once, with two separate families, hadn’t been an issue between them since they were kids.

Amber ignored him. “I miss you. Are you still in Cedar Springs?”

“I can’t imagine being anywhere else.” She could hear the love in his voice. “Of course, there’s been a few trips back and forth, but Cedar Springs is definitely home now.”

Amber still had a hard time wrapping her head around all of her siblings being in Cedar Springs. Together. Never in a million years would she have thought that they’d all be able to put their feelings aside and be a happy family after everything that had happened with their parents. Especially Ian and Mitch, her oldest brothers. They’d taken their father’s betrayal the hardest and for many years had refused to have any relationship with Amber and Chelsea at all. That had changed recently, but Amber still hadn’t met Ian and Mitch, at least not properly.

When she didn’t say anything right away, Declan added, “You’re surprised, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” She laughed. He knew her too well. “Not that you’re in love—that’s fantastic. But I never would have guessed that you would settle down in a small town. But if that’s where your heart is…”

“It is,” Declan said quickly. “So much. And I can’t wait for you to meet

Evie. She's amazing."

Amber had heard all about her brother's new fiancée, as well as Ian's new fiancée, and of course her movie star brother, Cal's, new love. And then there was Mitch, who'd taken it to a whole new level and fallen in love, gotten married, and gotten pregnant in record time. Hell, she'd barely met Mitch and now she had a whole other family to meet and she was going to be an auntie. At least Chelsea wasn't getting married. Yet. But after the last time she'd spoken to her, it seemed as if even her little sister had also found love in the small mountain town.

Amber risked a glance down the hall, where she could hear Cole starting to get to work. *Maybe she'd found love in the prairies?*

As soon as the thought settled, she pushed it out. *Temporary.* One night and one morning of hot sex—*very* hot sex—wasn't love. Far from it.

Even if her heart was starting to think so.

"When are you coming?"

"What?" It took Amber a moment to realize Declan was asking her a question. "Coming where?"

"To Cedar Springs, silly. The lake...to come visit and meet everyone properly. A lot has changed with everyone."

Reflexively, Amber shook her head, even though her brother couldn't see her.

"I hear Christmas here is beautiful," Declan continued. "And with Jonah, Evie's little guy, it's going to be so fun. Amber, you have to come."

"Oh, I don't know."

She did know, and the answer was—no.

Chelsea had tried to get her to go visit Cedar Springs, the tiny lake town in the middle of the Canadian Rockies, to see their half-brothers a few months earlier. At the time, she'd used the excuse of having to finish up her internship, which wasn't totally an excuse. But the truth was, she also wasn't in a hurry to visit her two older half-brothers for the first time. There were

four brothers all together. But Chelsea and Amber only had a good relationship with the two youngest, Declan and Cal. Likely because when the scandal of their parents blew up, they were all young enough to be forgiving and when they ended up in school together, a friendship formed. That wasn't the case with the older ones, Ian and Mitch. Chelsea had met them both over the summer and swore to Amber that they were great guys. But despite everyone's attempts, Amber just hadn't been able to get in the *one big happy family* mood. *Maybe that could change, too?*

"I don't think so," she told Declan. "I'm kind of busy."

"Is that right? Didn't you graduate a few months ago?"

"I did."

"And Chelsea said you were finishing up an internship and you haven't accepted a job yet. So the way I see it—"

"I'm not going." She could only deal with so many things at once. "Not this time, Dec."

"Okay." His voice was kind. Her brother knew when not to push. He was genuinely one of the nicest people she'd ever met, which was exactly why he was in the perfect profession. "So tell me," he shifted gears, "what are you up to these days? You're done with school, you haven't taken a job yet...and... that's totally unlike you. Are you feeling okay?"

Amber laughed and walked through the kitchen, out the back door and into the crisp November morning air. There was the distinct smell of snow lingering in the air. Maybe they'd get a big snow fall after all. *A lot of things were going on that were totally out of character for her*, she thought, thinking of Cole. Declan didn't know the half of it. "I'm taking a bit of a break to figure things out. I'm just feeling a little unsure of everything right now."

*Where had that come from? She wasn't taking a break. Not really, anyway...*

"That doesn't sound like you at all."

"That's the point." It felt good to say it out loud. "I think I'm more than

ready for a change. I'm not the same little girl anymore who needs to control everything."

"You're not?"

She knew he was teasing, but she was serious. Even she hadn't been fully convinced that she would be able to let go of her need for control, but the last few days had proved otherwise.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Amber laughed.

"What? I'm a good listener," Declan protested.

"I know you are. And yes, I'd like to talk about it, but I really don't know what more to say. I'm in the middle of Saskatchewan right now."

"Saskatchewan?"

"Right? I know, it's crazy. My best friend Josie is flipping a house in this tiny town in the middle of nowhere, so I came for a little visit. After that, I don't know. A few days ago, I would have said that I'd take a job and start my life as an accountant."

"But now?"

"Now I don't really know." It was a truthful answer, but it hurt her heart a little to say it out loud. "I mean, I guess I *do* know," she added quickly. "I will take a job at some point, but I'm just being silly because I know that's what I'm going to do but they didn't offer me the job the way I thought they would."

"They still might."

He was right and she knew it. "They might. In fact, I really do think they will." She took a deep breath. "But when they didn't, it kind of threw me for a loop and I got to thinking that maybe there was more."

"More?"

She shrugged. "Like what you have." Amber hadn't even realized until that moment that her brother did have a lot of what she was looking for. "You travel and do new things. You don't have every minute planned out. You just

kind of...live.”

“Amber.” There was so much kindness and love in his voice that it made Amber even more emotional. “You know there isn’t one right way to live, right? You’re not doing it wrong.”

“I know, I know.” She said the words, but as she did, she shook her head as if she didn’t fully believe them. “I just had this crazy idea that maybe I could...I don’t know.”

“What? What do you want to do?”

“That’s just it.” The emotion built until finally Amber felt like crying. She *never* cried. “I don’t even know, Dec. I just know I don’t want to be boring anymore.”

“Oh Amber, you’re not boring. You’re fantastic.” There was nothing disingenuous about what he said; she knew he thought the world of her, but it still didn’t feel like enough.

“You have to say that because you’re my brother.” She walked across the grass, enjoying the crunch of the thin layer of snow they did have under her shoes. She inhaled deeply, wrapped her sweater tighter, and tried to let the peacefulness of the morning wash through her.

“That’s not true. I get to say whatever I want because I’m your brother.” He laughed again, and this time the sound made her want to hug him. “So I’m going to say this,” he continued. “You aren’t boring. I would never think that of you. But I do know that even the most exciting people sometimes feel like they’re in a rut. So if you’re feeling stuck, for whatever reason, shake it up. Your life is totally up to you, Amber. You can be and do anything you want to do. It’s your life. So live it the way you want.”

“You make it sound so easy.” Amber turned back toward the house and caught a glimpse of Cole through the window.

“It really is. I promise you,” he said. “You might think that there’s a lot weighing on what you decide to do, but mostly we build things up in our head. And really, the world will not collapse if you decide to do something

different than you originally planned. If you don't want to take an accounting job right now, don't. Maybe it is time for you to try something new. Go travel, see the world. Meet new people. Do something that makes your heart sing. We have one life. It doesn't have to be hard."

"Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure, Amber. Honestly. We're allowed to change our minds. Whenever we want."

*Change our minds.*

*Live life the way you want?*

Could it really be as easy as Declan seemed to think it was?

On the other end of the line, Amber heard someone calling for Declan. There was some mumbling and then her brother came back on the line. "Amber, I gotta go. But I'm serious...this is your life. Follow your heart."

"Okay."

"Promise?"

She laughed. "I promise, *big* brother."

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COLE WATCHED Amber on the phone. Whoever she was talking to, it wasn't his sister. He knew that because she'd just texted him to let him know she'd be there early the next morning and not only was she looking forward to seeing them both, but also going to the Snow Ball. He hadn't even thought about the ball. Of course, he also had barely given any thought to Josie coming home.

Hell, the only thing he'd been able to think of was Amber. It hadn't even been forty-eight hours since she'd sat on him on the couch, yet the woman had somehow managed to consume every single one of his waking thoughts since. And his sleeping ones, too. Those ones were really good.

But not nearly as good as they'd been in reality. She was something else,

that was for sure. Logically, Cole knew that whatever was going on between them could never be more than a fling—how could it be? They were going in different directions, doing different things with their lives. Even if it did make him think of trying new things. New *relationship* things.

That was a thought he never expected to have. Ever. But Amber was changing the way he thought about a lot of things. Or maybe it was just that he was changing and she'd come along at the right time. Or maybe...it was a little bit of both?

“How's it going in here?”

Cole hadn't noticed Amber come inside, he'd been so lost in his thoughts about her. It took him a moment, but he swallowed hard and cleared his throat.

“They'll go a lot faster with you here.”

She laughed and picked up a hammer. “Then let's get moving. We have some frolicking to get to.”

There was no way she could know how her words affected him, but *damn*.

He took her hammer away and smoothly replaced it with a crowbar. “You can start over there. Try not to break the boards when you take them off. We'll reuse whatever we can. Assuming Josie wants to reuse them, that is.”

They started working and Cole did his best to keep himself focused on the job. After all, she was right: the faster they finished, the faster they could get to the fun part of the day. Never mind the fact that the organized Frosty Frolic event wasn't until midnight. He was pretty sure he could create his own event right there at the house without much prompting at all.

“Tell me about Australia.” Amber pried one end of a baseboard off, resulting in the satisfying give of the old nails.

“What do you want to know?”

“Why Australia?”

Cole laughed. He got that question a lot. Mostly from his parents when he

first moved. “Honestly?” She nodded and turned to listen to the answer. “Because it was as far away as I could get at the time,” he said matter-of-factly. Of course, he’d given his parents a very different answer. Something about loving the movie *Crocodile Dundee* when he was a kid and always wanting to see the Outback. But to Amber, he gave the truth. “If I’d have stayed at home, I would have ended up like my dad, and I couldn’t think of anything worse than that.”

“Doesn’t your dad own a hardware store?”

“He does. He wanted me to get a degree in business and run it with him.”

Amber tugged on the piece of trim she was working on and it came off in her hand. “Why was that so bad?”

“It’s not, really.” Cole shrugged. He’d thought about it a lot, how unfair he’d been to his parents. “But you know when you’re young and you think you know everything.”

She laughed. “I guess.”

“Well, maybe you weren’t so cocky. But I was very dramatic and I was so sure that if I did what they wanted me to do that I’d miss out on something.”

She turned to look at him. “I’ve met your parents. They seem really nice and happy enough.”

“They are. And I suppose it wouldn’t have been so bad, if that’s all I wanted out of life. But I wanted more than just nice and happy *enough*, you know?”

“I do.” Amber’s face creased into a frown and she nodded. “Well, I guess I don’t really know. But it doesn’t seem so bad, I guess.”

He laughed, but there wasn’t much humor there. “It seemed absolutely horrible to me at the time.” He shook his head and continued. “It still does in a way. I think there’s just so much more out there. I didn’t want to settle for *happy enough*. I want to be ecstatically happy.”

“I don’t think that’s real life.” She waved the crowbar slightly. “I mean,



don't you think ecstasy is an unrealistic expectation?"

He couldn't help himself. He grinned wickedly and wiggled his eyebrows. "Not at all."

She blushed and waved him away. "Okay, okay. But besides that. Seriously," she said. "Don't you think it's unrealistic to expect every day to be *extra*?"

"No." He didn't even have to think about it. He shook his head. "I don't. I don't think anyone should ever settle. Life should be an adventure, with excitement at every turn. It should be fun. I mean, it's your life."

"I think that *seems* nice, but it's just not reality."

"Why not? We only get so many trips around the sun," Cole argued. "Why not make the best of them?"

Her face changed and Cole caught the shadowed look of defeat in her eyes before she shrugged and turned away.

"You don't agree?" He softened his voice, put down his tools and crossed the room to her. Earlier, he'd tried to tell himself that he could keep his hands off her for the day, at least until they got their work done, but suddenly that seemed like a terrible idea. He wrapped his arms around her and dropped a kiss on her neck.

Amber turned in his arms. "What was that for?"

"You seemed a little bummed, and I don't want to see you sad. Especially if it was something I said."

She forced a smile that was clearly fake, but it was also clear that she didn't want to talk about whatever had bothered her. "I'm fine. Let's get this finished and go see what's happening with the festival today."

He kissed her gently. She might not want to talk about it now, but Cole was pretty sure it was a subject he'd be revisiting with her. Especially considering he hadn't even told her how he *really* felt. That his feelings were changing every day. He wasn't ready to admit it yet, but more and more, Cole couldn't help but think that he would trade his life of excitement at every

turn, for the love of a woman. A woman like Amber.

No, he really wasn't ready to admit that out loud yet.

So instead, he smiled broadly. "Deal." For now, it was definitely easier to play his cards close to his chest. No sense getting ahead of himself.

## Chapter Nine

---

AMBER ALMOST FELT guilty for the lack of work they'd done on Josie's house. On one hand, they had made a little progress and it was fair to say that they'd done *some things*. But there was no doubt that if Cole had been visiting his sister on his own without her to distract him, he could have accomplished at least double the amount of work.

On the other hand, Amber was enjoying her time with Cole so much that she really couldn't feel guilty about it. Besides, it was coming to an end soon. Josie would be home in less than twenty-four hours, and their little... whatever it was would come to a crashing halt.

She snuck a glance in Cole's direction as he navigated the truck toward town. Freshly showered, he smelled even more amazing than he usually did, and Amber needed to sit on her hands in the truck to keep from grabbing him and kissing him. Then they'd never get to the activities in town. And despite the attraction of staying in with Cole, she'd really enjoyed the first night of the festival and was excited for more fun.

"What did you say was happening at the Tipping Cow?" Cole asked when he saw her looking at him.

"I think it's some sort of drink tasting," she answered. "Some of the locals create a unique cocktail, and there's a vote at the end of the night to see which one was the favorite. I think there's a few other things going on in the

main square, too. Besides, it will just be fun to walk around and take it all in.”

“You like the small-town stuff.”

It wasn't a question and she didn't bother denying it anyway. It was true. She'd grown up in a suburb of Vancouver and although it definitely wasn't the big city, it was far from a small town. After graduation, she'd gone to school on the other side of the country in Toronto, which was as opposite from a small town as you could get. Amber never thought of herself as a small-town girl. Maybe it wasn't something she could sustain for a long time, but there was no doubt that seeing a town with such a close sense of family was appealing. Really appealing.

*Maybe moving is an option after all?*

There were still so many questions about her future. And now that she'd opened her mind to the possibilities of actually having a choice instead of taking the job at the firm if it was ever offered, there suddenly seemed like even more options than she'd ever considered.

“I really do,” she finally agreed with Cole. “I've just never experienced this type of thing before. It's kind of cool.”

“It is. But you know, you don't have to live in a small town to experience that.”

“I actually think that's the whole point.”

“No. You don't.” He pulled the truck into a space against the curb, turned off the ignition and looked at her. “Working at the ranch over in Australia is just like that. I mean, it's definitely not a small town, but it's bigger than a family. The best way to describe it is like a community. There are a lot of things going on, and everyone cares about one another. It's actually pretty fantastic.” Cole hopped out of the truck and ran around to help her down from her side.

“It sounds pretty good,” she said truthfully. “So I assume you'll go back.”

“To the ranch? No.”

“Why not?” She stared at him, but he only shrugged in response. “I mean, if it’s as great as you say it is, why wouldn’t you want to go back?”

“There are lots of places in the world,” Cole answered easily. “Why settle for just one?” He took her hand in his and they walked toward the main square, where people were gathered. Children ran around while the parents stood around various fire pits, sipping hot chocolate and apple cider. The whole scene was incredibly small town, and it made her happy just to watch it.

Cole made it sound so simple and Amber couldn’t help but envy his easygoing attitude. He was right. There were a lot of nice places in the world, and she’d love to see some of them. She’d never been the type of person who had wanderlust in her veins, but then again, maybe she could be. Maybe she’d just done a really good job of burying it beneath all the responsibility she thought she had. Maybe it was something else to consider.

“The drink tasting is in here.”

They stood in front of the pub and Cole laughed. “Was it the sign *Snowflake Spirits and Brr Brew* that gave it away? Come on, let’s go check it out. I think I could definitely use some Brr Brew. What about you?”

“I think I’m more of a Snowflake Spirit kind of girl.”

She laughed, and once again Amber found herself relaxing in his presence. It was so easy to be with Cole. Something about him just made her feel comfortable.

They walked in and found seats at the bar. Cole was served something that was blue and smelled faintly like black licorice, while Amber’s drink had some sort of smoke coming out of the clear liquid with a glass rimmed in sugar.

“Cheers.” They toasted their frosty concoctions and drank them down. They were better than they expected and for the next round, they switched and ordered what the other was having. Amber drank her second drink much slower, fully aware that in the last few days she’d had more alcohol than

she'd probably had in the last six months combined. She wanted to ask Cole about what would happen when Josie got home, but she wasn't sure how to bring it up. Would they continue their...whatever it was? Or would it end as quickly as it had begun? She could have made herself crazy thinking about it, and the last thing Amber wanted to do was ruin their evening, so in the end she just said what she was thinking.

"So, Josie will be home tomorrow."

Cole nodded. "That's what her text said. Oh, and she asked me to get some costumes for tomorrow night's party."

"Costumes?" Amber groaned. "I hate costumes. Besides, Halloween was last month. Why costumes?"

"It started years ago," the bartender interrupted with a shrug. "Sorry," he added. "I couldn't help but overhear you."

"It's okay," Amber said. "But tell me, why costumes? I thought it was the Snow Ball?"

"About ten years ago, there was a terrible virus that spread through town right before Halloween. Most of the kids were too sick to go trick-or-treating, so they kind of postponed Halloween. Since it was so close to the First Frost Festival, the mayor just decided to combine the celebrations into one. It was a tradition that just kind of stuck. It's fun."

"Costumes *are* fun," Cole agreed. "But where will we find something on such short notice?"

"I know just the place." He handed Cole a piece of paper with a phone number on it. "Katie will hook you up. She brought in a truck full of options so the people who weren't able to leave town to go to the city to get something would have a few choices. I'm sure she'll have something left. Give her a call."

"Thanks, man." Cole smiled mischievously, grabbed the paper and tucked it into his pocket.

"Well, aren't you going to call?" Amber wasn't sure whether she should

trust the look in his eye.

“I am.”

“But?”

“Do you trust me?”

Amber laughed in response.

“Wait here.” Cole stood. “I’ll be right back. Stay right here.”

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SHE DID AS HE ASKED, and watched him leave the bar to make the call. She kind of wanted to know what the costumes would be, but at the same time, she didn’t much care. Amber had never been a big fan of costumes. If it had been up to her, she wouldn’t have dressed up at all. But if Cole was excited enough to sort them out, she’d be happy enough to go along with it.

“Another drink?” The bartender held up her empty glass. “I can make you a Spiked Icicle or a Frosty Freeze if you want to try something new?”

She laughed because he managed to say the names with a straight face. “I’m not sure I want to know what a Spiked Icicle is.”

“It’s really good, I promise. I’ll get you one of those.”

She shrugged, but didn’t bother protesting. It’s not as though she had anything else to do. Besides, she was having fun and Amber definitely couldn’t remember the last time she’d had such a good time.

As if the universe had some kind of limitation on how much fun she should be having, her cell phone rang. When she glanced at the number on the screen, her heart leapt into her throat. Joshua Magnus, her internship supervisor from the accounting firm in Toronto.

She should let it go to voicemail. She was, after all, sitting in a bar, drinking themed drinks on a Saturday afternoon. She wasn’t drunk by any stretch of the imagination, but was she in any state to talk to Joshua?

*Probably not.*

But she couldn't *not* answer it. It just wasn't her style.

Her heart raced. Maybe it was the alcohol she'd consumed, but probably not, that made her hands shake as she took a deep breath, pressed the button, and put the phone to her ear.

"Mr. Magnus, hi." She put her business voice on and hoped she sounded more professional than she felt.

"Oh, I'm glad I got you, Amber. I was half expecting to get your voicemail. It is Saturday after all, and sometimes I forget that not everyone works as much as I do. Some people actually have a life outside of work." He chuckled but his comments hit her in the gut. She *was* one of those people. "But what am I thinking? I'm talking to you."

Amber flinched. But he was exactly right. The entire time she worked at the firm, she hadn't once accepted an invite to join her coworkers for a drink after hours, or shared in the stories of what she'd done over the weekend. In fact, it only took a few weeks until no one bothered to ask her what she'd done over the weekend. She'd worked. Everyone knew that.

With the very notable exception of the last few days, she'd pretty much done nothing interesting for the last few years unless it involved school or the internship and that wasn't all that interesting. "Right," she said after a moment. "And why are you working today, Mr. Magnus?" She knew why he was calling. It could only be for one reason. The job. She was either going to be offered the position, or be told she wasn't the right fit. Her stomach roiled, but not because she was afraid of not getting the offer. Just the opposite.

Things had changed a lot in the last few days. *Maybe there were other options after all?* She glanced out the window, where Cole was speaking into his phone.

The full-time position at the firm might not be the only thing on the table anymore.

But if it was offered...would she be able to say no? Had she really changed that much?



“As you know, Amber.” Her attention was drawn back to the conversation. “We’ve been considering all the interns for the full-time position as junior analyst.” She nodded despite the fact that he couldn’t see her. “And your resume, along with your work experience with us, is very strong.”

“Thank you.”

“Right, well, besides your impressive credentials, I must tell you, Amber, that I have been particularly impressed with your work ethic while you were with us. You remind me of a younger version of myself. You work hard, you make the right sacrifices to get ahead, and get the job done. I can always count on the quality of your work and I know that if I need anything, you’re not just a clock puncher. No matter what it takes, I know you’ll make the firm a priority. Your *first* priority.”

She was conflicted by his words. On one hand, it was the highest praise she could have received from him; yet, on the other, listening to him describe her, made her sad. *Would she really sacrifice anything for the firm? Would she truly make it her life? At the expense of everything else?*

Her stomach churned because deep down, she knew the answer. She would. It’s who she was. It was how she was wired. Maybe she was destined to be boring and predictable forever. To settle down in a predictable job and live a predictable life doing predictable things.

*Was that really such a bad thing?*

“And because of all of those qualities, Ms. McCormick,” he continued. “It’s my pleasure to offer you the position as the newest junior analyst here at Wallace and McKwade Financial Services.”

She’d expected it, of course—despite trying to talk herself out of it—but hearing him say the words out loud sent a thrill through her. Followed by a shot of icy terror. She pushed her empty glass away.

The job was everything she’d ever wanted. Everything she’d ever worked for. And it was happening. She should be excited. Over the moon. She should

be... “Really?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “You deserve it. Now, you don’t have to give me an answer right now. In fact, I would—”

“Oh no,” she said before she realized what she was doing. “It’s a fantastic opportunity, Mr. Magnus. I’m happy to...” She let the thought trail off. She’d been ready to accept the position. But something stopped her from saying it aloud. Amber glanced to the window and Cole, who still stood outside talking on his cell phone.

It was ridiculous not to accept a job because of a man she was having a casual relationship with. It was downright insane.

“Decisive. I like it.” Mr. Magnus was talking. It took her a moment to catch up and realize that he’d misunderstood what she’d said—or not really finished saying. “I’m very happy to hear it, Amber. You will be an excellent addition to our team.”

“Oh, Mr. Magnus, I—”

“Call me Joshua.” He chuckled. “You’re one of us now. You start on the thirteenth. I trust that gives you enough time to prepare yourself.”

“It does, but—”

“If you have any more questions, I’m sure the team in HR will be able to help you out. But if not, I expect to see you bright and early on the thirteenth, Amber.” He laughed again, a sound that was starting to give her a headache. “What am I saying? I’m talking to you. I’m sure you’ll be the first one in the office.”

Before she could protest again, or even process what had happened, the line went dead and the call was disconnected.

In a daze, she reached for the new drink that the bartender had placed in front of her while she was on the phone.

She’d just been offered everything she’d ever wanted. And it seemed that maybe she’d accepted it, too. She should be thrilled. She should be celebrating. Instead, she sat numbly and stared at the smooth countertop.

“Hey,” Cole said a moment later when he returned to the bar. “Are you okay?” He squeezed her shoulders and brushed his lips next to her ear in a way that made her stomach flip with the familiarity of the action. He sat next to her and put his hand on hers. “You look a little...I don’t know. Off.”

That was putting it mildly.

She wanted to tell him what had just happened. And more importantly, how conflicted it had made her feel. And maybe if it had been a real relationship, she would have. But it wasn’t. So instead of saying what she was feeling, she once again swallowed down her feelings and forced a smile to her face. “It’s these drinks,” she lied. “I think they’re hitting me. But I’m okay now.”

He looked at her as if he were prepared to challenge her further, but then his cocky grin returned. “There’s that smile,” he said. “Must be because I’m back.”

She shook her head with a laugh. She liked that about him. He made her laugh. *Really* laugh. “Must be.”

He signaled the bartender for a new drink and turned back to her. “Seriously.” His voice changed. It was softer. He was genuinely asking. “Are you sure you’re okay? You can talk to me, you know?”

She wanted to. So badly that it was almost a physical ache inside her. *What was this man doing to her?* In a matter of only a few days, she’d gone from knowing exactly what she wanted out of life, to being completely and totally confused. And there was no way she could tell him any of that. And she especially couldn’t tell him that even though what they were doing was just supposed to be fun and no strings, she was starting to have feelings. Real ones. No. She *definitely* couldn’t tell him that.

Besides, in a few days, he’d be gone, she’d go to Toronto to start the new job, and they’d never see each other again. “I’m good,” she lied. “I’m looking forward to the frolic later.” That *wasn’t* a lie.

Cole leaned forward and kissed her on the lips. The openness of their

relationship, or whatever it was that they were doing, took her off guard a little bit, but she liked it. A lot.

“I’m looking forward to it, too.” He kissed her again. “*Really* looking forward to it.”

## Chapter Ten

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COLE COULDN'T SHAKE the feeling that something was bothering Amber, but he wasn't going to push either. She'd talk to him if she was ready. But maybe he'd been wrong, and there really wasn't anything wrong. After all, she was smiling now. He glanced over at the beautiful blonde, whose smile only made her more radiant.

He'd never been one to question happiness and there was no reason for that to change. So for the time being, he was going to take the smiley, happy, beautiful woman on his arm and enjoy the rest of what the day had to offer. And he was pretty sure that was a whole lot.

They finished their drinks at the Tipping Cow and, needing some fresh air, ventured out into the town square. Cole had never been one for the quaintness of a small town, but something about Crystal Creek was getting to him. He glanced at Amber, who held his hand as if they were a real couple. He wasn't even going to pretend that it wasn't Amber's influence that was making him feel so good. He knew damn well it had *everything* to do with her.

They strolled toward the focal point of the square. The gazebo was decorated with giant wooden snowflakes that had been painted light blue and white and dipped in glitter and pine boughs swags that hung along the banister. He couldn't help but want the walk to last longer. Heck, he wanted

everything with Amber to last longer. Knowing that Josie was coming home and would crash their little arrangement was bittersweet. Of course he wanted to see his little sister, but he desperately wanted to spend more time with Amber.

“What?” She caught him staring at her. She blushed a little and tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

“I was just thinking how beautiful you were.”

She blushed harder, and the sexy pink flush that worked its way across her creamy skin was totally worth the lie, which wasn't really a lie at all.

“Let's sit.”

“I have a better idea.” Amber tugged on his hand and started to walk in the opposite direction. “Let's check out the ice castle.”

Cole laughed. “It's not dark enough. Let's wait.”

“No way. Besides, it's not like it's a haunted house.”

“It is kind of crazy, isn't it?” he asked. “This whole Halloween, winter festival mash-up?”

“I like it.” She grinned. “Besides, I really don't think the ice castle is meant to be haunted or creepy, but if it is, dusk is the best time to check it out.”

“I think you're crazy, but okay.” Cole shrugged and laughed again because ultimately he didn't care what they did, as long as he was with Amber. The thought hit him out of left field. He'd literally only been in a relationship...or whatever it was...for forty-eight hours, and already he was thinking about how he never wanted her out of his sight. And that's what was crazy. But surprisingly, he wasn't scared. And he definitely didn't want to run away. *Maybe he was really growing up?* The thought made him want to laugh. His whole adult life, Cole had made it a point not to settle down, not to get attached. Maybe that was changing? No, it was definitely changing. Fast.

The ice castle turned out to be an excellent idea, especially because Amber clutched tightly to him at every turn. It really was a mixture of a

winter wonderland with frosty features in the form of glitter and a few spooky Halloween holdovers. Occasionally, something would jump out, or fall on them, and whenever that happened, Amber worked her way a little closer to him. But that wasn't even the best part.

Just as they were navigating their way through a room that had been designed to look like a giant igloo, a polar bear jumped out and grabbed at Amber's arm. She shrieked and Cole spun her so she was sheltered in his arms and nuzzled under his chin. As he turned, he caught sight of the staircase and got an idea. When Amber had gotten up to go to the bathroom, the bartender in the Tipping Cow told him a little more about the ice castle and that it was a little bit famous for couples to sneak upstairs and fool around in one of the upstairs rooms. He hadn't planned it, but since the opportunity presented itself...

Without saying a word, Cole took her hand and led Amber up the stairs and away from the chaos below.

"Where are we going?"

"Just to take a little break." He found the first door and tried the handle. It was locked. He tried not to laugh and tried the next one. It opened. Cole popped his head around the corner and checked. The room was empty. *Perfect.*

"What are we doing?"

Conveniently, there were candles and a book of matches lying on an old dresser. Cole lit them, illuminating the dim room. There wasn't much to it, except a few chairs and an old sofa. He pulled his jacket off and laid it on the sofa for her to sit on. She giggled at his chivalry and sat.

"I wanted to talk to you is all." He finally answered her as he sat next to her.

"You couldn't wait until after we were done?"

He took her hand and shook his head. "I really don't think I could. Besides, any excuse to get you up here and alone." He held her face in his

hands and kissed her thoroughly. He couldn't get enough of her lips, and the more he kissed her, the more he wanted to. He'd kissed a lot of girls, but none like Amber.

"Well, I can't argue with that." She touched a finger to her lips when he pulled away. "I can't believe the weekend is almost over. I mean, I know we still have all day tomorrow and I wasn't planning on leaving until Monday morning."

Her words hit him in the gut. *Leaving?* He didn't even want to think about it.

"And Josie will be here tomorrow morning." Amber was still talking. "I'm excited to see her, but..."

"But you're kind of enjoying the way things are?"

She nodded. "Is that silly? I mean, I know it is. We're not...I mean, this isn't...we're just having fun."

Cole ignored the implication of her words. "We are having fun. But I was thinking." The idea hit him like a flash. There really was nothing to lose, so he took a deep breath and said what he was thinking before he could change his mind. "There's no reason that we can't continue... this."

"This?" Amber sat back and looked at him as if he'd just told her he was really a Tibetan monk. "What do you mean?"

He took a breath, and silently reprimanded himself for being nervous. He was never nervous with women. Besides, it's not as if he were asking her to marry him. He was being ridiculous. "All I'm saying is, we've been having a lot of fun together. And I like you, Amber."

"I like you, too."

That made him happier than he expected. Cole grinned. "And life is too short not to have fun. Don't you agree?" She narrowed her eyes in question. *Maybe that had been the wrong choice of words. Dammit. Why was it so hard for him to say how he really felt?* "So why don't we keep the good times going?"



Cole had to force himself not to groan out loud. *That was definitely not the right choice of words.*

“Keep the good times going?” She shook her head. “What does that even mean?”

Cole ignored the warning bells ringing in his head and pushed on with his idea. Maybe if he just got the words out properly, it would all make sense. “What it means is that I think you should come with me when I go back.”

“Go back?”

“To Australia.” He grabbed her hands and squeezed. “Life is way too short not to make the most of it. And you said yourself that you didn’t have any immediate plans now that you’ve graduated and the job wasn’t offered to you right away, so why not? Let’s go see the world and have a little fun. Together.”

---

TOGETHER?

*See the world?*

Amber’s mind raced. *What was he saying? Was he drunk?*

Did he seriously think he could sit here and ask her so casually to drop everything and go with him to the other side of the world? Sure, they’d been having fun but that was different. It was safe here. It wasn’t *Australia*. Besides, they were temporary. They were only having a little fun—no attachments. They were *not* the get serious—move to the other side of the world—change your life completely—kind of together.

*Were they?*

She blinked hard, trying desperately to process his words. But she couldn’t think straight. She’d been offered her dream job. And now...she was being offered...something so much different.

*Could it be a different dream? Could she really let go of her plan to take*

*a chance?*

He was squeezing her hands in his and watching her intently for the answer that no doubt he expected to be a big hell yes. She could see it in his eyes. He wanted her to jump up and say yes without a second thought. And dammit if she didn't want to do just that.

But she couldn't.

It just wasn't who she was and despite how much she wished she could be someone else, do something else, it just wasn't her.

*Was it?*

“Amber?”

The smile on Cole's face morphed into a look of concern and maybe even a little irritation because she hadn't answered him. *But what did he expect? He couldn't seriously expect her to be excited about this.* The very fact that he'd asked the question was giving her heart palpitations.

“Say something, Amber.” He moved one of his hands and smoothed back a stray hair from her cheek that kept escaping her braid. “Anything. Just say something.”

“What the hell are you thinking?” It wasn't exactly the best choice of words, and certainly she could have thought of something better to say, but the words slipped out before she could think of anything else.

Cole recoiled and sat back. “What was I thinking? I was thinking that we like each other and we're having fun and—”

“*Fun? We're having fun,*” she repeated, making the word fun sound like something very *very* bad, which in that moment, in that particular context, it really felt like. “Do you really think I could drop my whole life for a little *fun?*”

Cole released her hands and crossed his arms over his chest. “Why not? There's nothing wrong with enjoying life, Amber.”

“I *am* enjoying it.”

“Are you?” His eyes flared. “Because it seems to me that until I came

along, you were merely existing. Tell me I'm wrong."

Amber jumped up and paced across the small room. *How dare he!*

Her stomach hurt. Her heart raced. She wanted to cry and scream all at the same time. It wasn't at all how she'd planned the night to go.

*Because you did plan it. Just like you plan everything, Amber. Because you're boring. Predictable and boring.*

She forced the voice in her head to be quiet. She took a fortifying breath and turned around. "I can't." The edge slipped from her voice as she answered him. "I can't tell you that."

He stood, but didn't make a move toward her. "Then come with me." His eyes pleaded with her. "Just come."

"It's not that easy, Cole."

"It really is."

"I got the job." The words fell from her mouth and burned her tongue on the way out. It was an amazing opportunity at a prestigious firm. It was exactly what she wanted; she should have been thrilled.

She *should* have been. But she wasn't. And wasn't that exactly why she hadn't told Cole about it earlier?

She knew it was.

Everything she'd been pretending at for the last few days with Cole was just that—pretend. As much as she would like to think otherwise, she was who she was. It had been determined a long time ago. She was boring. Destined to live a life of predictability.

And really, was that such a bad thing?

"The job?" He took a step toward her. "You got it?"

She nodded and hugged her arms around her body. "They called earlier. They offered me the job."

"And you took it?"

She shrugged.

"You did or you didn't."

Amber looked down at her feet for a moment. “I guess I did.” She knew that wasn’t entirely true. Sure, Mr. Magnus had misunderstood her earlier, but that didn’t mean she had to sign up for a life she didn’t want.

She could say no. She could turn it down. She didn’t have to go for the *safe* choice. Her whole life she’d taken the safe route, the path of least resistance where she would be safe, where she would know exactly what would happen next.

She didn’t have to do that now. Not if it wasn’t what she really wanted.

Amber looked up at Cole. Everything they’d shared together for the last few days flashed through her mind. It had been fun, spontaneous, and, truthfully, some of the best days of her life.

But it was scary.

She squeezed her eyes shut and looked down again.

Maybe it was *too* scary.

“So you’re going to be an accountant?”

“I *am* an accountant.” Amber jerked her head up and swallowed hard to keep the tears at bay. She would not cry. Not like this.

“I guess congratulations are in order.”

His words bit into her skin like acid. She hadn’t really expected him to be happy for her. She hadn’t expected much from him, really. But she hadn’t expected him to be hurtful.

“So you’re going to give it all up for some boring job?”

“Give what up?” The room was suddenly a lot colder than it had been a moment ago, and she wrapped her arms tighter around her. “What exactly would I be giving up, Cole? This is all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Is it?”

She swallowed hard and nodded.

“I don’t believe that.”

She opened her mouth to defend herself, but he still hadn’t answered her question. “What am I giving up, Cole?”

“Everything.” He shook his head and rubbed his hands over his face. “You’re giving everything up, Amber. You just spent the last few days telling me how you weren’t sure what you wanted to do with your life but what you did know was that you needed a change. I just offered you a change. I just offered you fun and adventure and...”

“And what?” She forced herself to keep her eyes open, when all she really wanted to do was squeeze them shut and will him to say the words that she didn’t even realize she wanted to hear until that exact moment. “What else did you offer me?”

He opened his mouth and closed it again. “It doesn’t matter. Sounds like you already made your choice.”

*Choice? What was he talking about?* She’d taken a job. That was the right thing to do. She’d been ridiculous to even think there might be any other thing to do. She was a college graduate and she needed a job. That was what you did. You graduated and got a job. Besides, he hadn’t offered her anything else, except *fun*.

*What had she wanted him to offer?*

The answer to that question scared her more than it should have. Because she knew exactly what she’d wanted him to say—that he had feelings for her—because didn’t she have some for him?

It was all too much.

Anger grew inside her. She was supposed to be happy about the job. She was supposed to be excited about her future. She was getting everything she’d planned for.

*Even if you no longer know if you even want a plan?*

Amber shook her head hard in an effort to make the stupid voice in her head shut up once and for all.

“There was no choice,” she said after a moment. The words came out soft and hurt, and it pissed her off because she didn’t want to feel any of those things talking to Cole.

“There was.” He crossed the room and stood only inches from her. Despite the flood of mixed feelings flowing through her, a shiver of desire rippled through her body. His voice was cold, tinged with disappointment and hurt. “There still is.” He looked at her with so much intensity that maybe she didn’t need him to voice anything out loud after all. Maybe he was saying everything she needed to hear with his eyes?

She opened her mouth to change her mind. To tell him that she’d go. That she didn’t want the job at all. That what she really wanted was—him.

But before she could say anything, Cole spoke again. “I’m sure you’ll be very happy with your boring, predictable, planned-out life. After all, it’s all you’ve always wanted.”

His words pierced through her and lodged painfully in her heart. To hear him so coldly express his opinion of her hurt more than she could have ever expected.

Standing in front of him, the man she never would have expected to have any feelings for beyond simple lust, especially after such a short time, Amber had two choices. She could break down and cry. She could admit out loud for the first time that he was right, and that she was terrified that she was making a mistake, that she was going to regret taking the safe road and not risking everything, but that she was just too scared to do anything else.

Or...she could go with the safe choice the way she always had: protect her heart and her future.

Amber swallowed hard and squeezed her eyes shut, but just for a moment. When she opened them, she looked Cole right in the eye and made her choice.

“Screw you, Cole Price.” Before she could stop herself, her hand flew out and slapped him across the cheek. The sound of it hurt more than the sting in her palm, but not nearly as much as it hurt to turn around and leave him standing there.

## Chapter Eleven

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THE NIGHT BEFORE, after storming out of the ice castle and making the short walk in the cold November night back to Josie's house, Amber half expected Cole to be waiting for her. She wasn't sure whether she was relieved that his truck wasn't in the driveway or disappointed. After going inside, making herself a peanut butter sandwich and taking a hot shower to warm up, he still wasn't back, and she'd given up hope that he would walk through the door and apologize.

*Did he even need to apologize? Should she be the one to say sorry? After all, she'd hit him.* The questions rolled through her head on a continual loop all night. She'd lain awake in Josie's bed, staring at the ceiling and trying to make sense of what had happened in the ice castle. *What had Cole been saying before she'd gotten mad? And why had she gotten so upset?*

She at least knew the answer to that one. She was upset because he'd called her out. And he had no right to do that.

*Or did he?*

Maybe he had a point. Maybe she shouldn't have taken the job. Maybe she was choosing a safe, boring path for her life. But what was her other option? She didn't have any. She'd made a choice a long time ago, whether she realized it or not, that the only way to be sure that your life wasn't going to self-implode was to keep close tabs on it, and make sure every detail was

planned. Period. Besides, it wasn't as if Cole were offering any real alternatives.

*Or was he?*

Even if he had been serious about going to Australia, what they had together was only two days of fun and recklessness. That wasn't enough to base any major life decisions on. Amber was smarter than that. She was *safer* than that.

With so much rolling through her head, it was a surprise that she'd been able to get any sleep at all. Her alarm went off at seven the next morning, and she woke disoriented, groggy, and shocked that she'd managed even a few hours. The urge to pull the covers over her head and ignore the outside world was strong. But Josie would be home in less than an hour after catching an early flight, and ignoring her best friend was never an option.

She would definitely need coffee to get through the day. And lots of it. Before she left the room, Amber took her time dressing in jeans and a clean sweater. She tied her hair in a braid so tight it hurt. Cole liked her hair down. More the reason to keep it pulled back. *That way, if he was downstairs... what?* She couldn't even finish the thought. Part of her wished with every fiber in her that he would be sitting at the table with a fresh pot of coffee, waiting to talk to her, but the logical part of her knew he wouldn't be.

Sure enough, by the time Amber pulled together enough courage to go downstairs, she walked into an empty kitchen. There was no sign of him anywhere. More than that, there was no indication that he'd even come home the night before.

*Where would he go?*

He didn't know anyone else in Crystal Creek and she hadn't noticed any motels. Even if there was one, it was likely all booked up because of the festival.

*Should she be worried about him?*

*No.* A man like Cole, so full of adventure...he'd be fine.



“He probably found someone to go to the Frosty Frolic with after all.” Amber spat out the words and instantly wished the idea hadn’t popped into her head. She knew Cole wasn’t a monk, but the idea of him with anyone else hurt her in a way that she’d never felt before.

Sick to her stomach, she managed to prepare a pot of coffee and a meager breakfast of toast that she only picked at. She didn’t realize how long she’d been sitting at the table, staring into her half-empty coffee mug, until the front door opened.

Amber flinched, splashing coffee all over the table and her sweater.

“Cole?”

The second his name was out of her mouth, she regretted it. No way did she need him to think that she’d been sitting around waiting for him.

“It’s me.” Josie’s voice rang out.

*Josie? Shit. Of course.*

Amber quickly swiped her hands over her hair and pushed up from the table to meet her friend. “Josie. Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” She pulled her into a hug and squeezed tight.

Amber wrapped her arms around her friend and bit the inside of her cheek to keep from crying the unexpected tears that threatened.

When she pulled away, Amber took a good look at her friend. She looked the same. Only better, and she told her so. “You’re early.” Amber led the way back into Josie’s kitchen. “I didn’t expect you until...” She glanced up at the stove and saw that it was already after ten.

“You didn’t expect me until now?” Josie laughed. “I’m actually very impressed that the flight was on time and I got out of there so fast. It was seamless. When is travel ever seamless?”

“Never.” Amber laughed. It was good to see Josie and it was *very* good to have her there to keep her out of her head so she couldn’t keep thinking about

—

“Cole!” Josie turned in a circle and hollered her brother’s name again

before she looked at Amber. “Where’s my big bro? Don’t tell me you chased him off.”

She knew Josie was only kidding, but her words hit way too close to home. Amber forced a very fake laugh and busied herself getting her friend a cup of coffee.

“Seriously,” Josie asked. “Where is he? I’m dying to see him.”

Amber took a deep breath and handed her the mug of coffee. “You know what...I don’t actually know where Cole is. He didn’t come home last night, so I assume he met someone in town—”

“Of course. That sounds just like him. He’s never lonely long. Didn’t I tell you to keep him away from the women? I should have known he’d—”

“I don’t need to hear about it.” Amber knew she was being ridiculous. Especially to Josie, who would have no way to know that her best friend had hooked up with her big brother. And Amber definitely wasn’t about to say anything. But at the same time, she really didn’t want to listen to how he was a total player who wouldn’t have a cold bed for very long. *That* she definitely didn’t need to hear. “We should probably get some work done around here, right? I mean, you do have a pretty short deadline, right? You might as well use me while you can.” Amber forced a cheer into her voice she certainly didn’t feel. “What should we do first?”

Josie eyed her suspiciously and for a moment Amber was pretty sure she was going to call her on her weirdness. But finally, Josie nodded, followed by a smile. “I have just the thing.” She walked down the hall and admired the floor, or lack thereof, and the piles of baseboards and trim Amber and Cole had made in the living room. “You guys did a bunch,” she said. “Thank you. But I have a feeling that today’s project is going to be perfect for you right now. Wait here.”

She left to go outside, likely to the shed, and Amber let out the breath she’d been holding in. She hated lying to her best friend, but she wasn’t really lying if she just didn’t say anything at all, right? Besides, as of

tomorrow, it wouldn't matter anymore.

She'd leave, go to Toronto, and leave all of this—and Cole—behind.

Something in her chest ached at the thought of leaving. Not just Josie, but Cole, too. And if she was honest, that was the part that hurt the most. But there really wasn't another option. Unexpected and completely unwanted tears pricked at the back of her eyes. She sniffed hard and forced herself to pull it together just in time for Josie to walk back inside.

She handed Amber a sledgehammer. "Here."

"What's this for?" Amber took the hammer and eyed her friend warily.

"Look, I know you, Amber. And I don't know why yet, but I can see that you clearly need a little therapy session. We don't need to talk about it right now," she added quickly, silencing Amber's protest before she could speak it. "There'll be time for that later but I assume it has something to do with a man and I gotta tell you, Randy isn't worth any angst at all. I never did like him. And he was never even close to good enough for you." She caught herself and smiled. "But seriously, we'll talk about that douche later. For now, it's time for the next project." She walked through the house to the living room.

Amber followed, ready to cry again—this time because she had such a good friend who knew her so well. "What are we going to be doing?"

"This." Josie stopped in front of the wall that separated the tiny living room from the kitchen. "This wall needs to come down. Are you up for it?"

Amber eyed her friend and when she saw that she was serious, a small smile crept over her face. She hefted the hammer over her shoulder, ready to swing. "Absolutely."

---

COLE HAD WOKEN BEFORE DAWN, freezing in the cold cab of his truck, and spent the next few hours driving around to warm up before the festival began and he walked aimlessly around the booths in the square. He'd

had at least three cups of apple cider and was only narrowly able to talk his way out of decorating a cupcake. The little girl running the booth was very persistent, and it was hard to say no to six-year-olds in pigtails. But he was in no mood to decorate anything. What he was really in the mood for was some more of that Moon Juice, but he purposely avoided that booth because no good would come from him drinking that delicious beverage before noon on a Sunday. Besides, every time he saw the jars, he thought of Amber and their sleigh ride. It was stupid to have such memories with her after one night, but he couldn't help it. Hell, he couldn't stop thinking about her at all.

After she'd stormed out of the ice castle the night before, he knew he should go after her. But what would he say? It's not as if he could tell her that the last few days he'd spent with her had been some of the best days he'd had in years, maybe ever. He couldn't tell her that the connection he had with her was unlike any he'd ever had with anyone else. And he definitely couldn't tell her that he thought he might be falling in love with her.

*No. No way.*

He couldn't say any of those things. So, he'd done exactly what he shouldn't have done. He'd let her go. He'd cringed when the door slammed behind her and then a moment later, he'd looked through the window and watched her run down the street. Later, after enough time had passed, he'd driven past Josie's house and seen the lights on in the upstairs bedroom. Satisfied that she was home safe, he spent the rest of the night driving around the small town until he finally parked his truck in the lot of a local diner and stretched across the front seat to get a few hours of sleep. Not that he managed to get any at all. Whenever he did manage to drift off, he was tortured by images of Amber's face in his dreams.

Cold, and tired of attempting to avoid thoughts of Amber, Cole retreated to the diner, and a hot cup of strong coffee. He chose a table in the back where he could stare out the window.

Outside, the sky was gray and it looked like it might finally snow soon.

*Amber would love that. Snow on the last night of the frost festival. It would be perfect.*

The thought made him sadder. He stared down into his now cold cup of coffee—*how long had he been sitting there?*—and tried to think of a way to get Amber out of his head.

He knew it was only a matter of time before he'd have to go to the house. Josie was coming home and he was going to have to face Amber sooner or later. He'd apologize for basically calling her boring and predictable and generally being a jackass. He couldn't even lie and say that he didn't know why he'd said those things. He did. Everything he'd said was because he meant it. Except the part where he'd said that Amber was boring. She was far from it. But the life she was choosing was. And he had no idea why she was making the choice she was. She obviously wasn't excited about it. Why was it so hard to choose something different? She didn't even see how much more there was to life. To *her*. It made him crazy that she couldn't see her own value. To see that she could have a life full of laughter, fun, and living. Because she deserved it. She deserved to wake up every day and laugh, look forward to the adventure and...

She deserved him.

He dropped his head into his hands and stared at the tabletop. He needed more time to figure out what he could say or do to somehow fix things. Not that he thought he'd actually be able to. Not really. The damage was done. He should probably just take off before he caused any more trouble.

“Cole?” He popped his head up in time for Josie's screech to pierce the air. “Cole!”

He jumped up from his chair and met her in the middle of the diner. He wrapped his arms around his baby sister and swung her around as best he could without knocking over the other patrons, who were starting to fill tables for the lunch rush.

“Josie. What are you doing here? When did you get back?”

She pulled back and whacked him on the chest. “I got home hours ago. Nice of you to be there to greet me. And you didn’t even answer your phone. I’ve been calling you all morning.”

“Sorry.” He shook his head and gestured to his little table. “I’ve been here. I should have called, Josie. I’m so sorry.”

“No,” she corrected him. “You should have been at the house. Are you scared of Amber or something? I know she can be a bit fierce when she’s in a mood, but she’s doing a lot better now that I’ve had her bashing down walls all morning. I may not know much, but I certainly do know how to work out man problems.”

“Man problems?” *No way did Amber tell his sister about them. But why wouldn’t she?* After all, Josie was her best friend and Amber was really pissed. “What kind of man problems?” He flinched a little bit, waiting for the answer, but breathed a sigh of relief when Josie answered.

“We haven’t even talked about it yet, but I assume it’s that stupid ex of hers. I mean, he was a total douche and I really don’t think she’s dated anyone since him. If you ask me, he didn’t even deserve the time he did spend with her. Amber’s a pretty special woman and—”

“She is.”

Josie stopped and stared at him. She wasn’t stupid and she knew her brother very well, despite the distance they’d had between them over the last few years. “That’s right,” she said slowly, watching him carefully. “I forget that you’ve met Amber before and of course, you just spent the last few days with her.” He nodded. “So where were you last night, brother? No doubt you met some local—”

Cole didn’t have the energy to pretend and there didn’t seem to be any point to it anyway. “We had a fight.”

“You had a fight? With Amber?”

He looked around and for the first time wondered what his sister was doing in the cafe in the first place. *Was Amber with her?* “Where is Amber,

anyway? What are you doing here?"

"I came to grab some lunch for us. Amber's at home." Josie stepped in front of him so he had to focus. "I left her bashing a wall down with a sledgehammer to work out some of her feelings that she's clearly having about a man and please tell me that man is not you, Cole."

He didn't say a word. He didn't have to. He should have known Josie would figure it out in less than five minutes.

"Cole." She smacked his chest with both hands. "No. Please tell me that you're not the reason Amber is back at my house having a whole lot of feelings."

*A whole lot of feelings?* Because of him? He returned to his table and sat heavily in the chair before he dropped his head into his hands.

"No, Cole." Josie sat across from him. "Just, no."

They sat in silence for a moment before his sister spoke. "You better tell me what's going on." Her voice was firm, with no room for negotiation. "Now."

He looked up and nodded. "I think I'm falling in love with her." Josie's mouth opened in surprise but she didn't say anything, so he continued. "I know it sounds crazy, but it's not really if you think about it. The last few days have been...well, it doesn't matter anyway, because she hates me now."

"No. She doesn't hate you. If the way she's swinging that hammer is any indication, she definitely has some *strong* feelings for you."

"Do you think?" For the first time since Amber had slapped him, Cole felt something besides defeat. "But then why...I don't understand why she won't even give us a chance?" If anyone understood Amber, it would be Josie. "She's insisting on taking this job and I know she doesn't want it. I just *know* it. I offered her—"

"Cole." Josie stopped him with a touch on his arm. "Do you even know why structure is so important to Amber? Why she is the least spontaneous person I know?"

“Of course. I mean, I know that her family...I—” He stopped himself. “No,” he admitted. “I guess I don’t. Not really.”

“You should ask.”

His sister’s words took him off guard. Of course. He *should* ask. There were still so many things he didn’t know about her. And he wanted to know all of the things.

“I will,” he told Josie. “Just as soon as I see her. Well, maybe not right away.” He shook his head sharply. “I’ve really screwed this up, Josie. What should I do?”

“Oh, no.” Josie shook her head. “I’m not doing this, Cole. I’m not getting in the middle of anything that the two of you have going. I love you both and while the idea of the two of you is still really weird...I can’t get in the middle.” She took a breath and then added, “Except to say one thing.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “And what’s that, little sis?”

She smiled, but then it faded as she got serious and grabbed his hand across the table. “Whatever’s going on with you two, if it means anything... even if you only *think* it might mean something, don’t screw it up, okay?”

“I won’t.”

“I mean it, Cole. Amber is a good woman. She’s not one of your little—”

“I know, Josie. She’s so much more.”

“She is. And so are you. Don’t forget that.”

He nodded, the support of his little sister fueling him. “I’m not going to screw it up, but I might need your help.”



## Chapter Twelve

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AMBER ASSESSED herself in the mirror and for at least the dozenth time questioned what she was doing. All she really wanted to do was curl up on the couch with a bottle of wine and feel sorry for herself. “Why am I doing this again?”

“Because it’s the First Frost Festival,” Josie called from the bathroom down the hall. “And it’s tradition. And you’re going to leave tomorrow and I won’t see you for ages.” She appeared in the door of the bedroom and Amber smiled. “And don’t forget, it’s mostly because you love me.”

“Of course I do.” Amber blew her friend a kiss and turned back to the mirror so she could tug at her way-too-short dress again. “But I don’t think this is the only way to prove that I’m your best friend and love you dearly.” She shook her head. “And I’m still not sold on this costume.” She grabbed her long red cloak and swung it around her shoulders. “I’m not sure Little Red Riding Hood was supposed to be so...”

“Smokin’ hot?” Josie laughed. “Maybe not. But you look great. I, on the other hand, look like an old hag.”

Josie did not look like an old hag, but she *did* look like a grandma. Little Red Riding Hood’s grandma to be exact. Amber couldn’t help but giggle a little at Cole’s sense of humor in choosing the costumes.

Earlier, when Josie came home with lunch, she’d also arrived with the

costumes Cole had ordered, having run into him in town. But she hadn't come home with Cole. He obviously didn't want to see her. Whatever had happened between them over the last few days obviously hadn't meant the same to him as it had to her. But she couldn't let it bother her. Not tonight.

She'd promised Josie she would go to the Snow Ball with her, and have a great night. She couldn't let her feelings about what was obviously not anything to begin with, affect that. One more night and she could get on with things, start her new job and settle into her new life. Besides, if Cole couldn't be bothered to deliver the costumes himself, he wasn't likely to show up at the ball anyway. One less thing she needed to worry about.

Amber adjusted her dress one last time and fluffed her hair, which cascaded in curls around her shoulders. "I do look good, don't I?"

Josie laughed. "Good? You look hot. Like, really hot. Are you ready to do this?"

"Why not?" She linked arms with her best friend and forced a smile. "Let's go have a great night."

When they got to the party, it was already in full swing. A tent had been put up in the park next to the main town square, which was already packed with people in costume. Twinkle lights and giant snowflakes decorated the space, and it really did look like a winter wonderland. The night was chilly, but with so many people and the heaters throughout the tent, no one seemed to notice. Children ran around, squealing on their hopped-up sugar rushes as they darted from booth to booth, collecting candy just as if it were Halloween. The DJ was pumping tunes over the speakers and the dance floor was already full. The air was full of a festive fun, just as the rest of the weekend had been. Amber felt a stab of disappointment that Cole wasn't with her to experience the climax of the First Frost Festival. It felt wrong somehow to be there without him.

"Did you talk to your brother?" Amber hoped the question came off casually.

“I did. When I got the costumes, remember?”

“Oh, right.” She was hoping she’d talked to him again. “And what was he doing today? I’m surprised he didn’t come by the house.”

“You are?” Josie eyed her.

“You’re not?” Amber was having a hard time trying not to look too interested. “I mean, he is here to see you, isn’t he? I hope he knows he can be at the house with me there. I mean, I don’t want to ruin your visit with him.”

“You’re not ruining a thing.” Josie squeezed her arm. “You know that, right?” Amber couldn’t help but feel that there was more to her question than she was letting on, but she didn’t know how much Josie knew or how much she wanted to know about things between her and Cole.

“I know that.” Amber smiled. “But please know I would never want my presence to interfere with your time with your brother, okay? I mean, if he feels awkward in any way because I’m here...well, I just want you to know that whatever reason...look, Josie.” She shook her head. She couldn’t keep quiet anymore. “I think there’s something you should know.” She hadn’t meant to say anything, but the more she stood there with her best friend, the more she knew that she needed to say something. Josie knew everything about her love life, or more accurately, lack thereof. If it had been anyone else, Amber would have already told her. But it wasn’t anyone else—it was Cole.

*Cole.*

Just thinking about him left a weird sort of gaping hole in her heart.

“I know, Amber.” Josie’s voice was kind. “About you and Cole. I mean, I don’t know everything, but I do know that I’ve never seen my big brother as messed up as I saw him earlier. I mean, I’ve seen him screwed up by a woman before, but never like that. Not even close.”

Amber didn’t know whether hearing that should make her feel better or worse.

“And remember, I saw the way you swung that hammer.” Josie laughed.

“I know pent-up feelings when I see them. I just never would have guessed that they were because of my big brother.” She shook her head and laughed. “That is completely new territory for me.”

“I know.” Amber grabbed Josie’s hand and pulled her aside to a small table where they wouldn’t be in the way of all the festivities. “And Josie, you need to understand when I tell you that I never intended for anything to happen. I mean, me and Cole...it’s...”

“Crazy?”

Amber nodded.

“Insane?”

Amber nodded again.

“Perfect?”

A rush of air escaped Amber’s lungs as she almost collapsed into her friend. “Yes.”

Josie squealed and wrapped her arms around her in a hug. “I know, right? I mean, at first I wasn’t sure. But I think it was just the idea of everything that took me off guard. But the more I think about it, oh my God, yes. It makes perfect sense.”

Amber laughed a little. “It actually makes no sense at all. We’re total opposites in every way.”

Josie didn’t disagree but she didn’t agree either. Instead, she took Amber’s hands and squeezed.

“It doesn’t matter anyway.” Amber shook her head. “We argued and he said things and I said things and now...well...it doesn’t matter anymore. I’m leaving tomorrow to start my new job. I told you about that, right? I was offered the job at Wallace and McKwade, and even though I didn’t formally accept it, I kind of did and—”

“Congratulations.”

“It is a good job, Josie.”

“I said congratulations.”

“It really is a great job.” She spoke to her friend, but she could no longer be sure of who exactly she was trying to convince. “It’s really everything I’ve ever wanted and most people would kill for such an offer.”

“I’m sure they would.”

“I should be thrilled. Celebrating. This is a job that anyone would be super lucky to get right out of school. It’s a huge deal, Josie.”

“I believe you.”

“I should be so happy.”

“But you’re not.”

She looked around the busy square filled with people, hoping upon hope to see Cole standing there waiting for her. “No,” she said softly. “I’m not.”

“You know what I think?”

Amber looked at her friend, hoping for some grand revelation.

“I think we need to dance.”

Amber laughed. “I actually can’t think of a better idea right now.”

She let Josie lead her through the crowd to the dance floor, where she pulled her into her arms. Amber laughed again. “We must look crazy,” she said. “Granny and Little Red Riding Hood dancing together.”

Josie spun her around before she pulled her back in for a dip. “We don’t look any crazier than anyone else here,” Josie said. “It’s a Halloween-themed Snow Ball, for God’s sake.”

“True.” Amber found herself laughing harder than she had in a long time as Josie continued to take the lead, swinging her and moving her around the dance floor. She spun her hard, extending her arm so it sent Amber spinning along the floor until a strong pair of arms caught her. Instantly, her body both simultaneously tensed and melted from relief. She looked up into the eyes of the Big Bad Wolf.

“My, what beautiful eyes you have.”

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COLE HELD HER TIGHT, afraid Amber would slap him again. Or worse, bolt. Once he had her back in his arms, he had no intention of letting go. He could feel her body tense when he caught her. But she wasn't pulling away.

Finally, she looked up into his eyes. "Isn't that my line?"

He didn't answer right away, choosing instead to move her slowly around the dance floor to the romantic lyrics of the latest Thomas Rhett song. "You do have beautiful eyes."

"The better to see you with, my dear."

Cole laughed. "That's *my* line."

She shrugged. "It's an interesting costume choice."

He wore a full wolf suit with a half mask over his face. He hadn't been so sure about it at first, but the effect was actually pretty impressive, even with the granny hat and gown over his wolf suit.

He spun her easily and pulled her back in to his chest, where he preferred her. "I thought they were fitting. Given the situation."

"And what situation is that?" She looked up at him through thick, dark lashes that made her look every bit the part of the innocently sexy Little Red Riding Hood.

He had to force himself to stay calm and move slowly when all he really wanted to do was twirl her right off the dance floor and into a private corner where he could tell her all the things he'd been thinking since the last moment he'd seen her. He wanted to take her and hold her until she understood that whatever was going on between them was real, even if neither of them understood it yet. They couldn't ignore it and not even some stupid thing he'd said when he'd been upset and not thinking straight should keep them from figuring it all out. He wanted to kiss her until she *felt* exactly what he was trying to say.

But it wasn't time to do any of that. They were in costume, and he'd play the role. He'd play it as long as it took to convince her that whatever it was that he was feeling for her, it was real.

He grinned wide, knowing his costume likely made him look as wolfish and sinister as possible. “The situation between the innocent good girl and the wicked bad boy.”

Cole could tell she was trying not to, but a smile crept across her face. “I’m the innocent good girl?”

“Innocent enough.” He spun her around again. The twinkling lights strung around the dance floor sparkled and danced on her skin. “And I’m definitely bad enough.”

“Enough for what?”

He paused in mid turn and held her fast. “Enough to make this work.”

“This?”

“Us. The innocent girl and the Big Bad Wolf.”

She shook her head. “That’s not how the story goes.”

The music changed pace to a more upbeat song and Cole easily transitioned into a quicker step, moving Amber around the dance floor through the crowd, but he didn’t release his grip on her. “If I remember correctly, the Big Bad Wolf pursued Little Red Riding Hood, until she finally gave in.”

“That’s an interesting take on it,” Amber said. “If you call stalking and hunting pursuing.”

He gave her another grin. “Maybe I do. If it gets me the girl in the end.”

Amber’s smile faded and she shook her head slightly. “That’s not how the story goes. He didn’t get the girl at all. The woodsman came and saved Little Red Riding Hood from the Big Bad Wolf. He took the wolf out to the forest and she never heard from him again.”

*Dammit.* He hadn’t thought that part of the fairy tale through. But it was just that. A fairy tale. Having Amber standing in front of him—that was real. The way she made him feel—that was real. Everything about them and the last few days—that was *very* real. She wasn’t going to get off on a technicality. This was too important.

With two fingers, he tilted her chin up so she was looking at him. No, she was looking at his wolf mask. It wasn't good enough. He kept one hand on her back and with the other, he pulled off his mask so she was looking at his face. He couldn't be sure, but he had to believe that she'd be able to see the truth in his eyes. "That doesn't matter," he said after a moment. "None of that matters."

"Of course it matters."

"No." They'd stopped moving and couples danced around them, but he didn't care. The only thing he cared about was the woman in front of him and fixing things between them. There was no way he was going to let her walk away from whatever it was they'd started. "It doesn't matter, Amber, because we're going to write our own ending."

She tried to look down, but he wouldn't let her. He cupped her cheek and held her so their eyes were locked.

"It will never work, Cole. I'm—"

"It will." He nodded. "You're a planner. You're a rule follower and you're responsible. I'm the exact opposite of that. I've never planned anything in my life and I definitely don't follow the rules." He winked at her and that got a smile, but he could see the unshed tear in her eye.

"That's why this can never work." The tear rolled down her cheek. "We're so different, Cole. We come from different places. I just don't see how..."

He couldn't stand it anymore. Cole lowered his mouth to her lips and kissed her gently. "We'll write our own ending," he repeated. "This is *our* story. We get to decide how it ends, Amber. Or at the very least, we get to write the next chapter. And whatever it looks like, I want my story to include you."

"But...Australia...you...I'm..."

"Tell me you don't want me."

She shook her head and another tear slipped down her cheek. "I can't." A



smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “I can’t tell you that, because I do want you. So much.”

Cole didn’t need to hear anything else. He slipped a hand behind her head and pulled her to his mouth, where he kissed her like he’d never kissed before. In fact, he could have quite happily spent the rest of the night kissing her if that’s what it took, but someone had other plans.

“I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess that you two have sorted yourselves out.” Josie’s voice distracted him.

“Damn, little sis. You make a frighteningly good granny,” Cole said when he finally pulled himself away from Amber.

She smacked him on the arm. “I can rock whatever costume you give me.” She glanced between them. “But seriously.” Her face shifted back to one lined with concern. “Are you two good? Can we dance? I mean, you *are* both here to see me, aren’t you?”

“Well, I don’t know—”

“Of course—”

They laughed as the DJ started playing a popular dance tune. Cole took them each by the hand and spun them around. As much as he wanted to get Amber alone, his sister wanted to party, and he owed her. There’d be plenty of time for him to get Amber alone later. Right now, he’d settle for having her hand in his, back where it belonged.

## Chapter Thirteen

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IT WAS late by the time they got back to Josie's house. Her feet ached from hours of dancing, but Amber didn't care. They'd had a great night, introducing Josie to Moon Juice and even decorating cupcakes that they then ate in a few bites. It had been a perfect night. When they got back to the house, Josie had offered to share her bed with Amber, but she'd done so with a laugh, because they all knew Cole would never let that happen.

After Josie retreated upstairs, together they'd created a makeshift bed on the floor from the couch cushions and a pile of quilts. It wasn't the most comfortable bed she'd slept on, but she didn't care because Cole's arms were wrapped around her and she'd never been happier.

Except maybe when he suddenly flipped her so she lay on her back and looked up into his eyes.

"You were the most beautiful Little Red Riding Hood I've ever seen." He kissed her nose. "And you were definitely the sexiest woman there tonight."

"Is that right?"

"Oh, that's right." He kissed her again, only this time his kiss was more demanding, needing more. She moaned and closed her eyes, more than ready to take the kiss further. But as quickly as it started, it ended.

Amber snapped her eyes open and stared at him.

"I meant what I said earlier, Amber," Cole said. "About writing our own

story. We get to choose what happens next. Do you believe that?"

She nodded.

"I don't know how...or..." He stopped himself with a shake of his head. "All I know is that I want to be with you."

She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. "And I want to be with you." She tugged him closer so she could kiss him. "Now."

He didn't need any more invitation than that, and this time when their lips came together, she kissed him with a need that had been building up since the night before. Amber slipped her hands up and over his hard, muscled back. She squeezed and pulled, needing him as close to her as she could get him.

"You're very demanding." He grinned a little as he pulled back.

"You have no idea." She laughed.

"I like it." He dropped his head to her neck where he nipped and licked the skin there. "A lot."

Cole kept up the kisses and licks as he worked his way down to her breasts. His hot mouth on her bare skin fueled her. Everything about being with Cole was exciting. He woke feelings in her that she never knew she had. *How had she gone her entire life and never felt the way she felt with him?*

The litany of questions about their future together that she'd been suppressing all night tried to sneak its way to the forefront of her mind. *Where were they going to live? What about her job? Would Cole move to Toronto for her? Did she want him to? What about Australia? What would her family say?*

Before she could let herself go too far down that rabbit hole, a sharp sensation that straddled the line between pleasure and pain brought her back to the moment. Amber blinked hard and focused on Cole poised above her, one hand cupping her right breast, her nipple between two of his fingers.

"Stay with me," he said simply. "Stay out of your head, Amber."

He waited until she nodded and then sucked her nipple into his mouth, causing every other thought to be pushed straight out of her head. There

wasn't room for anything but the sensations tearing through her body.

She squirmed and her climax grew quickly and unexpectedly.

"Cole," she whispered on a moan. "I need..." She didn't bother to finish the sentence, letting her hand that had slid between them and found his hard cock do the talking instead. She squeezed and stroked, and a moment later, it was Cole who was doing the moaning.

"Dammit, woman."

She grinned as he lifted his head to meet her gaze again. There was fire in his eyes, and just seeing how much he wanted her fired her up even more.

Amber wiggled her hips and pressed herself up to him.

Cole groaned again and reached over her head to the coffee table. He grabbed the condom and made quick work of sheathing himself before positioning himself at her hot core, but only for a moment before he pushed inside her.

Amber cried out. The feel of him inside her was...everything. It was only belatedly that she remembered that Josie was sleeping only one floor away. She bit her lip as he moved inside her, bringing her right to the edge of an orgasm that would not be held back.

She wrapped her legs around his back in an effort to keep him even closer.

"Let go, babe." He kissed her, but only for a moment before the waves of ecstasy started to crash through her. To keep from crying out, she tucked her head into his neck and dug her fingers into his back.

A moment later, he joined her in his own release. Slowly, they pulled away from each other, and shifted so that Cole lay behind her, Amber tucked up tightly against his chest. Cole kept his arm wrapped tightly around her and dropped little kisses along her shoulder and the back of her neck as she drifted off to sleep.

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SHE'D MANAGED to go the entire night without giving any thought to what would happen in the morning, but now, still snuggled against his hard, naked chest, as the warm glow of the morning sun started to fill the room, Amber could no longer ignore the questions that popped up in her head.

“What are you thinking?” Cole kissed the back of her head.

She hadn't even known he was awake.

“How do you know I'm thinking something?”

He chuckled. “Babe, it doesn't take a genius to see that you're busy overthinking something.”

She twisted in his arms. “I'm not overthinking. I'm just thinking. I mean...” She trailed off, unsure how to say what she needed to without ruining the perfect night they'd had.

“Just say it. There's no point keeping it inside now,” he said. “And besides that, I'm pretty sure I already know what you're thinking.”

Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. But either way, it wasn't going to be easy to talk about. Especially considering Amber had zero experience talking about what it was she *wanted* to do. She was in completely uncharted territory.

After a moment, she nodded. “We do. I mean, what happens next, Cole? Are you coming with me to Toronto? I'm supposed to start my job next week.”

He was quiet for a moment but finally, he said, “If that's what you want, I will absolutely come with you.”

“You will?”

“Sure. I've never been to Toronto.” He didn't hesitate with his answer, and Amber's heart swelled unexpectedly. Randy never would have moved for her. It was too soon to think of whatever it was with Cole as a relationship, but...whatever it was, it was nice. Amber turned and propped herself up on her arm to look at him.

“This is crazy.”

“What? Moving to Toronto? I agree.” He shrugged. “But I’ve done crazier things.”

“No. Well, yes. That too.” She laughed even though she felt like crying. “But that’s not what I mean.”

“What *do* you mean?”

“You. This.” She shook her head. “Us. We’re talking about tomorrow.” She gestured wildly between them. “We’re talking about...well, more.” It sounded so stupid and so completely insane to say it out loud, but she didn’t care.

“We are.” Cole took her hand and pulled her down to him.

“And that doesn’t scare you?”

He laughed. “It scares the hell out of me.” It took a moment, but then he shook his head and added, “Look. I’ve never lived my life with any kind of plan. It drove my parents crazy.” He rolled his eyes. “I’ve always just gone with the flow of things, and if it felt right, I did it.”

The very idea of going with the flow the way Cole just described scared the hell out of *her*. But deep down, it also excited a part of her. A big part.

“And I don’t know about Toronto,” Cole continued. “But I do know that this feels right.” He took her hand and pressed it to his chest. “If you really want to take that job, then okay. I’ll go. I want to be with you, and if that means Toronto, then that’s what it means.”

“What about Australia?”

“It’s not going anywhere. We’ll go another time.”

“But it was only the other night that you asked me to go with you. Now you’re willing to come with *me*?”

He nodded. “Of course. Like I said, I’ve done crazier things than following a woman who I...”

Amber’s heart did a strange flutter in her chest. “Who you’re what?”

*What was he going to say?*

He shook his head and smiled. “Who I think is super sexy.”

The words were meant to be teasing and fun, but they fell flat and Amber couldn't help but think that there'd been something else he'd been about to say. But she wouldn't push. Because what if he didn't feel the same way she did? Sure, she knew he liked her. Enough to throw up his whole life in the air, and that was definitely something. But was it *everything*?

Was it enough?

Was it *love*?

And did it even matter?

## Chapter Fourteen

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"I THINK IT'S AWESOME." Josie sat across the table from them, sipping her coffee as if it were no big deal that they'd just told her Cole was moving to Toronto. His sister never failed to surprise him. "Are you surprised?" Josie looked between them. "I mean, just because I sort of said I wasn't sure about it, you didn't really think I'd disapprove of all this?" She waved her hand between them and laughed. "You did, didn't you?"

Amber shrugged but it was Cole who answered. "Honestly? Kind of. I mean, I'm your big brother."

"And I'm your best friend."

"And that's exactly why it's perfect." Josie laughed and drank her coffee. "Who else would I want for my sister-in-law?"

"Whoa!"

"What?"

They both spoke at the same time, and when Amber looked at him with panic on her face, he patted her hand and smiled. "No one is saying anything about marriage."

"Yet."

"Josie. Seriously. We're talking about Toronto. That's it." He needed to shut his sister down before she got any more crazy ideas. And marriage was crazy. He'd barely gotten used to the idea that he was falling for this girl.



Never mind spending the rest of his life with her. Way too soon for that.

“And we’re not making any plans.”

Cole turned and looked at Amber with shock and admiration. For a girl who’d planned her whole life, she was coming over quickly to his way of thinking. He liked it. More importantly, he liked her. A lot.

So much so that it scared him.

“Whatever you say. Either way, I’m happy for you guys,” Josie said. “But there’s only one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“This house.” She moaned and then laughed. “I was counting on your help.”

Cole instantly felt a flash of guilt. “I know. I’m so sorry. Do you want me to stay?” He looked quickly between his sister and Amber, who nodded. “I’ll stay. What do you need me to do?”

“No.” She waved her arm in the air. “Amber has a job to get to.” Cole didn’t think he was imagining it when he saw Amber flinch, but before he could say anything, Josie continued talking. “I’ll be fine. I’m just being sensitive. But I will miss you both.” Josie jumped up from the table. “Now come and give me a hug before I change my mind and make you stay.”

---

LEAVING Josie was harder than Amber expected. There hadn’t been enough time to spend with her friend. She’d almost turned her car around twice to go back and spend a few more days with her, but ultimately, she’d kept going, following Cole in his truck. With two rental vehicles, they had to drive separately back to Saskatoon and the airport. Amber would have rather been with Cole. She couldn’t get enough of him.

*You’ll have plenty of time to be with him in Toronto.*

Toronto.

At her new job. It was what she'd wanted. A good job at a prestige firm. It would be a great start to her career. It was perfect. Even more so that Cole decided to go with her. Sure, she hadn't planned that part of things, but it didn't matter. She could go with the flow. That in itself surprised her so much she had to laugh. *Her, go with the flow?* It was crazy how only a few days could change so much.

But even with all the changes—or maybe because of them—something still wasn't sitting right with Amber. She should be thrilled that she was getting everything she wanted, but whenever she tried to picture herself walking into Wallace and McKwade—she couldn't.

Maybe it was because she hadn't formally accepted the job. But more likely it was because Amber was no longer sure it was what she wanted. After all, did she really want to turn into a workaholic who spent all her waking hours crunching numbers and poring over financial statements?

And then there was Cole. They hadn't discussed what he was going to do in Toronto. In fact, she had no idea what he was trained to do. Had he even graduated from college? She didn't think so. She remembered Josie saying something about how he'd dropped out halfway through to travel to Australia. Not that it mattered, not really. Besides, Cole didn't seem concerned about what he'd do.

But she was.

Because the longer she drove, the harder it was to imagine Cole in a big city, working some kind of corporate job where he'd be miserable. He would hate it there. He needed an adventure, or at least somewhere with open spaces, no buildings to fence him in. He'd resent her. And then...

By the time they pulled up to the rental car return and dropped off their keys, Amber was fixated on the idea that no matter what he said, Cole didn't belong in the big city with her.

“What's going on in that pretty head?” he asked her as they walked through the airport hand in hand in search of the desk where Cole could

change his ticket. “You seem a million miles away, and that’s worrying me a little bit.”

Amber shrugged. “I’m fine. I’m just thinking.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her to a stop before she realized what was happening.

“What’s going on?” he demanded.

She shook her head and was about to protest and say something that would smooth things over, but she changed her mind and said what she knew was right. “We can’t go to Toronto.”

“What?”

Once the words were out of her mouth, Amber finally felt as though she could breathe again.

“What are you talking about? Your job is there.”

“No.”

“It is.”

“Yes, I mean, no.” She stopped and smiled before continuing. “What I mean is, I don’t want to go there. I didn’t even really formally accept the job and I’m not even excited about it. In fact, I’m kind of dreading it.”

Cole’s face twisted up in confusion for a moment before he said, “So what are you thinking?”

“I don’t want to go to Toronto.”

He laughed but didn’t release her hands. “Okay. So what *do* you want?”

“You,” she answered without hesitation. “I want you.”

“But not the job?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Australia?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.” It was an honest answer.

“Okay.” Cole drew the word out. “So, you know you want me?” She nodded. “You don’t want the job?” She shook her head. “And you’re not sure about Australia?”

“Right.”

“So, what do we do?” He looked around. “We can’t stay here. I mean, we could go back to Crystal Creek and—”

“Cedar Springs.” The idea popped into her head, but the moment it did, it felt right. Her family had been wanting her to go visit and the holidays were coming. Besides, it’s not as if they had any other place to go. “My whole family is there right now,” she explained. “It’s complicated, but I have a few brothers I don’t really know and they’re all there and they all seem to be married or getting married and...why not?” she finished with a shrug.

Cole eyed her carefully. “Did you plan this?”

She smacked him playfully on the shoulder. “Not at all.”

“Then I think it’s perfect. Let’s go to Cedar Springs.”

“Really?”

“Do you really think I’d say no?” He grinned and Amber stood on her tiptoes to kiss him. “Hell, I was ready to go to Toronto for you. I think I can go to Cedar Springs.” He shook his head with a chuckle. “Besides, I’d like to meet your family.”

*Meet her family.*

The words echoed in her head as she thought of not only Chelsea, Cal, and Declan, but also of the two half-brothers she didn’t know. The ones who’d never wanted her in their lives. Until now.

“Me too,” she said with a shaky smile. “Me too.”

## Chapter Fifteen

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REMEMBERING the look on Josie's face when he'd told her that they were leaving, Cole suggested a compromise. They'd go back to Crystal Creek for a few weeks and help Josie with as much work on the house as they could, before going to Cedar Springs in time for Christmas.

It was the perfect plan.

A word he was starting to get used to, even if he still did like teasing Amber about it.

The best part of the few weeks they spent in Crystal Creek with his little sister wasn't catching up with Josie—although that part was fantastic and made him miss her even more. It wasn't getting his hands dirty demolishing walls, ripping up more flooring, and putting fresh coats of paint on all the walls—although it was satisfying to see the transformation of the old house. It wasn't even sleeping with Amber wrapped tight in his arms every night—but that was a very close second.

No, the best part of their time in Crystal Creek was watching Amber come alive. Despite the fact that her life had taken a very sharp and very unexpected turn, she seemed to blossom with the lack of structure to their days. She didn't have to get up and go to an office, didn't have to sit and crunch numbers all day—although she swore she loved that part—and for the first time in her life, didn't have to follow some sort of grand master plan for

her life.

For Cole, just watching the way she laughed more, smiled more easily, and danced through each day made him fall for her a little bit more. Not that he could fall much more. He was already completely lost to her. In fact, he was pretty sure that his heart had been completely hers from the moment she pressed her back up against the wall and wielded a remote control at him.

It was a revelation that was equal parts terrifying and exciting. Yes. He was definitely falling in love with her. But he wasn't ready to share his feelings for her. Not yet.

He leaned against the door of his rental truck after making one last trip out to the car with Amber's bags.

*Why couldn't he tell her?*

It was a question that had been driving him crazy for days now, but he didn't have any real answer. Not beyond the cop-out that he was waiting for her to say it first. He'd never been that kind of guy. If there was something he wanted, he went after it. If there was something that needed to be said, he said it.

Of course, he'd never felt the way he felt about Amber before. He'd never remotely felt as if he might be in love or falling in love or whatever it was that he was feeling. It scared the hell out of him.

And that was it. He was scared. Never in his life had he put himself out there the way he had with Amber. *What if she rejected him? What if she changed her mind? What if...*

*It turned into forever?*

He'd spent his whole adult life running from the life his parents wanted for him. The life they had. *Nice enough.* Hadn't that been how he'd described it to Amber? Was he choosing that now? By giving up his life of freedom to put someone else's needs before his own, was he turning into the very thing he'd been trying to prevent?

The thought slammed into him and Cole had to take a step back from the

truck. He inhaled the crisp December air and forced himself to breathe slowly.

*This was different.* He was not turning into everything he'd been running from.

*And so what if he was?*

As Cole turned, he caught a glimpse of the object of his confused thoughts inside, giving Josie a hug. They were headed to the airport soon. This time for real. Flights were booked and it was time to move on. At least as far as Cedar Springs and Amber's family. She hadn't said much about how she was feeling about visiting her family but Cole could tell it was weighing on her. And how could it not? From what he understood, her two oldest half-brothers had never wanted anything to do with Amber or her sister until recently. They blamed the girls for their father's betrayal.

Cole shook his head. The whole situation was screwed up. But from what he understood, the siblings had not only made peace with their parents' decisions, but had actually formed a tight family bond. Not that super close families were really his thing, but Cole had a feeling that Amber would love it.

Once she got over her nerves about it all, that was.

"Are you ready?" The women appeared outside in the cold morning, their faces red from crying.

"It's not like you're not going to see each other again." Cole smiled. He hated good-byes. Especially when they involved tears.

"I'm ready." Amber wiped her cheeks and forced a smile. "I don't know what's wrong with me," she said. "I'm usually not so emotional."

"It's because you usually know exactly what's happening next." Josie pulled her back in for one more hug and Cole did his best not to roll his eyes.

"She does know what's happening next," he said. "We're going to Cedar Springs for the holiday."

Amber pulled away from Josie and stared at her. "Are you sure you don't

want to come? I don't want you to be alone for the holidays."

This time, Cole didn't try to stop the eye roll. They'd already been over this. At least a dozen times. Josie was going to stay in Crystal Creek for Christmas before joining their parents for the New Year. Because after all, someone had to represent the Price children. And Cole had no intention of making another stop in his hometown. Although, the idea of introducing his parents to Amber as his girlfriend and not just his sister's best friend was appealing. Despite his frustration with them, he couldn't seem to completely shut off the little part of him that still wanted to make them happy in some way. And he knew without a doubt that seeing him with a woman as amazing as Amber would make them very happy indeed.

But it wasn't the right time.

One family at a time.

"I'm fine," Josie was telling Amber for the hundredth time.

"Okay." Amber gave her one last look. "I'll let you two say good-bye." She turned quickly and disappeared into the cab of the truck. Likely before she could start crying again.

As soon as she was gone, Josie turned to Cole. She gave him such a strange look that after a moment, Cole shook his head and forced a laugh. "What?"

"I just needed a minute to really look at you so I could be sure."

"Sure of what?"

"That you're in love."

"Whoa!" Cole held up his hands and took a step back. "No one is saying anything about—"

"Stop it. You're talking to me, remember?" Josie took a step forward and grabbed his hands. "Besides, it's not like I didn't know it already. I mean, it would have to take some pretty strong feelings to get you to give it all up."

"Australia?"

"The bachelor life you were so certain would bring you happiness."



Cole shrugged in an effort to appear a whole lot more casual than he actually was. “I think I might have been wrong about what would make me happy.” He turned and glanced toward the truck, where Amber dabbed at her eyes and looked out the window away from them. “In fact, I’m pretty sure I was.”

“I can’t tell you how great it feels to see you so smitten, big brother.” Josie threw her arms around him and squeezed. “Now, go. I don’t want to be the reason you guys miss your flight.” She released him and took a quick step back. “And one more thing, Cole.” Josie gestured to the truck with her head. “Be careful with her. She’s way more nervous about meeting her brothers than she’s letting on.”

“How do you—”

“I know.”

---

IT WAS an uneventful flight to Calgary, but a slightly more eventful drive through the icy mountain roads to Cedar Springs a few hours away deep in the Rockies. Despite the fact that he’d been in sunny Australia for a few years, Cole handled the icy, snow-covered roads like a pro and soon they were in the valley that would lead them into town.

“What do you remember about Cedar Springs?”

She laughed. “Nothing. I only came here once when I was a kid. I was too young to really remember anything but the beach. It wasn’t until years later, when everything came out about my dad and his *other* family that I realized how messed up it was that we would have been here at all. Because while my mom knew about them, they didn’t know about us. And certainly, Chelsea and I didn’t know anything.”

“So why were you here?”

She shook her head and shrugged. “I don’t really know. Now, looking

back, I think Dad wanted to be discovered, even back then. I mean, how insane would it be, having two families?”

Cole shook his head. “I can’t wrap my head around it,” he said. “I still think that story is absolutely unbelievable.”

“You and me both.” Amber looked out the window and took in the snowy mountain peaks and the thick forest that surrounded them. It had been way too long since she’d been in the mountains.

Despite the cold winter air outside, she unrolled the window and let the fresh air blast inside. It did little to soothe her nerves that had become progressively more frayed since they’d landed. Chelsea had done her best to reassure her that Mitch and Ian were great guys and were excited to meet her properly. But no matter what her little sister said, Amber couldn’t shake the feeling that she was about to walk into the viper’s den.

Cedar Springs was *their* territory. They didn’t like her. Well, maybe they did. Or they would...or...whatever...

She took a deep breath and then another.

“Hey, are you okay?” Cole slid his hand over her thigh and squeezed. His touch brought her back to the moment.

“I’m fine.”

He gave her a look, but then quickly returned his gaze to the icy road in front of him.

“I am,” she said again even though he didn’t ask. “I just needed a bit of fresh air.” She forced a cheeriness into her voice and it seemed to appease him.

“It’s certainly fresh out there.” He unrolled his own window. “It’s downright freezing.”

The blast of icy air only lasted a few moments before they were both shivering and they once again put their windows up.

“It may be cold,” Cole said. “But it sure is beautiful here. I’m looking forward to trying some snowboarding.”

“You are?”

“You don’t snowboard?”

Amber shook her head. Of course she didn’t snowboard. It was dangerous. *Really* dangerous. Her parents had always tried to get her to join them at Whistler, a ski resort just outside of Vancouver, but Amber had always opted to stay home while Chelsea took them up on their offer. She was way less likely to break a leg if she didn’t strap herself to a board and point it down a mountain.

*Had she always been so boring?*

Sadly, she knew the answer to that. She had. And maybe it was time that she stopped blaming her past for that. After all, one could only blame their parents’ life choices for the outcome of their life for so long.

She sighed, but quickly covered it up with a smile.

“But I’ll try it,” she said before she could overthink it.

“You will?”

Amber couldn’t be sure who was more surprised. But once she’d said it out loud, it actually sounded like a good idea. “I totally will.”

Cole slipped his hand in hers and squeezed. “You’re full of surprises, Amber.”

That was the truth. She hardly recognized herself lately. *No job, no plan, no...* “That’s the turn,” she told Cole, interrupting her own internal thoughts, which was probably a good thing because they always led to the same place—a mild panic attack.

Okay, a panic attack that was beginning to grow in intensity each time.

At some point she was going to have to figure out the future. But today wasn’t that day. “Right here.” She pointed to the turn, and consulted the instructions that Chelsea had given her. They were going to meet at the neighborhood pub, the Grizzly Paw.

Chelsea had moved in with her new boyfriend, and apparently that left an empty room at their half-brother Mitch’s house, as well as a room at their

oldest brother, Ian's, house, which happened to be the house where their half-brothers, growing up, had spent their summers. When Amber heard that, she knew that there was no way she and Cole could stay there. After all, that was the house they'd been in when they'd found out about their father's deception.

*How could she stay there knowing that?*

*How could she stay with either of them?*

Once again, Amber was filled with indecision. *Maybe they were doing the wrong thing?* After all, they'd been happy enough going along without meeting. *Why should that change now?*

But they were here, and Cole was making the turn down the road that would lead them to her family. All of her family.

Besides, it wasn't as if they had to stay with either Mitch or Ian. She had two other brothers. Declan was living with his fiancée Evie and her son, Jonah. Which meant there really was only one option left—Cal. He was close to Amber in age, and they'd been friends in their teenage years although they'd lost touch a little bit lately as Cal's movie star career had taken him all over the world on jobs. Of course, now he, too, was settled into Cedar Springs, filming a show based on Ian and his fiancée Gwen's life.

Amber hadn't said it outright, but she was hoping that Chelsea had read between the lines and would secure them a room with Cal and his fiancée Milena for the holiday.

*Maybe she should have said it outright? Yes. She should have. She never should have left something like that to chance.*

"Maybe we can get a room at that new resort?" She blurted it before she could think it through. "I mean, it's probably really expensive, but—"

Cole squeezed her hand. "Whatever you want to do," he said. "We'll stay wherever you want to."

She nodded and turned to the window again.

Her eyes took in the giant pine wreaths attached to the light poles,

complete with huge red bows, and Amber's heart raced. A cold sweat pricked at the back of her neck and her hands clenched into fists in her lap. She forced herself to take deep breaths.

"It will be okay." Cole squeezed her hand again. "I know you're nervous," he said calmly. "But they want to meet you." He sounded so sure of himself, even though there was no way he could know that. Not really. "Chelsea wouldn't have invited you for Christmas if it wasn't going to be okay. You know that."

She *did* know that. But there'd been so many changes lately. *Maybe she shouldn't have thrown her family into the mix, too. Maybe they should just keep driving and—*

Cole pulled the rental truck up in front of a large timber-framed building. A wooden sign declaring it the Grizzly Paw hung out front.

"We're here."

## Chapter Sixteen

---

AS THEY STEPPED TOGETHER through the massive wooden doors to the Grizzly Paw pub, Amber tightened her grip on Cole's hand. She was worried. Of course she was worried. Who wouldn't be?

But as worried as she was, Cole knew logically—just as he was sure she knew—everything would be okay. He'd meant what he'd said in the car. Her sister wouldn't have invited her if their brothers wouldn't be welcoming.

Even so, he wasn't naive enough to think that his words would be enough. Hopefully his support would be.

"You got this," he whispered into her ear before pressing a small kiss to her cheek.

She offered a small smile in return only moments before a shorter, dark-haired version of Amber descended on them.

*Chelsea.*

It was easy to see the family resemblance between them, but it only took Cole seconds to notice the one marked difference as Chelsea squealed out a greeting and pulled her sister out of Cole's grasp and into a tight hug. Chelsea was by far the more outgoing of the sisters. Even if Amber hadn't told Cole about her little sister's penchant for making bad choices and being the rebel when they were younger, it would have been easy to see. What was also easy to see was their love for each other.

Her uncertainty was obviously forgotten—at least for the moment—as Amber embraced her sister. They spoke a series of rapid and completely incoherent things at each other and broke out into a mixture of laughter and tears.

There was definitely something about sisters.

A few moments later, the women were joined by two men who jumped straight into the fray and wrapped their arms around the crying, laughing women before squeezing them into a tight bear hug.

Completely abandoned, Cole might have started feeling a little out of place with the mini family reunion, if he wasn't enjoying it so much. It was yet another side of Amber he hadn't seen before. And just like everything else he knew about her, he loved it.

“You must be Cole.”

The voice startled him and he turned to see a petite, curvy woman dressed in a long sweater and leggings smiling up at him. She stuck out her hand and grinned. “I’m Milena.” She used her head to nod to the group as Cole shook her hand. “Cal’s fiancée. I’m glad you guys could come for Christmas. I’ve heard so much about...well, I’ve heard a lot about Amber,” she corrected herself, the smile never leaving her face. “But I have to admit, nobody has said much about you.”

“That’s because I’m new.” Cole smiled broadly. “Very new. But I’m really happy to be here. And this...” He shook his head with a smile at the siblings still hugging. “This is pretty awesome to see.”

Milena put her hand on Cole’s arm and together they took a step back. “I think it’s about to get better.” She pointed subtly to two other men who’d approached. The family resemblance was very strong between all the McCormick brothers, and there was no doubt at all that the two men who stood together, looking both hopeful and apprehensive, were Ian and Mitch. The two oldest McCormick brothers. The ones Amber was so nervous about seeing.

Instinctively, Cole took a step forward. *To what? Protect her?* But that was ridiculous. There was nothing threatening about them. If anything, they looked just as nervous as Amber had been in the car. Possibly more.

Cole stepped back again as one of the men cleared his voice and said, “Amber?”

The hugging and crying in front of them stopped. Slowly, the other siblings moved away and left Amber to face the two oldest brothers alone. Cole crossed his arms over his chest, both to keep himself from going to her as well as in a defensive move. He knew he needed to let Amber handle this, but if either of them hurt her, or made her cry, or...well, they’d have him to deal with.

The shot of protectiveness surprised him because Amber definitely wasn’t the type of woman who needed protecting in any way, and besides his sister when they were kids, Cole had never felt any type of protectiveness toward a woman before. It was unexpected. But it felt right.

He once again took a step forward.

This time, Milena put her hand on his arm and squeezed. “It’s fine,” she said, as if everything Cole was thinking was written on his face. Maybe it was. “I think Mitch and Ian are just as nervous as she is. But they’re also very excited. It’s been a big year around here, and while I don’t know everything about all of this, I can tell you with certainty—they all have huge hearts and everyone is ready to put their father’s choices behind them and move on. Amber was the missing piece.”

Cole studied Amber’s face carefully as she looked upon her oldest brothers. Her initial response of wariness was very quickly replaced with a shaky smile. That was all he saw, because only seconds later, the two men pulled her into a giant hug and she was swallowed up by them.

He hardly had a moment to recover from the raw emotion he’d just witnessed before Chelsea was in front of him.

“You must be Cole.” She grabbed him, wrapped her arms around him,



and squeezed.

He didn't know much about the McCormicks, but his first impression was that they were a family who liked to hug.

The loving feeling didn't last long, as Chelsea pulled back and smacked him hard in the arm. "I can't believe you convinced her not to take that job!"

Cole rubbed at his arm, suddenly unsure whether this woman was going to hit him again, because damn, that was a hard—and totally unexpected—smack.

"I didn't convince her not to do anything." He shook his head and looked toward Amber, who was completely absorbed in a conversation with Ian and Mitch and not at all concerned about him or the abuse her sister was doling out. "I swear, I—"

"I think it's great!"

Chelsea laughed and Cole tipped his head in question. "You do?"

"I do." She grinned. "You didn't think I was mad at you, did you?"

"Honestly?"

"Whatever." Chelsea shook her head. "Come on, I'll introduce you to everyone else."

---

IN ALL THE ways she'd imagined the reunion taking place, Amber never could have imagined it would go so well. Well, maybe she could have years ago when she'd first heard about her brothers. She'd been so naive then, thinking that they would all be just as excited for the expansion of their family as she was. They'd rejected her all those years ago. Of course, they'd only been kids. Young and confused and so very hurt.

Time changed things. And it definitely had changed things between the McCormick siblings. More than once throughout the night, Amber had caught herself staring at Ian and Mitch and shaking her head as if she

couldn't actually believe they were all together finally. It seemed surreal, as if she were in a dream.

Sitting at the Grizzly Paw, Amber and Cole were introduced to so many people, Amber's head spun as she worked to keep the names and faces straight. She opted to leave her drink untouched and instead clung to Cole's hand under the table like a lifeline tethering her to the present. Even so, the night was long and completely overwhelming, but also, equal parts of awesome.

It was Declan, always a little bit more tuned in than the others, who'd noticed that Amber was looking a bit overwhelmed and had suggested that Cal take them back to his house for the evening. Chelsea had organized for them to stay with Cal and Milena at their new house just outside of town in the trees. Almost as soon as they walked through the doors and were met with nothing but silence, Amber had started to feel better.

"Are you exhausted, sis?" Cal raised an eyebrow at her. "Or maybe do you want to decompress a little?"

She looked between Cal and Cole. "I'm going to head to bed." Cole smiled knowingly. He'd been so supportive all day. It was as if he just knew when she needed him to be close and when she needed him to give her space. She owed him a huge thank-you.

"I think maybe I could use a small glass of wine," she said to Cal. "If you're okay?"

Cole laughed. "I'm good. It's been a big day." He kissed her on the nose. "Go catch up with your brother."

"Come with me, Cole. I'll show you the guest room." Milena waved in the direction of the hall and after one more quick kiss goodnight, they disappeared.

As Cal got her settled on the couch, Amber couldn't help but wonder whether maybe Cole regretted his decision to come with her to Cedar Springs after all. Her family was intense.

Of course, Cole didn't seem to be the kind of guy who would bother hiding his feelings about a situation. He'd tell her exactly how he was feeling and whether it was all too much for him. At least she hoped he would. There was still a lot the two of them didn't know about each other.

But she wasn't going to worry about that for the moment. Milena, sensing that Cal and Amber could use a little time to catch up, had opened a bottle of wine, brought them two glasses, and had excused herself to bed as well.

"I didn't mean to scare her away," Amber said after she'd gone.

Cal laughed. "Nothing can scare my girl. Trust me on that. If the paparazzi didn't make her run for the hills when we first met, nothing can chase her away. Especially not my big sister."

"Watch it, mister. I'm not that big." She laughed. It was easy to be with Cal. Even after all the time they'd spent apart, it was as if no time had passed at all. "But I do like her." She nodded at the door Milena had escaped through. "She's sweet. But tough. Perfect for you."

"She is." Cal's eyes took on a faraway look and Amber couldn't help but smile at the sweetness. She never thought she'd see the day Cal would fall in love so completely. Sure, he'd had girls all over him in high school, and pretty much constantly since then, but none of them, including his highly publicized relationship with Australian actress Bridget Murphy, were anything like this. "I'm a pretty lucky man."

"You are." She looked around. "I mean, you all are. And for all of you to end up in Cedar Springs of all places, it's all pretty incredible."

"You're telling me." Cal laughed and sipped his wine. "I'll be totally honest, I never would have imagined myself picking a small town to settle down in. But when the opportunity to play *Mr. Summer*, especially when he's my own brother in real life, came up, there was no way I could say no."

*Mr. Summer* was the hottest new television series that was based off Gwen's super popular blog and her real-life relationship with their oldest brother, Ian. There'd been all sorts of drama surrounding the series as it was

getting started, but once the filming started, and the first few episodes debuted, the drama disappeared, replaced completely by success and the show had taken off.

“It doesn’t look like you’ll have to look for work anytime soon,” Amber said. “The show is doing incredible.”

“Filming it right here is even more incredible,” Cal said, ever humble. “Milena loves it here, too. And since I love her...well...it makes the decision to stay an easy one.” He waved his hand. “But that’s enough about me. Tell me everything about you. What has been going on?”

It had been the conversation Amber had been able to avoid for most of the night considering there was so much catching up to do with everyone else. It’s not that she didn’t want to talk about herself—it was more that she didn’t know what to say.

She shrugged and turned her attention to her glass. She swirled the deep-red liquid around and around.

“What’s going on, Amber?” Cal’s voice softened.

“There’s nothing going on.” That was the truth. Ever since she’d called Wallace and McKwade and turned down the job, there hadn’t been much going on at all. Thinking of the phone call she’d made and the way she’d thanked Joshua for the opportunity, but she had to say no to the position, still made her a little nauseous.

“Are you sure?” Joshua had asked her more than once. “It’s the opportunity of a lifetime.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but it was a great opportunity. She knew that. She also knew she couldn’t take the job. Besides, there was no way Cole would be happy in Toronto.

Not that Cole was the deciding factor in turning down the job. Not at all. But he did play a part. *How could he not?*

The job wasn’t the right thing for her. At least not for now. Not that she knew what *was* the right thing for her. *Was it Cole?* She couldn’t be sure. Not

of anything. Except maybe one thing—with the utmost certainty, Amber knew she was falling in love with him. Maybe she was already in love with him.

*But what if he didn't feel the same way?* Sure, she knew he liked her. A lot. *But love?* That was a big leap.

She sighed deeply and looked up at her brother. “I guess I don't really know what I'm doing at all anymore.”

## Chapter Seventeen

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"I STILL DON'T KNOW why we need to drive two hours into the forest when you're literally surrounded by trees, right here." Cole, dressed in thick winter clothes that had been donated by Amber's brothers, stood by the pickup truck as the others loaded axes, chainsaws, and thermoses full of what he assumed was coffee, but also really hoped contained some whisky to help warm him up, into the back.

"Because the best trees are up there." Mitch pointed toward a mountain that rose impossibly high above them.

"He's kidding," Ian said. "But the best trees are a bit of a drive."

"Besides," Declan chimed in, "and more importantly, it's tradition to go out in the woods and pick a tree."

"Whose tradition?" Lucas, Chelsea's boyfriend, asked with a laugh. "I didn't think any of you actually ever spent a Christmas in Cedar Springs before." He winked at Cole and shook his head. As the only other man who wasn't directly related, but dating a McCormick sister, Cole felt a sense of camaraderie from the man despite the fact he'd barely spoken to him.

"True," Mitch said. "But more the reason to start the tradition now, don't you think?" He handed Cole a thick pair of leather work gloves and opened the back door to the truck. "Welcome to the first annual McCormick tree hunt."

Cole laughed and climbed into the crew cab of the truck while Cal and Mitch rode up front. Lucas, Declan, Ian, and Declan's stepson-to-be Jonah, hopped in the truck behind them, and in their own little convoy, headed up the snow-covered mountain road.

They'd only been driving a few minutes, when Cal turned around in his seat and smiled at Cole. "So, Amber tells me you've been living in Australia for the last few years."

There was nothing particularly antagonistic about Cal's question, but Cole couldn't help but feel as if he were being interrogated. "That's right."

"I was in Australia myself."

Cole knew that. *Everyone* knew that. Cal was a rising star in Hollywood. "I doubt our paths would have crossed. I was mostly in the Outback, working on ranches."

Cal nodded knowingly. "And now?"

Cole raised an eyebrow in question and maybe the slightest bit of challenge. "Now I'm here."

The other man smirked and turned back to face front, but only for a moment before he turned around again. "I'm not sure about you yet." Whatever Cole expected him to say, it wasn't that. He bristled and readied to rebut, but Cal continued. "My sister likes you, so I like that." He grinned, softening his interrogation a little bit. "But she's different with you. *Really* different."

"Cal, I don't—"

"Hey." Cal held up his hand, interrupting Cole. "Amber's my sister and it's my job to make sure she's okay."

"I get it."

Cal tipped his head in question.

"I have a little sister myself," Cole said. "Josie. She used to be Amber's college roommate."

A slow smile spread across Cal's face as he took in the information.

“Okay,” he finally said with a broad grin. “So you know exactly what I’m saying. Good.”

“I do.” It was mostly a lie. Cole had never behaved in any kind of irrational way toward any guy Josie had brought home. He probably shouldn’t have been surprised that with four brothers, there’d be some protective behavior toward him, but he hadn’t expected it so soon into their visit. Still, Cole returned Cal’s smile until the other man turned around and looked out the windshield again.

Cole dropped his head and shook it briefly. When he looked up, his eyes met Mitch’s in the rearview mirror. For a moment, he was sure Mitch was going to take his turn grilling him. But when Mitch spoke, it had nothing to do with Amber.

“Have you ever cut down a Christmas tree before, Cole?”

---

“I’M SO glad you’re here.” Chelsea tucked her arm through Amber’s and skipped with her down the street. “I can’t remember the last time we went Christmas shopping together.”

Amber laughed. “I don’t think we’ve ever gone Christmas shopping together. You hate shopping with me, remember?”

When Chelsea had shown up earlier that day and all but insisted that Amber go shopping with her, she’d thought it was strange, given their history shopping together, historically an event that resulted in one or both of them frustrated and close to tears. Amber’s style was to get in and out as quickly as possible while Chelsea preferred more of an all-day browsing approach that always threatened to do Amber’s head in.

Hesitant, but excited to spend time with her sister, she’d said yes.

“It’s not that I *hate* shopping with you.”

Amber looked sideways at her little sister, who laughed.



“Okay, okay,” Chelsea admitted. “I kind of hate shopping with you. At least I used to. You don’t like to browse and where’s the fun in that?”

“Shopping isn’t supposed to be *fun*. You’re supposed to go in, get what you need, and leave. It’s just a chore to be done. Make a list, cross it off and...” She trailed off as she realized that she sounded just like the *old* Amber. The boring and predictable Amber. “Wait...” She risked a glance at Chelsea, who was trying not to laugh.

“It *is* supposed to be fun, Amber.” She shook her head. “At least, it can be. Honestly. It’s not always about getting a job done, making a list and checking it twice. I mean, you’re not Santa or anything.” Amber rolled her eyes, but Chelsea didn’t seem to notice. “Sometimes it’s about browsing and searching for just the right item for that person you love. Or, even better, trying on a bunch of things until you discover something incredible.”

“Incredible?” Amber raised an eyebrow, unconvinced that there was anything incredible at all about shopping.

“Yes, incredible.” Chelsea stopped walking in the middle of the sidewalk and spun around so she faced Amber. “Haven’t you ever taken something off the rack, something you never would normally try and then when you put it on...” She spun on the snowy sidewalk as if she were wearing a ball gown and not a parka. “It’s magic?”

Amber blinked and shook her head before answering. “Honestly?”

“No.” Chelsea laughed. “Don’t answer that. I already know the answer.”

Amber couldn’t help but laugh. She’d missed Chelsea’s dramatic antics. Everything about her was the complete opposite of Amber’s orderly-must-have-a-plan personality.

“Oh, Chels. I missed you.” Spontaneously, Amber pulled her into a hug and squeezed. Hard.

“I missed you, too.” Chelsea kissed her on the cheek. “So much. And I’m so glad you decided to come for Christmas. Can you even believe this town?” She turned, one arm still around Amber, the other spread wide, taking in the

main street. “It’s like a perfect little Christmas town,” Chelsea continued. “I’m absolutely loving everything about it. So much better than a big city for the holidays. It’s like being in a Hallmark movie.”

Amber laughed. It definitely *was* like that. “And being here, all together, it’s absolutely—”

“Perfect.”

Amber raised an eyebrow. “I still can’t totally wrap my head around the fact that we’re all...I don’t actually know how to explain it.”

“One big happy family?”

Amber laughed. “I guess that’s one way to describe it. Does Dad know? That we’re all friends after all this time? I bet he’s just loving it.” Despite the fact that their dad had made a horrible decision that had altered all of their lives, none of the McCormick children had fully disowned their father. They’d all gone through periods of being angry with him, but at the end of the day, he was their dad and they loved him.

“I’m not sure he knows you’re here,” Chelsea said. “But I spoke with them both the other day to let them know I wasn’t coming home for Christmas. Of course, I had to promise Mom that I’d bring Lucas to meet them before we went overseas. Maybe you and Cole can come with us? Before you guys go...where are you going?”

She shrugged as a reflex. After their abrupt decision in the airport a few weeks earlier, they hadn’t actually spent much time talking about the future or where they’d go after Cedar Springs. While they’d been at Josie’s, her lack of a plan actually hadn’t bothered Amber all that much. But ever since they got on the airplane, the *what next* thought kept pushing its way into her thoughts. What *were* they going to do next? They couldn’t just keep sleeping in Cal and Milena’s spare room forever. Besides that, they would run out of money. She had no idea what Cole’s situation was; she had some savings, but she couldn’t support them both indefinitely.

Standing on the street in the cold December air, Amber started to sweat as

all the questions she'd managed to keep at bay started demanding answers. She'd done a decent job ignoring her growing uncertainty. In fact, up until the moment she'd walked into the Grizzly Paw the day before, she'd put her feelings up to nerves at meeting Ian and Mitch. But now that the initial meeting had gone well, maybe there was more to her unsettled feelings than she'd thought.

"This is the store." Chelsea yanked on her hand, completely oblivious to the distress Amber found herself in, and pulled her into the shop. "Live, Love, Lake," Chelsea told her as the bells tinkled overhead, announcing their arrival. "It's Evie's store."

"Evie..."

"Declan's fiancée."

"Oh, right." Amber forced herself to focus on the moment. She'd met Evie the night before at the Grizzly Paw and instantly liked the sweet, soft-spoken woman. Her brother clearly adored her, and it was easy to see why. She really was lovely and Amber remembered Chelsea mentioning her store. "There was so much going on last night, it was hard to keep up."

"I get that." Chelsea lifted an arm in a wave as Evie called out to them. "You're going to love this place, though. And remember what I said about shopping being fun? Let's find you an amazing new dress for this new, I'm still not so sure about it, version of you."

---

AFTER THAT ONE moment in the truck when Cole wasn't sure whether Cal was getting ready to throw down and make it a full-on challenge, or whether it was just a warning of some kind, the rest of the tree hunting excursion was largely uneventful. At least in terms of any of Amber's brothers questioning his intentions with Amber.

By early afternoon, most of the men had found suitable trees for their

various households and the search was on for *the* McCormick family Christmas tree.

“It has to be at least nine feet,” Declan announced as they slogged their way through almost knee-deep snow.

“Are you kidding?” Cal countered. “That room can handle at least twelve feet. Besides, it’s got to be impressive.”

“Like, really impressive,” Mitch agreed.

Next to Cole, Lucas chuckled under his breath and shook his head. “Do you guys have a tree stand big enough for a tree that size?”

Everyone stopped in their tracks, and it was Ian who finally turned around to stare at Lucas, and then each of his brothers in turn. “Anyone have a stand?”

Cole tried his best to hide his chuckle, but when Lucas burst out in laughter, he gave in and joined him.

“Don’t worry,” Lucas said after a moment. “I can whip up something simple that will hold it.”

Ian’s face split into a smile. “All right then, let’s find it.” He clapped his gloved hands together and once again, they all set off. “It has to be perfect.”

“Why does this remind me of the Griswolds in *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*? At least we brought an ax.”

Declan, overhearing his comment, dropped back to Cole’s side. “Did you have big family Christmases as a kid?”

Cole shook his head. “Not like this. Your family—it’s...”

“Don’t I know it.” Declan slapped him on the back. “I hope you’re not too overwhelmed by it all?”

“Not at all,” he answered honestly.

“Good to hear, because Amber really seems to like you. I can’t remember her ever bringing a guy *home* before.”

“Not even that Randy guy?”

Declan laughed. “Definitely not that Randy guy. Which is a good thing,

from what I've heard of him." His laughter died down and he added more seriously, "But I don't think she felt about him the way she feels about you." His words struck something deep in Cole's gut, and he liked it. "But I have to tell you, Cole..."

After his *chat* with Cal, Cole was instantly on edge. He sucked in a deep breath and his entire body tensed. "What's that?"

"Amber's different with you."

Cole released a little of the breath he was holding, but not all of it.

"Like, *really* different."

"I've heard that." He nodded. "But I don't think I can take all the credit for that. She did say she was trying to make a change."

"She's happy," Declan said. "And as far as I'm concerned, that's all that matters. I think that goes for all of us."

Cole wasn't so sure about that. He snuck a glance at Cal, but didn't bother saying anything.

"And you do seem to make her happy."

"That's all I want to do."

"There was a time not that long ago when I would have told you that Amber was only happy if she had a plan," Declan said. "But maybe that's changed, too." He laughed. "I'm not going to lie to you—I have never seen that woman without a firm grip of control on things." He shook his head. "Not even once. It doesn't seem normal."

Obviously, he knew Amber had a history of being predictable and making sure all of the details in her life were taken care of. That wasn't any kind of a secret. But maybe he didn't realize to what extent she liked to be in control. *Was it really that unusual that she was flying by the seat of her pants right now? So unheard of that she didn't know what she was doing next?*

*Maybe it was.* And if it was, how long would it last? Would she change her mind about what she wanted to do? About the job she'd turned down? About *him*?

He didn't have a chance to let himself think much deeper on it because a second later, one of the group announced, "There it is! That's the one!"

---

"THAT'S THE ONE!"

Amber spun in the mirror again in an effort to assess her reflection.

Evie clapped her hands together. "Oh yes," she said. "That is absolutely the dress."

Never in her life had Amber worn anything like the one she had on. For most women, it probably wouldn't be considered that over the edge, but for her, it was absolutely the sexiest thing she'd ever had on her body—with the possible exception of the Little Red Riding Hood costume—let alone considered purchasing and wearing in front of other people.

"That color, Amber." Chelsea came to stand behind her. "It makes your hair look like gold. What do you call this color, Evie? Is it a royal or a peacock?"

"Definitely a peacock."

Amber turned to look at both of them with wonder. "There's such a thing as *peacock* blue?" She didn't wait for an answer before turning again and facing the mirror. She had to admit, her hair did look amazing. She'd taken to wearing it down more and more ever since she discovered that Cole liked it that way. Currently, it was spread over her shoulders and her bare back in soft, shiny waves.

It was a fitted dress made from some sort of silky, impossibly soft material that hugged her in all the right places, showcased her cleavage, and with the slit up the leg, exposed just enough bare thigh to make her a bit nervous. Her usual dress was an office-appropriate conservative style, with a high neckline, and maybe even a size too big to keep from showcasing her curves *too* much. The exact opposite of what she was wearing.

It fit perfectly, as if it were made specifically for her with no extra fabric at all to hide her body. Not only was she *not* hiding her body, she was fully showing it off with a deep vee neckline that plunged dangerously deep into her cleavage. Evie had given her some sort of push-up bra to wear under the dress that had her breasts lifted so high, she didn't think it was possible to have so much cleavage.

"You are stunning," Evie said. "But wait. One more thing." She glanced down at Amber's bare feet and took off out of the changing area, only to return a moment later with a pair of impossibly high heels in a shimmery silver.

"Oh, yes!"

Amber could have sworn that her little sister did a fist pump when Evie handed her the shoes that were, of course, in her size. The woman really was good at her job. She hadn't even asked Amber what her size was.

There was no way she was going to get away with *not* putting the shoes on and she knew it. Using a chair for balance, Amber slipped them on. They fit perfectly.

One of the women gasped and, a little bit scared of her own reflection, Amber slowly turned around to the mirror.

"You look like a sex goddess," Chelsea declared. "Holy shit!"

She didn't know what a sex goddess was supposed to look like, but Amber one hundred percent agreed with the second part of her sister's statement. "Holy shit," she repeated. She didn't even recognize the woman she looked at in the mirror.

"Is that...how did..."

"If you don't buy every single thing that you're wearing right now, then you are insane." Chelsea shook her head. "I wasn't sure I believed it before," she continued. "But you're right, Amber. You are definitely the furthest thing from boring and predictable. Not in that dress."

Amber looked at her reflection with new eyes. Chelsea was right. There

was absolutely nothing boring about how she looked. She didn't even need to think about it. "Sold," she said. "I'll take it all."

Ten minutes later, when Amber was tucking her credit card back in her wallet, and trying not to think about the growing balance on it with no way to pay it back, Chelsea tucked her arm through hers again. "See? I told you shopping was fun! Now, let's go buy some presents."



## Chapter Eighteen

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THE DAYS PASSED in a blur as Amber and Cole helped the rest of the McCormicks get ready for Christmas. Even Cole, who had never given much thought to Christmas before, couldn't help but fall under the spell of the holiday magic. A feat made easier because after that one uncomfortable moment in the truck when Cal grilled him on his intentions, Amber's brothers hadn't said one more word to him about what his intentions were when it came to their sister. He wasn't completely naive to think that they had totally accepted him and every once in a while, Cole could have sworn he caught Cal watching him.

In fact, everyone seemed to have relaxed into the new family dynamic. Even Amber, who'd been nervous to see Ian and Mitch, and even more nervous to meet their mother, Maureen, seemed to have put those fears to rest.

They'd been so busy with tree decorating, shopping, and all the rest of it, that Cole hadn't been able to get much time alone with Amber over the last few days, but that was going to change tonight. When he'd been in town the day before, he'd discovered the oversized ice rink that was shoveled out on the lake. It had been years since he'd been ice skating, but it seemed like the perfect time to try it out again.

Not that he would care what he was doing as long as it meant spending

some much overdue time alone with Amber.

Cole squeezed her gloved hand in his and pulled her a little closer as they made their way down Main Street.

“Isn’t this the cutest town?” She tipped her head up to look at him. “I mean, Crystal Creek was cute, too. But this...it doesn’t get any more Christmas card than Cedar Springs.”

Cole couldn’t argue with that. Just walking down the street filled him with a holiday spirit he’d never felt before. Twinkling lights were strung on every available pine tree. The store fronts were adorned with pine boughs, wreaths, and lights as well. Never mind the Christmas carols that seemed to be coming out of nowhere. The gently falling snow didn’t hurt either.

As they approached the end of the street and the frozen lake where people were skating around a huge bonfire, the entire scene looked as if it were fresh out of a snow globe.

“This really is amazing,” Cole said. “And I don’t even love Christmas.” He pulled her in for a hug and a quick kiss on the nose. “But that might be changing.”

It was true. Everything was just a little bit better with Amber. Okay, a *lot* better. She made him feel things he’d never felt before. Like the Christmas spirit. He kissed her again, on the lips this time, and not for the first time contemplated telling her exactly how he felt. But once again, something stopped him.

Besides, there was no rush.

“Are we really going to do this?” She turned around in his arms. “I can’t remember the last time I skated. It’s going to be interesting.”

“We don’t have to—”

“Oh no! We’re doing this.” She laughed and grabbed his hand to pull him toward the booth where they could rent skates.

Fifteen minutes later, they were laced up and ready to go.

Cole took a few tentative steps on his blades. He reached back to take

Amber's hand and help her steady herself, but before he had a chance, she was up and in two quick steps was on the ice, gliding away from him. He watched in awe as she did a quick, tight turn and in two pushes, was on her way back.

When she came to a quick stop in front of him with a spray of ice and snow, he couldn't help but laugh. "I thought you said it had been ages since you did this?"

"It has," she insisted. "But I may have done some competitive figure skating when I was a teenager."

"You *may* have?"

She held up two fingers to indicate a small amount and gradually spread them apart. "I won gold in the provincial championships when I was fifteen."

He laughed again and took a few more tentative steps, before pushing off and trying his own gentle glide. And then another, and another, until he was actually skating. Cole focused on putting one foot in front of the other, but was very aware of Amber gliding easily along next to him.

After a few minutes, he had the hang of it, and although he was nowhere nearly as skilled as Amber, he took her hand and together they fell into a nice rhythm.

"So, if you were such a figure skating champion, how come I never saw you in the Olympics?" He was only half joking as he asked the question, but he noticed the way her hand tensed ever so slightly in his. "I get the impression that you succeed at everything you do."

She didn't deny it, but simply shrugged. "When I was little, that's all I dreamed about."

"Then what happened?"

"The plan changed."

There was that word again. *Plan*.

"Why did it change?"

Cole watched her while he waited for an answer. Her hair was tied up in a

braid again, only this one was loose and hung over her shoulder in a very sexy way. It was very different than the severe tight braid she sported when they'd first met. She had a knit cap tugged over her head and a scarf tied loosely around her neck. She was absolutely gorgeous.

“Everything changed when I was a teenager and we found out the truth about our dad. Suddenly, figure skating didn't seem so important.”

His heart clenched, imagining a younger Amber whose world had just imploded in the most dramatic way. To the point where she'd given up her dream of skating for a much safer, and...predictable plan.

“And that's when you decided to be an accountant?”

She nodded. “It seemed like a nice, safe path to take. Too much uncertainty in skating.” Her mouth twisted up into a sad smile as they kept moving. She turned to look at him. “Everything was so out of control back then. It just seemed so important to be in control of something. Anything. And I could control that. Every single part of it. And it felt right.”

He nodded and let her talk.

“If I worked hard, I got good grades. Then I got the school I wanted. The internship I wanted. The job...”

*The job she turned down. For him.*

“And now?” He almost hated to ask the question. But he needed to. As much as he didn't want to, they did need to talk about the future, in some capacity.

He'd tried not to think about it, but Cal's words about Amber needing a plan kept reverberating in his head. And now he knew why. *What if her need for order was so deeply ingrained in her that this...this thing they were doing...them...couldn't possibly last?*

The idea scared the hell out of him in a way he didn't expect.

Cole worked to control his breathing as he waited for her answer. Finally, she spun on her skate so she was in front of him and looked directly into his eyes. “Now?” She shrugged a little. “Now I—”

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“THERE YOU GUYS ARE!” Chelsea all but slammed into them, grabbed Amber’s arm, and spun to a stop on her skates as her boyfriend, Lucas, joined them. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Amber’s words died on her lips, but she didn’t miss the look on Cole’s face as she turned away to greet her sister. She may not have been able to say what she needed to, but she couldn’t help but feel as though he already knew what she’d been about to say.

*But how could he know, when she didn’t even know?*

Not really.

Amber shook her head. She couldn’t think about that now.

“Hey,” she greeted her sister, holding tight so Chelsea didn’t fall down. She’d never been as good on skates as Amber. “We’ve been here all night. Were you looking for us?”

“Yes and no, I guess.” She shrugged. “I just want to spend as much time together as we possibly can.”

Amber laughed but Lucas shook his head. “I keep telling her that it’s okay to give you guys some time alone, too. But she won’t listen.”

“Of course I won’t listen! I haven’t seen my sister in ages and when we go overseas to check on Lucas’s new project, I won’t see her until...well, who knows!” Chelsea spun and faced her. “And if you decide to go to Australia.” She threw her arm over her face dramatically. “I’ll never see you again.”

Amber laughed and purposefully avoided meeting Cole’s gaze. She hadn’t missed her sister’s choice of words, and she was pretty sure he hadn’t either.

*If you decide to go to Australia.*

They hadn’t discussed their next steps at all. But even without talking about it, Amber had felt things changing for her. The last few days of being

around her family in Cedar Springs had been better than she'd ever expected. She never thought she'd be able to connect with her oldest brothers the way she had, and all of their women felt instantly like more sisters. She'd never before been able to experience the big happy family, and as messed up as their history was, it still felt good.

Really good.

“Earth to Amber?”

She blinked hard and shook her head a little. Chelsea had released her arm and stood in Lucas's embrace. She'd obviously been talking to her, but Amber had drifted off into her thoughts.

“Are you okay?” Cole put his arm on hers and squeezed gently. His eyes were full of concern, but Amber knew it wasn't just concern for the way she'd gotten momentarily lost in thought. He'd sensed the shift, too. And they still hadn't discussed what it was they were going to do after the holidays.

*Was it insane that she'd given up such an amazing opportunity for a man who, by his own declaration, had never wanted to get married or settle down? Did she even have a future with a man like that? Was she making a huge mistake?*

The questions that for the most part she'd managed to suppress bubbled to the surface all at once. Her heart raced and suddenly, despite the chilly air, she was too hot. Amber tugged at her scarf.

“Amber?”

She blinked hard to see Cole still watching her carefully. If she looked closely, she could almost see what she thought might be love in his eyes. *But was it?* He still hadn't told her how he felt. Except that he *liked* her. If he didn't admit his feelings to her, could she trust that he even had them? Or maybe that didn't matter? After all, she could just live moment to moment. She didn't really *need* any kind of declaration or promise from him. Did she? Maybe the *new* Amber didn't need long-term commitments or plans of any kind and could just *wing* it. Yes. She could wing it.

“I’m good.” It wasn’t entirely a lie. Because despite the confusion that swirled around inside her, growing more intense by the moment, she was good. Being in Cedar Springs felt like putting on a warm sweater, and being with Cole, despite the uncertainty...it felt right, too. Amber kissed Cole quickly to reassure him. “More than good.”

And that’s what she was going to focus on.

He slipped his arms around her and held her tight for a moment. She melted into his embrace, but only for a moment.

“Who’s ready for some hot chocolate?” Amber asked.

“Only if we can spike it with something.” Lucas grinned and Cole nodded in agreement.

Chelsea rolled her eyes, but offered up a suggestion. “How about a Mogul Smoker over at the Paw? It’s coffee and hot chocolate and just enough booze to help you really warm up.”

“Sounds good to me.” Amber linked her arm through her sister’s. “Besides, I think Cole may have hit his limit for skating for one night.”

---

THERE WAS DEFINITELY something going on with her. Cole could feel it and it worried him. A lot.

Maybe her brother had been right, and the lack of certainty in her future was starting to get to her. No matter how much Cole wanted to put Cal’s words out of his head, he couldn’t seem to let it go. Especially with the odd shift that seemed to be slowly happening with her.

After sharing hot toddies with the others and making promises to touch base in the morning, because Chelsea really was determined to spend as much time with her sister as possible, Cole once again managed to get Amber alone.

But when Cole finally slipped under the sheets of the guest bed they were

sharing, and snuggled up to Amber's smooth, warm back, the last thing he felt like doing was talking about the future.

He traced his finger down her arm and over her soft curves until his hand landed on her hip. He splayed his fingers wide and pulled her back into him. A moan slipped from her lips. It was the sexiest sound he'd ever heard.

"You're so beautiful, Amber." Cole kissed the back of her neck and she wiggled closer to him. "Damn, woman. I lo—" The word died on his lips before he could say it out loud and he instantly regretted it. She stiffened in his arms. Cole squeezed his eyes shut and silently chastised himself. He wanted to tell Amber how he felt about her. Of course he did, but not in bed. Not with her naked in his arms and his raging erection pressing into her back. That didn't feel right. It wasn't special. It wasn't...*enough*. Besides, he needed to be damn sure about his feelings for her. The last thing he wanted to do was say something he wasn't sure about, or worse, that he'd get wrong and make a mess of.

Never before had he been in love. He had no idea what it was supposed to feel like. Or what he was supposed to do with the emotions that bashed about inside him. *And what if she didn't reciprocate? Would that change anything?*

*No.*

He wasn't going to say a damn thing until it was the right moment.

Besides, Amber was distracted and he didn't want whatever it was that was going on with her to affect the way she felt about him. And he knew what to do about that. "I look forward to figuring out the next step with you." It was beyond a lame thing to say, but it was also the truth. Besides, Cole wasn't stupid and he was pretty sure he knew what was bothering Amber.

She turned in his arms, the sexy moaning a distant memory as she propped herself up on her elbow. "You what?"

Cole tried not to look disappointed because as much as he would have preferred to make her moan all night long, there were things they needed to talk about. He pushed himself up to a sitting position. "I look forward to



figuring out the next step with you.” When he said it again, it sounded even more ridiculous. Like something an insurance salesman might say and not at all something a man falling in love with a woman would say. He resisted the urge to groan out loud, and stayed the course. “I mean, we did say our stop in Cedar Springs would be a good time to *plan*.” He made sure to emphasize the word he knew she needed to hear.

If her brothers were even remotely right, Amber needed the stability of a *plan*. She needed to know what to do and what was happening next. No doubt that was why she was feeling so lost and acting so strangely. If a plan was what the woman needed, it would be exactly what he would give her.

She blinked in confusion a few times and propped herself up with an elbow. “You want to make a plan? *You*? You hate plans.”

“That’s not true.” He laughed, but she was right. At least a little. “Besides, I know that’s what you need.” He reached across the space between them to touch her. “I know what you gave up to be here. To be with me. And I want to make sure I—”

“Is that what this is about?” She stiffened, and Cole had the distinct impression he’d said something wrong. Really wrong. “You think I gave everything up for *you*.”

Alarm bells went off in his brain as he watched her shake her head. “No,” he said quickly. “That’s not what I was—”

“I gave it all up,” Amber interrupted him. “But it wasn’t for you.” Tears pooled in her eyes, and he instantly wanted to hold her close so she wouldn’t cry. “It was what I needed to do,”

she continued. “You were a...a bonus.” She laughed weakly, but the laughter vanished as quickly as it had started.

“Amber.” Cole shifted so he was closer to her, but still he didn’t gather her up in his arms the way he wanted to. “I know that it wasn’t about me.” She winced but didn’t say anything so he continued. “And that’s why I want you to know that I understand how hard this is for you.” She blinked. “Not

knowing what's happening next," he said quickly. Her lips curled up a little. A small sign that Cole took as a step in the right direction. "I mean, it probably wouldn't hurt if we thought about it a little bit, right?"

She didn't speak for a few minutes, but then she nodded and a real smile crossed her face. "You're right. Okay. Yes. We should think about what comes next. I mean, we can't stay in Cal and Milena's guest room forever, right?"

It was then that he pulled her into his arms and held her tight. Relief washed over him. Cole had never been good at communicating his feelings with women. Especially women he cared about. Hell, he'd never cared about a woman the way he cared about Amber, so how could he have any practice with it at all? But that didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that he had her in his arms and he was going to do whatever it took to keep her there.

If that meant making plans for the first time in his life, that's what he'd do. He'd figure out the future as far as it pertained to Amber because that's what she wanted. Hell, it's what she *needed*.

Whether or not she admitted it.

And one thing Cole knew for sure was that he'd do whatever it took to give this woman what she needed.

## Chapter Nineteen

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DESPITE WHAT COLE thought she needed, and what she would have expected herself was what she needed, the last thing she wanted to do was make plans for the future. At least, not until she knew how Cole really felt about her. Which was ridiculous, really, considering she'd been just as tight-lipped on her growing feelings for Cole.

Over the next few days, they both eagerly jumped into Christmas preparations with her family, and Amber managed to put Cole off every time he tried to bring up the topic of what would come next. Maybe if she could stall for some time, she'd have a little more clarity on how he felt about her. Because the one thing Amber did know was that despite her bravado and insistence that she wanted to *go with the flow*, when it came to Cole, it wasn't going to be that easy. It was one thing to risk a job; it was a completely different thing to risk her heart.

"Are you ready for this?" Cole squeezed her hand in his. "You look a million miles away."

Amber shook her head and focused on him. He was watching her with concern in his eyes as they walked toward the front door of Ian and Gwen's house. It was the day before Christmas Eve and Ian had insisted on hosting a Christmas caroling party. It involved a karaoke machine and a song book. Some of her siblings loved the spotlight, that much was certain. But Amber

wasn't one of them. The last thing she wanted was anyone watching her while she tried to stay in tune belting out "Jingle Bells."

"I'm here." She smiled and turned to him. "And I'm really glad you're here, too." She meant it. Despite the underlying questions she'd been trying not to focus on, she'd enjoyed every minute with Cole. Being with him was so easy, and so completely opposite than her relationship had been with Randy. He made her stomach flip, and she no longer had to question whether or not she was falling for Cole.

She'd fallen. Hard.

"I'm really glad I'm here, too." He kissed her then, right there in the middle of the street. Just like everything with Cole, it felt like magic. She could hardly believe that only a few months ago he wasn't part of her daily life. Now, she couldn't imagine her days without him. And that scared the hell out of her.

"And I am ready for this." She gestured with her head toward the house. Tonight was the night that she was finally going to meet her half-brothers' mother for the first time. Maureen McCormick had been the most affected by her husband's betrayal all those years ago and despite the fact that logically Amber knew it wasn't her fault, and Chelsea had already told her how warm and welcoming the woman was, she couldn't help but think that the woman would hate her on sight. "I got myself so worked up about Ian and Mitch, and that turned out to be all for naught. They're awesome."

Cole nodded.

"I don't know why I was so surprised. I mean, Cal and Declan have always been so...but Ian and Mitch were just so..." She laughed at herself. "I guess we've all changed quite a bit." But not that much, because her heart was still going a mile a minute at the idea of coming face-to-face with Maureen in a moment.

"It's going to be fine." Cole kissed her again and pulled her into a tight hug. "No need to be nervous."

Amber forced her breathing to slow as she snuggled deeper into his embrace.

“Are you two done making out yet?”

Despite the fact that they were definitely not making out, Amber and Cole pulled apart like teenagers caught out on the couch. Amber laughed when she saw Declan and Evie walking toward them.

“I’m never going to be done making out with her.” Cole pulled her close again and placed one last kiss on her lips that sent a thrill right to her core.

“Yeah, yeah,” Declan joked. “Save it for later. Let’s get in there.”

They fell into step with the other couple as Amber asked, “Where’s Jonah tonight? He’s going to miss out on all the singing.”

The other woman laughed. “He’s totally okay with that. He’s with his dad tonight. They’re having their celebration early so he can be with us tomorrow.”

Amber didn’t know much about the situation between Evie and her ex, but she’d heard that despite some rough patches, they were now in a good place as co-parents and had managed to make a difficult situation much better for Jonah.

Inside, the party had already started. The thing with a big family was that even if the guest list was limited to immediate family only, it still felt like a crowd. But in the best possible way. They’d only been inside a few minutes when a beautiful, older woman, who could only be Maureen McCormick, approached her.

Amber’s flight response kicked in. She glanced around for an escape route, but of course there wasn’t one. And even if there was one, she knew she wouldn’t take it. She couldn’t avoid the woman forever. Besides, there was no reason.

Except for her own nerves.

She forced herself to smile and not pull away when Maureen walked straight up and took Amber’s hands in hers, lifted them to her heart, and

squeezed.

“I know this might be a little strange,” Maureen said. “But it really is so nice to finally meet you.”

There was so much warmth and acceptance in her voice, it took Amber off guard for a moment. This woman had every reason to hate her existence. She was proof of her husband’s long-running infidelity. Amber couldn’t even imagine the pain she must have gone through. Even more so, she couldn’t begin to comprehend the strength it must take to be so welcoming of her and Chelsea. Instantly, she felt a connection and great admiration for her brothers’ mother.

“Maureen, I...” Words escaped her, so she smiled genuinely instead. “You are...well, I’m just so glad to meet you and...well, I’m just so sorry.”

“Stop.” Maureen took on a stern, very motherly expression. “That’s the last I want to hear of that. The past is in the past and even so, it had nothing to do with you girls.”

“I know, but—”

“I don’t want to hear another word.” She tipped her head and stared at Amber until finally she smiled and nodded. “We’re family, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Come,” Maureen said a moment later. “I think if we sneak off to the kitchen, we might be able to get out of at least the first few songs that Ian and Gwen have planned.”

Instinctively, she glanced around to see Cole already in conversation with Cal, a drink in his hand. Satisfied that he was in good hands with her brothers, she nodded and followed Maureen into the relative safety of the kitchen.

---

IT WASN'T that Cole didn't like Cal McCormick; he did. He was a good guy

and despite his high-profile career, he was remarkably down-to-earth. And if Cal hadn't been so openly antagonistic with Cole the first time they met, he was pretty sure they could be friends. As it was, every time Cole saw the other man, he felt as if he owed the other man some sort of explanation. It was the most ridiculous thing. After all, Cole was a grown man in an adult relationship with a woman and he didn't owe explanations to anyone.

Except maybe Amber.

"Have you given it any more thought?" Cal said as he'd handed Cole a drink. They'd been in the house less than five minutes, and already Cole was bracing himself for the interrogation. Only this time, he was ready for it.

"What exactly have I given any thought?"

He wasn't going to roll over easily.

"Whether you're good enough for my sister or not."

*Damn.*

Cole had not been expecting that. His spine stiffened, and he forced himself to take a sip of his drink before answering with a sharp retort. What he really wanted to do was tell the other man how he had actually considered their last conversation and was doing his best to give Amber exactly what she needed. But everything he'd been about to say vanished in the face of Cal's animosity. He let the icy-cold beer slide down his throat before swallowing hard and answering. "Oh, I know I'm good enough for your sister. And I also know I don't owe you any explanation to that end." Cal opened his mouth to protest, but Cole cut him off smoothly. "In fact, I think unless I'm in a relationship with you specifically, I don't have to tell you a damn thing." He put the glass down hard on the side table and crossed his arms.

It had been the wrong thing to say, and Cole knew it. But he couldn't help himself. Logically, he knew Cal was just being brotherly. He knew it wouldn't solve anything to be an asshole. Still, he couldn't stop himself.

Cal took two steps backward. His mouth opened and shut comically, but there was nothing funny about the anger Cole saw in his eyes.

It only took Cal a moment to recover. “Listen.” Cal was obviously taking great pains to control his voice. He took a step closer to Cole, so they were almost chest to chest. If anyone in the room was paying them any attention at all, they would see in a flash that a family-friendly, festive party was about to take a turn.

Cole knew he should step back. He knew there was nothing to gain by provoking Cal. Especially when the man really did only have his sister’s best interests at heart. Still, the stress of the last few days, the uncertainty of how Amber really felt for him and what she was willing to give up for him when maybe he didn’t really deserve it after all bubbled over and in an instant, Cole was looking for a fight.

“My sister *is* my business.” Cal spoke through clenched teeth. “If you think for one minute that I’m going to sit back and let you waltz in out of nowhere to ruin her life—”

“Ruin her life?” Cole swallowed hard. “That’s what you think I’m doing?”

“Absolutely.” Cal didn’t miss a beat. “That’s exactly what you’re doing. Before you came along, she had a plan for her life. An excellent job offer and a degree that she’d been working on for years. She was literally on the edge of having everything she’d ever worked for and then...” Cal held up his hand and made an exploding action. “Gone. For you.”

Cole shook his head despite the fact that he could only agree with everything Cal said. Not only did he agree with it, everything Cal said had been in the back of his mind, too. *Had he ruined her life?* “It’s not like that,” he insisted, although there was far less certainty in his voice and even he could hear it.

“It’s exactly like that. And I’m not going to sit around and—”

“Hey. What’s going on here?” Mitch slipped himself in the impossibly small space between the two men and looked at them each in turn. “Because it doesn’t look to me like you guys are rehearsing your rendition of ‘Silent



Night.”

Cole forced himself to take a deep breath and a step backward. “Nothing,” he said. “Nothing’s going on.”

Mitch looked to his brother. “Is that right, Cal? It’s nothing?”

For a moment, Cal looked as if he were going to disagree, just out of principle. But he pressed his lips together and nodded curtly. “It’s nothing.”

A sly smile slipped across Mitch’s face. “Great. Then you won’t mind if I borrow this one for a minute.” Without waiting for an answer, he turned to Cole. “Come with me. I need some help bringing in firewood.”

---

“I KNOW this might be a little strange.” Maureen addressed the elephant in the room straight away. The older woman instantly put Amber at ease and somehow reminded her of warm cookies.

Her relationship with her own mother had always been a good one, even throughout the scandal, but although her mom had always loved her, she’d never been an overly affectionate woman and had certainly never exuded the same type of open affection that Maureen McCormick did with her sons.

“It should be strange,” Amber said. “Shouldn’t it?” She laughed as Maureen nodded. “But is it weird if I don’t think that it feels strange at all?”

“No.” Maureen poured Amber a small glass of wine. “That’s not weird at all. I felt the same way with your sister. Well,” she added. “Maybe not at first, if I’m being honest. But as soon as I got to know her, it didn’t feel unusual at all and the same goes for you. After all the boys have told me, I feel like I already know you.”

Amber took a sip of her wine and settled into one of the kitchen chairs.

“I’m really glad you decided to come to Cedar Springs for Christmas,” Maureen said after pouring her own glass and joining her at the table. “Did you know it’d been years since I’ve been back here myself?”

Amber shook her head. "I didn't know. Are you glad you're back?"

"Very much." The smile that crossed the older woman's face was genuine. "Watching my boys find love the way they have, well...the lake has always been a special place and once again, it's brought my family together and more than doubled it in size." She laughed.

Amber laughed, too. "It does seem like a special place." She meant it. "I haven't spent much time in small towns until very recently, but I'm discovering that I like them. A lot."

It was something she'd been thinking about more and more since being in Crystal Creek with Josie. And those feelings had only intensified in the days since she'd been in Cedar Springs. Never before had Amber felt more at home, more...well, she didn't know what. But it just felt right. Way more right than moving to Toronto and taking a corporate job. And although she wasn't completely abandoning the idea of traveling either, more and more, she liked the idea of settling in a small town. She told Maureen as much and then went on to tell her how she'd met Cole and how things had changed so quickly for her.

"Wow." Maureen shook her head slowly and took a slow sip of her wine. "That's a lot of change, for sure. Declan told me that you were definitely the most responsible one, even more so than him, which I find hard to believe."

Amber laughed. As responsible as Declan was, he had always been far more adventurous than she was. It wouldn't have fazed him at all to jump on a plane with someone he'd just met.

"And how do you feel about it all?" Maureen asked.

"Honestly?"

"Of course."

Amber took her time to answer and the other woman didn't rush her. "I feel okay about turning down the job. I didn't think I would," she said. "But I do. The more I think about it, the more I realize that I don't want to spend my life working at that intensity for someone else. I feel good about that."

Maureen nodded. "And the rest of it? What's next for you?"

She tried to hide her reaction by lifting her wine glass, but judging by the look on Maureen's face, she hadn't been fast enough to hide the confusion in her heart.

"Talk to me," she encouraged.

"I'm mixed," Amber confessed. "Not about leaving Toronto." She shook her head. "I think I'm more than ready to leave the big city behind. It never felt like home to me. In fact, Vancouver never felt like home either." She blinked a few times before looking up again. "Do you think that's strange? That I've never actually felt at home anywhere?"

"Anywhere?"

"No," Amber admitted. "I felt at home when we were in Crystal Creek. And, I know it's only been a few days, but..."

"You feel at home here, too?"

Amber nodded.

"That's not strange at all." Maureen's smile was warm. "Cedar Springs has something special."

"I don't want to leave." She blurted it before she realized what she'd said. A moment after the words left her lips, Amber pressed her hand to her mouth. "I don't know why I said that."

"Because you meant it."

She shook her head, but even as she denied it, she knew it was the truth. She'd said the words because she'd meant them. She didn't want to leave. Traveling *did* sound appealing. Being with Cole *was* appealing. But the more time she spent with her family, the more she wanted to stay put.

"I did," Amber admitted. "But I don't know what to do."

"Ian told me that one of your plans might include going to Australia with your boyfriend after the holidays. Is that the problem?"

She nodded. It was so easy to open up to this woman she didn't know. Maybe that was exactly why it was easy. Because she had no idea who

Amber was, who she *had* been, or who she thought she *could* be. No preconceived notions at all. It was freeing to talk to someone like that and without even realizing it, Amber was opening up to a whole host of feelings that had been building inside her.

“Have you told him yet?”

“Cole?”

Maureen nodded. “Have you told him how you’re feeling?”

“No,” Amber said quickly.

“Why is that?”

“Because if I do, I’ll lose him.” The idea came out of her mouth so easily, it took her off guard. *Is that how she really felt?*

It was.

“He isn’t one to settle down,” Amber continued. “He’s been avoiding that type of life ever since he was old enough to realize he would hate it. He’s told me that repeatedly. If I tell him that not only is that what I want, but that I want it in a small town, I could lose him and I think that I’m...”

Amber dropped her gaze and blinked hard to keep the tears at bay.

“You’re what?” Maureen asked gently when Amber didn’t finish the sentence.

“I think I’m in love with him.” She’d never said the words out loud before and despite the hurt in her heart, they brought a smile to her face.

“So, what’s the problem?”

Amber didn’t even hesitate because the *problem*, as Maureen had put it, had been growing in her every day. “I don’t know if he feels the same way.” She let the tears slide down her face.

“Sweetie, there’s only one way to know for sure, isn’t there?”

Amber nodded.

“It was supposed to be just fun and easy.” She chuckled at herself. Crystal Creek and the Snow Ball seemed so long ago. “But you’re right,” she said after a moment. “There’s only one way to know.”

Amber took a deep breath and wiped her cheeks. She'd spent far too long living a half-life. Those days were over.

---

THE MINUTE they were outside in the crisp, dark night, Cole relaxed. He hadn't realized how tense his confrontation with Cal had really made him. But it wasn't all the other man's fault. Not at all. He had gotten as worked up as he had because he knew there was merit in what Cal had been saying. Of course he had a reason to be concerned about his sister, because Cole hadn't stepped up and done or said anything for him to feel otherwise.

Cole followed Mitch over to the wood pile and immediately started stacking logs to pick up.

"Just one second." Mitch put his gloved hand on Cole's arm. "I don't think there's a rush to get back in there, do you? After all, I'm in no rush for another chorus of 'Hark the Herald.'" Mitch laughed with a shake of his head. "I really have no idea what's gotten into Ian. I mean, I expect this type of thing from Gwen, but Ian? Christmas carol karaoke? Love does crazy things to a person."

Even in the dim light, Cole could see the way Mitch looked at him. Watched him and waited for...what exactly?

Cole shrugged. "I guess it does."

"Things like giving up your dream job and talking about moving halfway around the world with a man you'd just met."

*Ahh, of course.* He knew there was more to the late-night firewood gathering. Cole instantly stiffened. Dealing with Amber's overprotective brothers was starting to get a little tiresome.

"Hey," Mitch said, reading his mind. "I get it. Dating someone with four brothers must be a bit...well, much." Cole started to nod, but Mitch kept talking. "The thing is, when it comes to Amber...well..." He laughed to

himself as if he'd told a joke. "With Chelsea, it was different, even though she's the youngest."

"Why is that?" Cole tried not to be defensive, especially because there was nothing confrontational about Mitch. He was just talking. Not like Cal. Cole took a deep breath and forced his hands to unclench from the fists they'd instinctively formed.

"I don't really know. And to be honest, as I'm sure you've already heard...Amber and I haven't been close." Cole nodded. That wasn't a secret, which made the big brother act even more flabbergasting. "But I've always known her. At least, I've known *about* her. And who she was," Mitch continued. "I think we're all finding this—meaning you"—he waved in Cole's direction—"so difficult to wrap our head around. Because it's so out of character for who she is."

Despite the fact that it was true, Cole was getting really tired of hearing it. "Look," he started. "I know that she's made some decisions that are a little out of—"

"Hey." Mitch cut him off. "Before you go all alpha on me, hear me out, okay?"

He swallowed hard, but Cole nodded and Mitch continued.

"I'm okay with out of character," he said. "I'm even okay with making radical life choices that people don't expect. Hell, when you meet the right person, all the rules go out the window. I totally get that. Even if they're not saying it, every single one of us understand that perfectly." Mitch moved around the wood stack and started absentmindedly brushing the snow off the top logs.

"It wasn't just me," Cole said. "I mean, Amber made those changes for herself. As much as I'd love to take credit for her waking up to the fact that there is more to life than crunching numbers all day, I can't. It was all her. I just happened to be there. And moving to Australia, well..." He trailed off, because they hadn't actually discussed doing that for a while. "Well, I can't

take credit for any of this. Good or bad.”

Mitch nodded and was quiet for a moment before he picked up some wood. “Okay,” he said after a moment. “I can understand that. But I don’t think you’re giving yourself enough credit.”

Cole mimicked him, and picked up a few logs of his own. “In what way?”

“I agree with you that her choices are coming from her. She’s a strong woman and I can’t imagine she’s one to make any major decision on a whim. But I also think that a whole lot of what’s going on in her head has to do with you.” He grinned. “So, my question to you is one that I think all of my brothers have wanted to ask you.” Mitch paused, his hand on a log. “Do you love her?”

Whatever he thought Mitch was going to ask him, Cole hadn’t been prepared for that. He stumbled over his words, coughed and choked and, finally, before he could utter a word, Mitch stopped him.

“It’s not me you need to answer that question for,” he said. “It’s Amber. I think you’re a good guy, Cole. I do. And I would welcome you into our family without hesitation. But there’s one thing that I would ask of you. If you don’t love her, totally and completely, tell her before she makes any more life-altering decisions that may or may not have anything to do with you, okay?”

He was stunned, but the other man’s words sank in and permeated his consciousness. Somehow, he managed a nod that seemed to satisfy Mitch.

“Good.” He clapped his gloved hands together and scooped up the small stack of wood he’d prepared. “We should get back in there.”

A moment later, Cole was alone in the dark, staring at the woodpile and trying to process what had just happened. Why hadn’t he answered Mitch with a *hell yes* the moment he’d asked? More importantly, why hadn’t he told Amber? After all, she was the only one who really deserved to hear how he felt.

---

AMBER TOOK a moment to make sure her eyes weren't red from the tears, and after finishing her glass of wine, the women rejoined the party in the living room.

Cole and Mitch were missing, but before Amber could ask, Jade told her they'd gone to get firewood. She pretended not to notice the stack of wood in the basket next to the hearth and simply smiled. She did her best to avoid Declan's eye contact when he asked for volunteers to sing "Joy to the World," and moments before he pulled her up to join him, Gwen—*thank God*—cried mercy and everyone abandoned the idea of singing altogether, opting instead to enjoy their cocktails and share stories.

Mitch returned alone with the firewood, but Cole still hadn't reappeared when Amber managed to excuse herself. It wasn't that she wasn't enjoying herself with her family, because she was. But she couldn't shake the questions that her conversation with Maureen had left her with. She grabbed her coat from the closet and slipped outside to get some fresh air.

The night was cool, but not too cold. She walked around the side of the house where she could see the expanse of the frozen lake and the full moon reflected off the ice. There was very little light and the stars filled the night sky. She inhaled deeply and allowed her head to drop back so she could stare at the millions of constellations above her.

*What would the stars look like on the other side of the world?*

The thought made her inexplicably sad, because in her heart she knew she'd never find out. She'd never stand next to Cole, looking up at the Australian night sky. Because in her heart, Amber knew that it wasn't fair to ask more of him than he was willing to give. He wanted a free life, and despite the changes she'd made, she knew she couldn't change *that* much. Nor did she want to.

The realization caused a physical ache in her chest because she *did* love



Cole. Letting him go would be the hardest thing she'd ever done. But it was the right thing to do because sometimes, love just couldn't be enough.

The thought filled her with sadness, but also a sense of peace because she'd made the decision that had been troubling her since they'd arrived in Cedar Springs.

She squeezed her eyes shut and released a long, deep breath as her cell phone vibrated in her pocket. Tempted to ignore it, Amber continued to stare at the night sky, but finally curiosity got the best of her and she looked at the illuminated screen. And she was glad she did.

"Josie," she said into the phone. "I'm so glad to hear your voice right now."

Her best friend picked up immediately on the conflict in Amber's voice. "What's wrong? You sound...different. What's going on?"

She debated for a moment about not telling her the truth, but what was the point? Josie was her best friend, and she was going to hear about it sooner or later anyway. "I think I need to stay in Cedar Springs."

"Really?" Josie sounded surprised, but pleased. "So, it's going well with your family? That's great news."

It was. But it wasn't *all* great news.

"And Cole?" Josie continued. "That's a big change for him. I mean, a small town? Wow. But hey, I guess you can never underestimate—"

"He doesn't know."

"Know what?"

Amber took a deep breath. "He doesn't know that I've decided to stay."

There was silence on the other end while her friend processed what she'd said.

"I mean," Amber continued to fill the silence. "I only just made the decision myself. I haven't had a chance to tell him yet. And I thought that maybe I'd just wait until after Christmas. After all, what's the point of creating a big—"

“Amber?”

She swallowed hard and squeezed her eyes shut, as if Josie were right in front of her. “Yes.”

“What happened?” Josie asked the question quietly, but the words slammed into her. “I mean, you two seemed so happy and so determined to face what happened next together. What went...well...I mean...what happened?”

“Nothing,” Amber answered honestly. “And everything.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“But it does,” Amber continued. “Being here in Cedar Springs makes me feel like I’m home for the first time since...well, ever. And Cole...”

“He doesn’t want to stay?”

She hadn’t asked. But she didn’t need to. “Cole doesn’t want this, Josie. He’s never wanted this. I can’t ask him to—”

“Why not?”

“Because, I...”

“Do you care about him, Amber?”

She nodded and then remembered Josie couldn’t see her. “I do.” Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

“Do you love him?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes.” The word came out on a whisper. “But I can’t give up on myself now, Josie,” she added. “I just can’t. These last few months, I’ve learned so much about myself. About what I want, and what I don’t want out of life. I have to be true to myself.”

“Of course you do,” Josie said matter-of-factly. “But can I ask you a question?”

Again she nodded before she caught herself. “Of course.”

“Have you ever considered that the reason you feel at home in Cedar Springs has something to do with the man you’re there with? Has it occurred to you that *Cole* might be your home?”

Her friend's question took the air from her lungs. *No*. She hadn't considered that.

Tears slipped unchecked down her cheeks.

"He loves you, Amber. I've never seen my brother like he is with you. Not ever."

"I don't know if he—"

"Of course he does!" Josie was almost yelling into the phone.

Amber choked back a sob. It was all too much. She wanted to believe her friend's words more than anything else in the world. But it wasn't enough to hear them from Josie. She needed to hear them from Cole. And even if she did...would love be enough to keep them together?

## Chapter Twenty

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AFTER THE PARTY, where he'd managed to pull his thoughts together long enough to rejoin the group for a few hours before collecting Amber and escaping back to their spare bedroom where they'd made love and fallen asleep in each other's arms, he'd barely been able to sleep.

As connected as they'd been the night before, he couldn't help but feel as if something had shifted between them. Amber had seemed distracted, deep in thought, and when he'd asked her about it, she hadn't wanted to talk. Instead, she'd kissed him. As much as he loved kissing her, Cole couldn't help but feel as though she were using sex to distract him from whatever it was that was bothering her. It felt different. More intense.

Amber had fallen asleep tucked up against his chest and Cole had spent most of the next few hours stroking her hair, dropping soft kisses on her head, and pulling her even closer, as if she could slip away at any moment.

*Maybe she could?* He wouldn't let it happen.

He *couldn't*. Because without a doubt in his mind, he was in love with Amber McCormick. And the thought of losing her, or not being enough for her, scared the hell out of him. But despite that fear, Cole knew that the only thing worse than losing her would be losing her without fighting for her. And for a woman like Amber, fighting for her meant telling her exactly how he felt about her.

And that's exactly what he was going to do.

Which was why he'd slipped out of the bed before she'd woken up.

Cole hadn't needed either of the talks with Cal and Mitch for him to come to his own conclusions about how he felt about Amber, but maybe it had given the push he needed to do something about it. Either way, it didn't matter.

He'd spent far too long running away from something he *thought* he didn't want, but the truth was, in all his running, he hadn't *known* what he wanted. Maybe he hadn't known until it presented itself in the form of a gorgeous blonde with a tight French braid and a penchant for planning.

The thought of that version of Amber made his lips curl up into a smile as he walked down the main street of Cedar Springs right before he stopped in front of the store he'd been looking for.

*This was it.* He knew what he needed to do. More than that, what he *wanted* to do. It would be a huge leap for him. But he was ready. More than ready.

Especially if it meant he got to be with Amber.

With a huge grin on his face, Cole pulled open the door of *Live, Love, Lake* and stepped inside to buy Amber a Christmas present.

---

AMBER HAD BARELY SEEN Cole all day. He'd said something about doing some last-minute Christmas shopping when she'd texted him earlier, but he'd promised to be back in plenty of time to go up to the Springs resort for the big Christmas Eve party that was happening that night.

The Springs hotel was an exclusive spa resort that had really been a boon to the economy of Cedar Springs since it had opened only a few years earlier. And, of course, being the small town that it was, Amber's siblings had all become friends with many of the locals who both worked there and owned it.

The resort was hosting a big party and although Amber would have been happy with a quiet Christmas Eve spent watching holiday movies and drinking eggnog, she was looking forward to an excuse to wear her new dress.

All day, she'd tried not to think of the decision she'd already made, focusing instead on being with her family and enjoying what was the first big holiday together with all her siblings. There'd be plenty of time to get Cole alone and have the conversation she'd been dreading. But that could come later. Much later.

There was no need to ruin Christmas.

And that's what Amber was still telling herself as she walked into the ballroom of the Springs resort with Cal and Milena hours later. She'd spent a little extra time on her hair and Jade had helped her with her makeup, since her skills in that area were pretty much nonexistent. The peacock-blue dress they'd picked out earlier in the week showed off every curve she had, and even some she didn't know she had. Paired with the shoes Chelsea and Evie had convinced her to buy, she had to admit, the entire effect was amazing.

When Amber looked in the mirror, she could hardly believe that she was the woman staring back at her.

"You seriously look fantastic," Milena said for the dozenth time that night. "Cal, doesn't she look incredible?" It was a question she'd asked him at least as many times.

Her brother grunted begrudgingly, but he smiled. "You really do look stunning, Amber. Really." She kissed him on the cheek. "Cole won't even know what hit him. Where is he, anyway? I haven't seen him all day." He made a show of looking around the room.

Amber tried not to look bothered by the fact that she'd really wanted Cole to accompany her to the party that night. She'd been a little upset when he'd texted to say that he'd meet her there, but she'd squashed the feelings.

After all, she had no right to demand anything of him. And she needed to

keep reminding herself of that.

“I’m sure he’ll be here shortly.”

But even after they got drinks and Cal introduced her to a few of the locals he knew from town, Cole still hadn’t shown up. Amber forced herself not to look at her phone. After all, if he didn’t want to be there, she would have her answer about how he felt about her and she wouldn’t even have to ask.

She kept the smile she didn’t completely feel pasted to her face, but when the beginning strains of a familiar song filled the air, Amber no longer could hold back her feelings. As quickly and subtly as she could, Amber excused herself from the conversation with people whose names she didn’t remember anyway, and started to make a beeline for the washroom. Maybe she could hide there until the song was over.

She hadn’t quite made it to the safety of the restroom when the lyrics of the Thomas Rhett song she’d been trying to avoid reached her ears. It had only been such a short time ago that she’d danced with Cole to these words at the Snow Ball. Only a few weeks ago when he’d held her in his arms and for the first time in her life she’d felt safe and wanted and needed. And now...

Tears threatened, but Amber was determined not to ruin her makeup. She increased her pace because she couldn’t listen to even one more note, not without bursting into tears—which was something she really didn’t want to do. Not in front of everyone. *No*. She had to get out of there. She almost made it when she felt a hand on her arm.

Amber spun around, ready to tell whomever it was that there was an emergency and she really had to go. But it was Cole who stood there.

In an instant, the air was sucked from the room.

“You look...” Cole shook his head and sucked on his bottom lip for just a moment before trying again. “You look absolutely ravishing, Amber. May I have this dance?”

---

SHE WAS the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life. Not that he needed any more reason to say what he needed to say, but with only one look at her, Cole knew it in his heart.

She was unequivocally the woman of his dreams.

Cole led her to the dance floor and pulled her close into his arms. The downside to that was he could no longer admire how gorgeous she was. The upside, of course, was having her pressed close to him. A feeling he never wanted to let go of.

They moved easily for a few beats, letting the lyrics wash over them. But then it was time. He couldn't hold it in a moment longer.

"Amber, I need to tell you something."

Instantly, he regretted his choice of words as she stiffened in his arms. But he couldn't stop, not for anything. "It's something I should have told you earlier, but—"

"It's okay." She cut him off and tried to wiggle out of his grip. In response, Cole tried again to pull her close. "I knew it was coming."

"You knew what?" Something was wrong. Her body language changed in an instant. Come to think of it, she'd been tense from the moment they got on the dance floor. And when he'd caught up to her outside of the restroom, had she been trying to *leave*?

Something was very wrong.

"Amber, what's going on?" He stopped her to look in her eyes. "I need to tell you that—"

"I know." She interrupted him again. "I know it's not going to work. I know you need to keep moving and I'm not sure I can go." She shook her head. "No. That's not true. I know I can't go. Not permanently, anyway. I need to be here. I need to be close to my family. And I know you aren't the type to settle down and have a relationship. You told me so and even though I



said it was okay, it's not. Because I need more. I *want* more. And as much as I want you to want it too, I know you don't and that's okay. I mean, it's not okay. Nothing about it is okay because I love you and I wish it could be different. But I totally understand and I guess what I'm trying to say is that it's okay and you don't have to say anything because I think I already knew, so you're off the hook."

She wasn't crying, but the unshed tears shone in her eyes, ready to spill over. Except they wouldn't. He knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't cry until she was alone. But he'd be damned if he was going to allow that to happen.

Especially after a speech like that. When he was sure she was done with her ranting ramble, he shook his head. "Are you finished?"

She nodded and pressed her lips together. They had a swipe of light-pink lip gloss on them and looked so completely kissable, but Cole forced himself to focus.

"Good," he said.

They'd stopped dancing while Amber spewed forth the verbal barrage she'd obviously been holding back for a while. But Cole once again took her in his arms and led her to the beat of the song he'd forever think of as theirs. The one he'd specifically asked the DJ to play. He spun her gently, but didn't release her from his grip. When she came back and once more was pressed up against him, Cole whispered in her ear. "I love you, too. Very much. I was hoping to say it first, but you kind of beat me to it."

He heard her breath hitch, but he wasn't done. Not by a long shot.

"In fact," he continued, "I've loved you for some time now. I just didn't know how to say it and to be totally honest, I was a little bit scared you wouldn't say it back. Or if you did, that I wouldn't be enough for you."

She started to say something in protest, but still Cole had more to say. He cut her off smoothly and continued. "But then I realized that if I never told you how I felt, I could lose you forever and that wasn't something I was

willing to risk. Because the truth is, Amber, I've never felt the way I feel about you. Not even close. And maybe there was a time when I thought I'd never be a *relationship guy*, but that was before you. Before this." He pulled back a little then so he could look her in the eyes.

The blue of her dress made her eyes sparkle.

"I know it hasn't been long, but I don't think there's any kind of time limit on these things, and I hope you feel the same way. Because the truth is..."

Cole took his hand from the small of her waist and dug into the pocket of his suit jacket before he produced the ring he'd bought from Evie's store earlier in the day. Without releasing her other hand, Cole dropped to his knee in front of the love of his life. There was a room full of people with their eyes on them, but he didn't care. Cole only had eyes for Amber.

"I love you, Amber McCormick, and if you'll have me, I would love to spend the rest of my life making plans *and* going on adventures with you. From the moment you sat on me on that couch at Josie's house, I knew. Spending a life with you is all I'll ever need, and I hope with all of my heart that you feel the same way." He held out the vintage diamond ring. "Will you go on the greatest adventure of our lives and marry me?"

She stared at him; her mouth fell open, but still she didn't say anything. Cole became very aware of the way the music had stopped and the room had grown very quiet as the crowd waited for her answer.

The moments seemed to tick by in slow motion, but finally Amber said, "Really?"

He nodded. "Really."

"You're sure?" She shook her head and a tear finally slipped free and down her cheek. "But I just told you that I want to stay and I know you need to—"

"I need you."

"But Cedar Springs?"

“Absolutely.”

“A small town? Settling down? All of it... you’re—”

“All in, Amber. All. In.”

Around them, Cole began to register some whispers as still, Amber didn’t answer him. She shook her head a little, but after a moment, a smile started to cross her face, so he asked again.

“Amber McCormick, whatever it is that life throws at us: small towns, world travel, kids, family, career changes, sickness, health...all of it. I want to face it with you.” He swallowed hard, and still on his knee, said, “Will you marry me?”

Still, she waited a beat. But finally, the one word he’d been dying to hear came out of her mouth. “Yes.”

He jumped to his feet and pulled her into his arms. He pressed his lips to her beautiful mouth and kissed her deeply as if their lives depended on it.

Around them, the crowd cheered and let out a series of hoots and hollers, but Cole was barely listening. He took the ring that he still held in his fingers and slid it on her finger before pressing a kiss to it and looking up to meet her gaze again. “Whatever it is you need from me, Amber...I want to be that guy. If you need to make plans and figure things out, I’ll do it. If you want to go on adventures and travel, let’s do it.”

She closed her eyes for a moment. “I want it all,” she said after a moment. “But maybe, we could make Cedar Springs a bit of a home base?”

Cole looked over her shoulder for the first time and saw her entire family standing by with smiles on their faces, and tears in their eyes. He let his gaze travel over to where Cal stood with Milena. She had her hands clasped and held up to her mouth, but it was Cal who Cole focused on. He wasn’t sure what he’d see in the other man, but when they locked eyes, Cal nodded...and smiled.

Cole couldn’t help but laugh as he looked back to Amber. “I think maybe we could do that. It looks like your brothers might just accept me yet.”

Amber's face screwed up in question, but before she could ask what he was talking about, he kissed her again.

"This is our perfect moment." Her smile lit her up. "I love you, Cole."

His heart flipped. If he heard those words a million times, it still wouldn't be enough.

"Merry Christmas, my love." The music had started up again, and because he wasn't ready to share her yet, he pulled her back into his arms and twirled her once more around the dance floor.

## Epilogue

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NEW YEAR'S EVE

“Really? You want me to find you a house?” Milena all but jumped up and down, her excitement clear. “You’re staying? For real?”

Amber laughed and gave her new friend a hug. The two women had become fast friends in the short time that Amber and Cole had been in Cedar Springs. Amber had very much enjoyed the time they’d spent together living in Cal and Milena’s house, but it was time to move on.

Especially if they were going to be staying.

And they *were* going to be staying.

Cole’s proposal had been the most amazing, unexpected, and romantic thing that had ever happened to her. It wasn’t until the day after Christmas that they’d had a chance to sit down together and properly discuss what sharing a life together was going to look like. To Amber’s surprise, and complete joy, their thoughts weren’t too far off, but the biggest similarity was also the most important—as long as they were together, they’d make anything work.

“We *are* going to stay,” Amber said as together they surveyed the living room of Cal and Milena’s house where the New Year’s party was to be held. “But we can’t afford much,” she added quickly. “At least not yet.”

“I think it’s so exciting,” Milena said again. “You are going to love it here. I just know it.”

“I already love it. Besides, I had no idea this town was in such desperate need of an accountant.” It hadn’t taken Amber long to discover that with only one local accountant in town, and a growing economy with more and more businesses opening every day, her skills were in high demand. There was a lot to do to prepare, but as soon as the New Year’s celebrations were over, she planned to take the necessary steps to start up her own business. For the first time in a very long time, Amber was excited about working. She knew it would take a lot of effort, but Cole was on board, and it wasn’t as if she’d be working herself to the bone for a giant corporation this time; it was for herself. And that made all the difference in the world.

“Thank goodness you’re setting up shop.” Milena handed her a party hat before selecting one for herself. “You’re going to be turning away business, for sure. And what about Cole? Has he decided what to do?”

“I absolutely have.” Cole appeared and slid one arm around Amber’s waist. He pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I’m going to offer tours.” He grinned.

“Tours?”

“Snowmobiles in the winter and ATVs in the summer,” Cole explained. “I’ll start out small, and hopefully be able to expand in no time.”

“I actually think that’s a great idea. This town is booming in a way I’ve never seen before and I bet the tourists will love something like that.”

“That’s our hope.”

Cole squeezed Amber tighter and she all but melted against him. Everything was happening so quickly, but it was happening. They had a lot of plans, but a lot of things were still up in the air, and as unusual as that was for Amber, she actually kind of liked it. Because as long as Cole was her constant, she would be fine.

It was funny how much things could change.

“Are you guys ready out here?” Cal appeared in the door to the kitchen and held a bottle of wine aloft. “I thought we could have a glass of wine

before everyone got here.”

“Too late!” They all turned toward the front door and Declan, who stood in a small crowd with the rest of the McCormick clan. “Let’s get this party started.”

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“I’d like to make a toast.”

The entire room fell quiet, which was quite a feat for the McCormick clan. Cole instinctively slipped his arm around Amber. Any excuse to hold her close. He snuck her a kiss before turning to look at Maureen McCormick, the matriarch of the family, who’d raised a glass of champagne.

“Just before we ring in the new year,” she said. “I wanted to propose a toast to you all. My sons…” She looked at each of the boys in turn, giving them all a little smile. “And you girls, too. I know it hasn’t been easy, but you two also feel like family to me.” She pressed a hand to her chest. “It’s incredible that in such a short time I can love you both as if you were my own.”

Next to him, Cole heard Amber sniff back a tear. He knew she felt the same.

“It makes a mother’s heart happy,” Maureen continued, “to see her children find love the way you all have. Our family has expanded in all the best ways and I just wanted to take a moment to toast to the future that I’m sure will be filled with just as much love and excitement as today.” She raised her glass high and they all followed suit.

“To the—”

“What about you, Mom?”

Maureen’s face registered shock as Declan’s words hit her. She recovered quickly, but Cole didn’t miss the flash of pain that crossed her features.

She lowered her glass and looked to her son. “I think sometimes when

you hit a certain age, you don't worry about those things anymore."

Cole didn't know Maureen very well yet, but even he didn't believe the words that came out of her mouth. She was a woman with a lot of love to give, and she hadn't been given a fair deal in life. No one should experience the type of heartbreak and betrayal she had.

"You know that's not true," Declan challenged her.

Beside him, Cal joined his brother and stood by his side. "It's your turn, Mom."

"It's way past your turn," Ian said from across the room. He, too, went to join his brothers.

It was then that Maureen started to look around. Her eyes landed on Mitch.

He grinned. "They're right, Mom." He left Jade's side and joined his brothers. "Which is why we got you a little something."

Her mouth formed a perfect O and she quickly raised her hand to cover it. "Oh, no." She shook her head. "I meant what I said—my time has passed."

Cole looked down to Amber, but she looked just as surprised as Maureen did. Whatever it was that was going on, it was between the McCormick brothers. The sisters didn't know anything at all.

Declan stepped forward then and handed their mother an envelope. "I'm sorry it's a little late, Mom. But we wanted to get you a little something."

"You don't have to open it now," Mitch added quickly.

"In fact," Ian jumped in. "Maybe wait until you're alone."

"And ready." Cal smiled.

"Ready for what?" Maureen's voice was shaky, but she took the envelope from Declan's outstretched hand.

"For love, Mom," he answered simply. "You deserve it."

He pulled his mother into a hug then, and the other men joined in.

"What's that all about?" Cole asked Amber, but she only shook her head and looked to Chelsea.



Chelsea smiled from across the room and quickly made her way over. “It turns out that Maureen was in love before Dad,” she started to explain quickly and in a hushed voice, although they appeared to be the only two people in the room who had no idea what was happening. “He was the love of her life, but she didn’t go with him when she had the chance. Something she always regretted. I think Declan finally tracked him down. His name is Adam. Anyway, Declan reached out and I think Adam wrote her a letter.”

“No way!” Amber looked from her sister to Maureen, who was once again holding her glass of champagne, albeit this time with a slight shake to her hand. “That’s so romantic.”

It was. And judging by the look on the older woman’s face, she thought so too.

“It’s almost time to countdown!” someone across the room called out, breaking the intensity of the moment. Someone else clinked on a glass and then everyone was counting.

10...

Evie moved around quickly and topped up everyone’s glasses with champagne.

9...

Cole slipped his hand into Amber’s and squeezed.

8...

She looked up and smiled at him.

7...

“I love you.”

6...

She laughed and said it back. He’d never grow tired of hearing it.

5...

They turned their attention to the oversized television screen where the ball drop was being broadcast.

4...

Cole snuck another look at Amber, her blonde hair in waves over her shoulders.

3...

She was the most beautiful woman in the world. And she was his.

2...

She turned to look at him and their eyes locked.

“Happy New Year!”

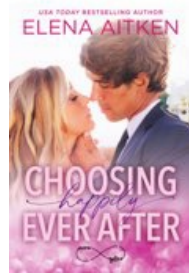
The room broke out in shouts and whistles and noise of all kind, but Cole ignored them all because the only thing that mattered was the woman who stood before him. With his free hand, he cupped Amber’s cheek and pulled her in for a deep kiss and rung in the new year and their future.

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**It’s no secret that I love the mountains and if you enjoy them as much as I do, you’ll want to check out the Ever After series and the friends of Glacier Falls. These stories are heartwarming, full of love and of course a happy ever after!**

**You can read a sneak peak of [Choosing Happily Ever After](#) right after this...**

**And if you want even more romance...click [HERE](#) for an exclusive FREE novella that isn’t available anywhere else!**



## Choosing Happily Ever After

Please enjoy this excerpt from [Choosing Happily Ever After](#)

SHE WAS GORGEOUS. All dressed in white, of course. The veil covered her face, but there was no doubt that beneath the gauzy film was the hint of a smile while she tried to bite back the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks despite the bride's insistence earlier that she "*absolutely will not cry. I'm just not a crier.*"

Hope Turner had seen it a million times before. And they almost always cried.

At least a little.

"Are you ready?" she asked the bride, who clutched her father's arm tightly. "Just like we practiced."

"Only this time it's for real."

Hope nodded. "It is."

She'd also seen this a million times. A bride and groom who laughed and joked their way through the rehearsal the night before and then completely came undone at the actual ceremony the moment they realized that it was, in

fact, *real*.

“And you *are* ready,” she added. “It’s going to be great.” The bride nodded and looked straight ahead. That was Hope’s cue.

She whipped out her phone, which also served as a control station for basically everything, and tapped a button. A moment later, the traditional wedding march—the bride’s choice, not hers—filled the outdoor ceremony space Hope had dubbed Riverbend, due to the fact that it was, in fact, in the bend of the river. She had her pick of perfect ceremony sites on Ever After Ranch, but this was her favorite.

Hope stepped back and let the bride’s father lead her down the grassy aisle toward her groom, whom, she was absolutely certain, would also be dabbing his eyes through the entire ceremony.

The bride made it safely to the end of the aisle, hugged her father, and took her groom’s hand as the ceremony began. There was a time when there was nothing Hope enjoyed more than listening to the couple recite their vows. After all, it didn’t get any more romantic. But lately, there hadn’t been time to enjoy the details of the beautiful weddings she put on. There was just too much to do.

Which was why, as soon as the officiant began speaking, Hope scurried away in the golf cart that she’d recently started using to get from place to place around the ranch, back up to the Barn, where the reception was to be held to double-check with the catering staff that everything was set up. Just as she’d instructed, champagne was poured and ready to go on trays by the entrance. The servers stood by with canapés to keep guests entertained while the newlywed couple went for a few photographs around the property.

Hope did a quick spin of the reception space, a refurbished barn that was her pride and joy and also the reason that her business was booming in the last few years. It was rustic elegance that spoke to the dreams of many engaged couples. It didn’t hurt that it had the capacity for large gatherings, and a wedding coordinator who could handle anything that was thrown at her.

She'd come a long way from the little girl who, along with her twin sister, used to beg her parents to help with the few weddings that they'd host on the lawns of their sprawling mountain property. Back then, it hadn't been a business. Not really. Just a little bit of *fun money*, her mom used to call it. Something to do when things were slow with the ranching business, or more usual, when there was a special request to hold an event on their property. The Turner ranch had always been gorgeous.

And Hope had seen the potential. Of course, not even her grandest dreams could have prepared her for how successful Ever After Ranch would be and just how busy she'd find herself in such a short time.

Satisfied that the reception was ready, Hope gave a few final instructions to the catering staff, who she already knew didn't need them, and raced back down to the ceremony space just as the officiant was declaring the happy couple husband and wife.

*Perfect timing.*

She quickly pressed another button on her phone and new music played over the speakers. The crowd cheered and the bride and groom danced down the aisle with their arms in the air, and ever so slightly red eyes, just as Hope predicted.

It wasn't until hours later, after the photographs, the speeches, and dinner, with the guests all happily dancing the night away on the hardwood floors of the barn, that Hope had a minute to hop in her cart and head back to the ceremony site to clean up any garbage that guests had left behind, pack up the speakers and sound system, and take care of anything else that couldn't be left out in the elements.

The stars and the moon lit up the night sky and in desperate need to sit down, Hope gave in and did just that. She tipped her head up and let herself take it all in.

*When was the last time she'd stopped and just looked up?*

She couldn't remember. But that's what it was like to build a business.

Exhausting. Which would explain why she could barely keep her eyes open. She felt it deep in her bones. An overwhelming exhaustion. It was different than her usual tiredness. Of course, she was taking on more bookings than ever before. Maybe it was time to bring on an assistant.

Or her sister.

Hope almost laughed out loud at herself. There was no way. Nevertheless, it was worth a shot. Well, it was worth *another shot*. Still chuckling, she pulled out her cell phone and pressed the button for her twin sister.

“It’s late on a Saturday,” Faith answered. “Shouldn’t you be busy perpetuating the myth of happy ever after and charging tens of thousands of dollars for it while you’re at it?”

Hope shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Hi to you, too, sis.” Where Hope was a die-hard romantic, which had led to the idea of her business in the first place, her twin sister, although identical in appearance, couldn’t be more opposite in her feelings about love and marriage. “So I was thinking...”  
*Might as well get right to the point.*

“No.”

“You don’t even know what I’m going to ask.” She groaned and moved the phone to her other ear. “At least wait until I—”

“You’re going to ask me to come home to Glacier Falls and run the ranch with you,” her sister said matter-of-factly. “Just like you always do when I answer the phone at eleven p.m. on a Saturday night. And just like it always is, the answer is no. I hate that shit, Hope. You know that.”

*She did.*

“But you love me.”

“I do.”

“So do it for me. To help me out.” She knew it was pointless, but she tried anyway. “Besides, it will be fun. We can be the wedding sisters again, like when we were kids.”

It was one of Hope's favorite memories, when their mother would dress them up in frilly dresses and give them baskets of flower petals to throw on the newly married couples. Guests had loved the identical blonde-haired, little girls. Hope had loved it too. Faith, not so much. But even so, there had been a handful of times when Hope had managed to convince her sister from time to time to dress up and reenact their own weddings, taking turns with who got to be the bride and who had to play the groom.

"If you're trying to convince me, that's the wrong way to do it." Faith laughed and then added, "Seriously though, if you need help, Hope, hire someone. Because as much as I love you, I'll be staying in the city. Sorry." She actually did sound a little sorry this time. "Put an ad on the town's Facebook page or something. You'll get someone."

"Yeah, maybe. But hey, you can't blame a girl for trying. Let's talk tomorrow, okay?" Hope smiled into the phone. Distance and lifestyle may separate them, but they were still close. "Love you."

"Love you too, Hope," Faith said. "And Hope? Get some sleep. You sound exhausted."

She hung up the phone and tucked it away before going to gather up the rest of the things that couldn't wait until morning. Hope fell heavy into her golf cart and checked the time. There was still at least two hours before she could announce last call. And then she got to start the process of cleaning up.

Hope closed her eyes, but only for a moment. She couldn't risk falling asleep. Maybe Faith was right; maybe she really should hire someone. She was exhausted already and the wedding season was only just beginning. Before she could talk herself out of it, Hope opened the Facebook app on her phone and typed up a quick help wanted ad.

After all, it couldn't hurt.

"I'M NOT SAYING it's not good to have you back..."

“It’s just strange,” Levi Langdon finished for his cousin, Logan. “I get it. It is strange.” Levi lifted the bottle to his lips and let the cold beer slide down his throat. As strange as it was to be back in his hometown after almost ten years, it also felt good. Really good. Like putting on an old sweater. Or in this case, an old pair of work boots to help Logan out on his family ranch. The ranch he’d grown up on and couldn’t wait to leave.

“But I’m not complaining.” Logan grinned. “I’ve missed you and it was good to be out there today. When was the last time we rode the fence line like that together?”

Levi chuckled and shook his head because they both knew the answer. He’d been twenty years old, Logan a year ahead of him, and they’d both been caught drinking Logan’s dad’s beers. Both were of legal drinking age in Canada, not that it mattered to Uncle Harold. They were *his* beers. An already hard man got even harder when someone took his beers. Especially his dead sister’s kid. For whatever reason, Uncle Harold had a special place in his heart for Levi. And it wasn’t a good one.

Their punishment had been to ride the fence line and repair some downed wire in the middle of the night. Of course, Levi’s punishment had also included a punch in the face that only narrowly missed breaking his nose, but he’d sported the shiner for weeks. It was the last time they’d rode the fence together, because it had also been the last time Levi had spent the night under his uncle’s roof.

He’d had enough. Besides, he was already living on borrowed time on the Langdon ranch. A fact Uncle Harold had no trouble reminding him of on a regular basis. He should have left years ago but he’d been trying to save up enough money to get an apartment in the city. Or at least enough to set him up. But leaving early couldn’t hurt. Hell, it would probably hurt a whole lot less.

At least that’s what he’d thought at the time.

Levi blinked hard and shook his head. Coming back to Glacier Falls was



hard enough. He didn't need to relive every goddamn heartbreaking moment.

“Right.” Logan lifted his own beer, obviously remembering that night as well. “Hey, about all of that.” He wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve. “I'm really sorry that my dad treated you like that back then. I don't—”

“Want you to worry about it,” Levi answered for him. “It wasn't your fault and you can't own the actions of your parents. Hell, we'd both be in trouble if that were the case.” He hadn't known his dad, but all accounts were that he was a deadbeat asshole who'd left his mom knocked up and alone. Levi didn't even know what his last name was, having been given his mother's family name. And it didn't matter; he'd never cared to know who the man was.

Levi had nothing but love for his mother, what he could remember of her anyway. She'd died when he was only ten and he'd gone to live with her brother's family in Glacier Falls. It had been a mixed blessing. Logan had been a cousin, best friend, and brother all rolled into one. Katie had been like a little sister to him, and Auntie Deb had done her best to love and protect young Levi from the unexplainable anger of her husband that only got worse the older he got.

Leaving them had been just as hard as it had been easy leaving Uncle Harold. But now Uncle Harold was gone, having died three months earlier from a heart attack. And Levi was back.

“Still,” Logan said. “I'm sorry he was such a dick to you. He never could explain it, and I know you don't want to hear it, or you wouldn't believe it anyway, but he really wasn't like that with Katie and me.”

“That I do believe.” He took another long pull from his beer. “It doesn't matter now,” he said again, meaning it. “I'm looking forward to catching up with you all. I've missed all of you.”

“Just us?”

If he hadn't been on the other side of the shop, Levi likely would have punched his cousin or at least given him a shove. He hadn't even been back

for a full twenty-four hours. There was no need to stir the pot. Logan knew damn well that his family wasn't the only thing he'd missed about Glacier Falls. Far from it.

“How is Hope?”

Hope Turner, the love of Levi's young life. Or at least he'd thought she was at the time. With her long blonde hair and innocent blue eyes, he'd been completely wrapped around her little finger. He would have done anything for that girl.

Except stay in town.

As much as he loved her, he knew in his heart that if he stayed, Uncle Harold would slowly beat down his spirit—and his body—and in a small town, there was nowhere else to go. Leaving her had been the hardest thing he'd ever done and as much as he wanted to, he couldn't ask her to go with him, because he knew her heart was in Glacier Falls. She loved her small town, and more than that, the ranch she grew up on. She was never leaving. He knew it just like he also knew if he asked her, it would break her heart to have to choose. So he'd let her go.

To his credit, Logan didn't make a smart-ass comment the way Levi was so sure he would. Instead, he slowly put his beer down on the workbench he sat on and crossed his arms. “Ten years, and you've never once asked about her.”

Levi nodded. It was true.

“That must mean you're finally over her.”

He laughed but didn't answer right away. There would be a part of him that was never completely over Hope Turner. But he'd been a kid the last time he'd seen her. A lot changed in ten years. “It's been a long time.”

“That didn't answer my question.” Logan raised an eyebrow at him before hopping down off the bench and moving across the shop to the beer fridge. They hadn't even been in the house yet, a fact Levi felt a little guilty for. But it was late and he hadn't told anyone he was coming. He'd surprised

Logan by joining him in the field earlier, but it was getting late now. He'd just have to surprise Aunt Deb and Katie in the morning. He accepted another beer from his cousin but paused before opening it when Logan said, "Hope's killing it with her business. Turned her family ranch into a wedding venue, of all things."

Levi laughed and shook his head but he wasn't surprised. Ever since they were kids, Hope talked about the few weddings they held out on their property. She'd always been a hopeless romantic. "I'm glad it's working out," he said. "But I'm not surprised. She always knew exactly what she wanted."

Again, Logan raised his eyebrow, but didn't say anything. "She must be doing even better than last year." He handed Levi his cell phone. "She just posted on Facebook that she's looking to hire some help."

Levi took the phone without trying to look too eager. He was pretty sure he failed, but he couldn't help it. Talking about Hope had his pulse racing. He'd managed to avoid her on social media all these years, largely because he wasn't on any social media, but it didn't mean he hadn't thought about how easy it would be to see what she was up to. Was she married? Did she have kids? Was she happy? All things he could know if he'd joined the Facebook phenomenon. Which was precisely why he didn't. But that didn't stop him from grabbing his cousin's phone and looking at the familiar, yet different, beautiful face on the tiny screen.

*Hope Turner.*

She looked the same, but also so different. She definitely wasn't the innocent girl he'd left. Although she still had the sweet look of complete trust in her eyes, there was also something else in her expression. Something deeper.

Levi forced himself to look away from her profile picture and scroll down on the screen to the post Logan was referring to.

HELP WANTED: *General handyman, jack of all trades. Must love love.*

HE COULDN'T HELP but laugh. She was still a hopeless romantic. Some things never changed.

*What if there were a few more things that hadn't changed?*

Levi looked up at Logan, who clearly saw the expression on his cousin's face. "Looking for a job, are you, cuz?"

**Read the rest of [Choosing Happily Ever After](#) now!**

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Elena Aitken is a USA Today Bestselling Author of more than fifty romance and women's fiction novels. The mother of 'grown up' twins, Elena now lives with her very own mountain man in the heart of the very mountains she writes about. She can often be found with her toes in the lake and a glass of wine in her hand, dreaming up her next book and working on her own happily ever after.

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