



Snowed in
with the *Player*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

REBECCA JENSHAK

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For my favorite twins.

Chapter One



Stella and I sing along with the holiday tunes as I make the last turn down the snowy street that leads to the cabin. Snow! It's quite the change of scenery from when we left Valley University, only three hours ago. The sun had been shining and we were sweating by the time we loaded up our Jeep for the holiday break. But here, it looks and feels like winter. I love it.

"I can't wait to sleep in tomorrow." My twin sister rolls the window down, letting in the blistery cold air. "We survived our first semester of college!"

"Yeah, we did." The smell of pine trees and brisk air fills the vehicle, and we breathe it in with matching smiles.

"This was a great idea. We can snowboard, ski, snowshoe, and—"

I cut in to add, "Read by the fireplace, bake cookies, watch movies."

Stella laughs. "We'll do all of it. It's going to be amazing." She rolls the window back up. "Have you heard from Felix?"

"No. I texted him before we left, but no response. Are we terrible for ditching him for the cabin this weekend?"

"Are you kidding? He probably has plans to throw a party at the house every night until Mom and Dad are back."

I nod my agreement, but I still feel a stab of guilt.

Our parents are in Cabo until Christmas Eve, taking a much-deserved vacation. They've been saying they were going to take one for years, and they finally did it.

It's weird not rushing home to do all the usual holiday festivities, though. I look forward to it all year—making sugar cookies and decorating them, watching all our favorite holiday movies, and just lounging around and enjoying my family.

Stella and I decided that since Mom and Dad are gone, we'd spend the weekend at our family's cabin in Flagstaff, unwinding after the long semester before going home. She likes to ski. I like to sit by the fire and read. It's going to be so much fun. Different, but fun.

Our brother Felix goes to Valley U too, but he finished with classes a day earlier than us and headed home to Scottsdale to housesit while Mom and Dad are gone. And Stella is right. He's probably stocking the fridge right now and preparing to throw a party.

We're quiet as we pass the ski resort. The parking lot is packed, and people walk to and from the front with skis and snowboards, dressed in warm layers.

"Ah, it just got real." Stella bounces in her seat, sending her ponytail swinging around her shoulders. "Tomorrow we should sleep in and then go up to the ski resort and buy passes for the weekend before they sell out."

"I don't know if I'm going to be doing that much skiing. I should probably stick to ice skating and snowshoeing."

"I'll go on the bunny hill with you until you get the hang of it again." Her excitement is contagious.

"Deal."

As the cabin finally comes into view, a familiar orange vehicle catches my eye.

"Uhhh. Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" I ask as I pull the Jeep to a stop behind Felix's Corvette.

"What is he doing here?" Stella gapes at our brother, standing on the porch of our grandparents' vacation cabin and wearing a Santa hat but no shirt.

"Freezing to death, from the looks of it."

He isn't alone. A group of people fill the small front porch. A couple I recognize as his football teammates, but the others I've never seen before. Knowing Felix, he's already made friends with the neighbors in the short amount of time he's been here. My brother can and will talk with everyone he meets. And he knows how to throw a party, so people tend to flock to him.

I kill the engine, and the holiday music we'd been listening to on our drive up from Valley U. The mood has officially deflated.

Stella hops out first, and with a grin that's half annoyed and half pleasantly surprised, shouts, "What the hell, Felix?"

She slams the door behind her and marches toward the cabin. People stare

at her as she approaches. I slink down in my seat.

Felix looks surprised, but still smiles, even as Stella continues to shriek at him. His response back is muffled. They hug, but I can tell Stella is still worked up by the way she waves her hands around as she speaks.

Felix walks back to the car with her. I roll down my window and the cold air bristles against my face.

“Holly!” My brother greets me. His eyes are glossy, and he smells like he’s been drinking for the better part of the day. “I can’t believe you two are here.”

“Same. I thought you were taking care of the house for Mom and Dad while they’re in Cabo?”

“I am.”

I get out of the car, and he pulls me into a big hug, squeezing me and lifting my feet off the ground.

“Funny. It doesn’t look like you’re in Scottsdale.”

He ruffles my hair, which he knows I hate. “I’ve got it under control. Don’t worry.”

“Well, that just makes me more worried.” I scan his bare torso. “You’re missing a shirt.”

“Spilled beer on it.” Laughing, he looks from me to Stella and back again. “Why didn’t you two tell me you were coming?”

“We texted you this morning after we were done with classes,” Stella says.

“I was already here. We came up last night.” He pats his front and back jeans pockets. “I have no idea where I left my phone.”

“Typical,” I tease.

He pulls me in for another hug. “This is rad. We can all hang out. How long are you staying?”

“Just the weekend. There is a good chance of snow. We thought we’d ski and hang out for a few days before going home.” An excited smile tips up the corners of Stella’s lips.

“And we thought the party would be at Mom and Dad’s, since you’re supposed to be housesitting,” I chime in. “We can’t all stay here. There isn’t enough room.”

“Sure, there is.” My brother waves off my concern.

It’s a rustic, two-bedroom cabin that’s been in our family for three generations. Our great-grandparents bought the land when there was nothing

else around. They built a summer getaway house to escape the brutal temperatures in June and July. The temperatures in northern Arizona are way cooler than just a few hours south, and this is where they'd come on weekends or time off from work.

That was before someone decided to build a ski resort half a mile away. It made the property worth a lot more, but it also meant that a dozen more cabins popped up all around. Most are rentals or vacation homes, but there are a few people that live here year-round.

We came here a lot as kids during the summer. And as we've gotten older, Felix, Stella, and I like to come up here in the winter with friends to ski or just hang out. During the winter break, it's packed with high school and college students. But it's been a few years since we've all been here together.

"Where are we all going to sleep?"

"We'll figure it out." Felix throws an arm around each of our shoulders. "Come meet some people."

Laughing, I shrug out of his hold. "I'll be right there. I'm just gonna grab some of our stuff."

Stella goes with Felix, and I walk behind the Jeep to get our things. I know my sister well enough to know she won't want to change our plans for the weekend, even if it means sharing the small cabin with our brother and his friends.

She will spend most of her time at the resort anyway, so it's not that big of an inconvenience, but my plans of enjoying the quiet and reading by the fireplace seem far-fetched now.

Plus, Stella and I might be twins, but when the three of us hang out together, she and Felix usually team up against me. They're both a lot more extroverted than I am, and deciding what to do quickly becomes two against one. It's the only reason I've gone skydiving or been to a dance club. It's not all bad. Sometimes they pull me out of my comfort zone, and I'm thankful, but other times, I end up anxious and sweaty. The dance club falls into the latter column.

I leave the suitcase in the back of the Jeep to get later, but grab two of the paper bags filled with food for the weekend. Some of it needs to go in the fridge—assuming it isn't already full of beer.

I'm wrangling a third bag, so I can get it all in one trip, when a familiar deep voice cuts through my thoughts.

"Hold up. Let me get that."

Teddy invades my space before I've had time to prepare for him. And where Teddy is concerned, I need time to prepare. His hand brushes mine as he takes the last bag from me, sending goosebumps all the way to my toes. I breathe in the scent of his soap, mixed with the winter wonderland around us, and it's just about the most heavenly thing I've ever smelled.

"Thanks," I mumble as I take him in.

Theo Radford. Star running back of the Valley University football team, my brother's best friend, impossibly nice guy, and my secret crush.

It's silly, really. He's ridiculously handsome and, of course, super popular, and I'm just me. One of Felix's little sisters. The shy one, the one people overlook.

He's big and burly like a teddy bear, which is why everyone calls him Teddy. He's one of the few people that never makes me feel like the "other" twin. I like that about him. I like a lot of things about him.

Including the way the long-sleeved shirt he's wearing strains against his biceps and back. He's six foot, two inches, and every part of him is broad and muscular.

"How are you, Holly?" Even though lots of people can tell Stella and me apart, I secretly love when it's Teddy who calls me by name without prompting.

"Good. You?" My cold cheeks flame with warmth.

"I'm good. Nice antlers." One side of his mouth quirks up and his dimples are on full display. I love his dimples.

When Teddy isn't smiling, he looks tough and really intimidating. I've been watching him play football with Felix for the past two years and that tough and intimidating look has coincided with a lot of touchdowns. He is no-nonsense, all-out, determined, and aggressive on the field, but when he smiles, Teddy looks like the nicest guy you could ever meet. And he really is.

My hand flies to the reindeer antler headband I'd forgotten I was wearing, and I smile timidly. "Thanks. Felix didn't say you were coming to the house for Christmas again this year."

Teddy's from Virginia, a long way to fly home for the holidays. Last year, he came to our house. It wasn't the start of my crush, but spending so much time around him definitely kicked it up a notch or twenty.

"I'm not. I didn't want to impose on your family again. Emmett invited me to his folks' house for the break." He nods his head to our luggage, bringing my attention to his dark blond hair. It's thick and a little unruly, but

it suits him. "The suitcase too?"

"I can get that later," I say.

"I got it." He reaches in and grabs it then starts for the laundry basket.

"Not that one," I say too late. The big, white basket is filled with dirty clothes that Stella and I planned to wash once we got to Mom and Dad's. A pair of my holiday panties with little gingerbread men and women all over them are on top, and I think I might die as Teddy quickly looks away and his cheeks go ruddy.

I take another step from the Jeep and Teddy shuts the back.

"Thank you," I say again as we walk up toward the cabin.

"No problem." He stops on the bottom step of the porch stairs to let me go first. "I gather you weren't expecting us to be here."

"Felix is nothing if not spontaneous."

"Sorry." He cracks a sympathetic smile as I pass by him. A dozen or more people stand on the front porch, drinking and talking.

Inside, the place is a mess. Empty beer cans litter the kitchen counter, the top of the fridge holds a row of liquor bottles, and next to the sink, shot glasses are lined up beside pizza boxes.

Teddy drops the paper bag on the counter and then hoists the suitcase up like it weighs nothing. "Where am I putting this?"

"I'm not sure." I scan the living room. Pillows and blankets are spread out on both couches and there's a sleeping bag on the floor.

"You two can have my room." He tips his head and starts down the short hallway with the second bedroom, and I follow him.

"You don't have to do that," I say as he sets my suitcase down next to the bed. Felix will have called the master. It's on the opposite side and has a private, attached bath.

"It's fine." He grabs his duffel bag.

"Where are you going to sleep?" I cannot picture him in a sleeping bag on the floor.

"I'll mangle on the couch." He winks and it sets off a thousand butterflies in my chest. "Do you want a beer or something?"

"No thanks. Not yet."

He nods and heads back out. I linger in the bedroom for a moment to get my bearings. This trip is off to a rocky start. Are we all really going to stay here?

My fingers find the gold name necklace Stella got me as an early

Christmas present. She got one for herself too. She said they were so people would stop confusing us. Our friends from high school could tell us apart, but since getting to Valley, we've had to go through the whole people confusing us thing again. It gets a little awkward sometimes when people get it wrong, and I have to tell them I'm not Stella.

We're only one minute apart and identical twins with matching long, strawberry-blonde hair and brown eyes with flecks of green. Staring at her should be like looking in a mirror, but Stella has that something about her that would make her stand out, even if every person in the world looked the same. She's fearless and fun, confident. Stella has always been into sports and social clubs, while I like to hang with a small group of friends and cheer her on from the sideline.

If we were the Wakefield twins, she'd be Jessica for sure.

I take a deep breath and force myself to stop hiding. I can do this. Everything will be fine. Felix and his friends are fun, and I'll be sleeping under the same roof as Teddy. There are worse things.

Teddy is in the kitchen, pouring himself a drink, when I walk out to the main room. It's open-concept, with the kitchen on one side and the dining room on the other. The living area sits in between with a TV over the fireplace. Sliding glass doors lead out from the dining room to a deck that looks out to the mountains, but the front porch is where people tend to congregate.

The TV is on and *Jingle All the Way* plays on mute.

"I love this one," I say, stopping in front of the TV.

Teddy's long legs eat up the space between us, standing beside me in three big steps. His arm brushes mine and I expect him to pull away, but he doesn't.

"Me too."

Captions are on and we watch silently for a few minutes before he turns to me. "What's your favorite holiday movie?"

"That is an impossible question."

A silent laugh shakes his chest. "Top three?"

"Elf," I start. "*Christmas Vacation*, and *Home Alone*."

He nods along. "All great choices."

"But then there's *The Grinch*, *Bad Santa*, *Love Actually*, *A Christmas Story* . . . there are so many good ones."

"*Die Hard*," he adds and then tilts his head to study me. "You aren't one

of those people who claim it isn't a Christmas movie, are you?"

"Definitely not. It's so a Christmas movie."

He leans into me. "I knew I liked you."

His shoulder rests against mine and that winter-wonderland scent envelops me as he stares down at me with gray eyes. My body warms from his touch and his words. I'm suddenly unable to come up with anything to say back to him and an awkward beat passes between us while neither of us moves.

This might be the longest conversation I've ever had with Teddy. And the first one we've ever had alone like this. Sure, we've had one-on-one conversations before, but there were always other people around, aiding as a nice distraction in case I said something embarrassing.

Noise outside catches my attention, breaking the nice moment between us and reminding me we aren't really alone.

Teddy takes a step away. "Ready?"

I let out a shaky breath and nod.

Felix and two more of his teammates, Emmett and Lucas, are standing next to the door outside with girls I don't recognize.

My brother introduces me to Tricia and Anna. The girls wave around their red Solo cups. A couple of guys join us, and Felix introduces them to me as Brian and Kevin. He doesn't specify which is which, so I just nod and smile.

"We went to high school together. They go to NAU," Felix says, and then hangs his arm around my shoulders. "And this is one of my sisters."

One of the guys steps forward and extends a hand. "Nice to meet you. What's your name?"

Felix's voice turns protective. "Hey, hey. Don't get any ideas. My sisters are too good for any of you. This is—"

"Wait, let me guess which one." Emmett stares at me closely, then his gaze darts over to where Stella is standing on the opposite side of the porch. "You're Stella."

"Yep." Lucas nods his agreement. "Definitely Stella."

"It's Holly, you idiots," Teddy says.

"Really?" Emmett's gaze narrows.

I nod.

"How do you always get it wrong?" Felix asks with a shake of his head.

"They're identical twins," Emmett whines. "They look *identical*."

Felix just laughs, but Teddy stares right at me as he says, “No, they don’t. It’s easy to tell them apart. You’re just not looking close enough.”

I’m on cloud nine until he adds, “Her name is right there on her necklace.”

Chapter Two



Stella throws her head back and laughs after I tell her about my interaction with Teddy. The party died out and everyone who isn't staying here went home, leaving me and Stella alone with Felix and his teammates.

She glances over to where Teddy and the guys are tossing a football in the front yard. "I think it's great he's here. You will have a chance to hang out with him more."

"Oh, yeah. Another chance for him to not notice me." I don't even try to hide the defeat that spills out with my words. I have had a crush on Teddy since the moment I met him.

Felix is fifteen months older than me and Stella. He went off to Valley U while we were still in high school. I'll never forget the first time Felix introduced Teddy to us. It was after a home game. We'd all come down to watch Felix play.

It wasn't anything Teddy said or did. It was in all the things he didn't say or do. He is quieter and sweeter than the rest of Felix's friends. He smiled with those dimples, looked me in the eye and repeated my name like he was committing it to memory. That was all it took. I was smitten.

And every interaction, everything I've learned about him since, just makes me fall harder.

"Oh please, he totally notices you. How else did he see that necklace?" She lifts her chin and drops her gaze to it.

"He notices me, of course he does, I'm his best friend's sister, but he doesn't *notice* me. There's a difference."

"He was checking you out."

"I don't think that's what he was doing." My face heats.

"He's a straight, very hot-blooded college guy. He checked you out. He

probably just thinks you're not interested because your default mode around him is to hide or barely say two words back to him."

It's true. I tend to freeze up around him. Teddy makes me nervous. When he talks to me, or anyone really, he gives his undivided attention. And all that attentiveness from a guy that already makes my insides feel like goo is overwhelming.

And okay, it isn't fair to say he doesn't notice me; Teddy is always friendly, but he doesn't see me the way I see him. I know, because he treats Stella the same way, like he's looking out for us because it's his obligation as Felix's best friend.

"Felix and Teddy are staying until the twenty-third."

Three nights longer than Stella and I planned.

"You want to stay?"

"Don't you? Teddy is here!"

I shush her, but my face remains hot.

"He isn't listening," she says with a small laugh.

"What about all our plans? We were going to do holiday stuff, like bake cookies and watch *Home Alone*."

"I know." She turns, so her body is angled toward me, her eyes pleading with me. "But if we stay, we can do all that and ski and hang out with Felix. What are we going to do at home by ourselves that we can't do here?"

I hesitate. The answer is nothing, but I'm still torn.

"Please?"

"Okay," I relent.

She squeals and her smile gets bigger.

"But we're getting a tree for the cabin, and you have to go with me on the bunny hill."

"Whatever you want," she says and hugs me. "This is going to be so much fun!"

Her phone pings, and she pulls back quickly to look at the screen. A goofy grin lights up her face. The kind of grin that can only mean a text from one person.

"Is he done for the semester too?"

"Yeah. He finished yesterday and flew home today."

Stella met a guy last month at the airport. She's a diver and was traveling with the Valley U Swim and Dive Team. Serendipitously, she ended up sitting next to Beau at the gate before her flight. He goes to college out of

state, but is originally from the Phoenix area like us. Even so, I didn't really think anything would come of their happenstance meeting, but they've been talking all day, every day ever since.

"When do I get to meet this guy?"

"I don't know," she says. "He's only home for two weeks, and he has plans with his family."

Stella gets lost in her phone, and I go back to watching the guys. Felix throws the football to Lucas and calls, "I'm out. My nipples could cut glass."

He jogs up the front porch steps and heads inside. I follow after him.

"Beer?" he asks.

"No, but will you grab me a soda?"

He does and then cracks open his beer and starts toward the master bedroom.

"Wait." I walk with him, entering the messy room. It's decorated exactly as you'd expect from grandparents. Elementary school pictures of Felix, Stella, and me in all the awkward phases are framed on the dresser, and it has a smell that's a mixture of Icy Hot and floral potpourri.

"Stella and I are going to stay."

"Awesome."

"You're really not pissed we're crashing your entire week of partying?"

His blue eyes crinkle at the corners as he smiles. "Nah, but I hope you're prepared to sleep on the living room floor. At least until Sunday. Lucas is leaving then. After that, you are welcome to the lumpy couch."

He sets his beer on the dresser and pulls out clean clothes from his bag on the floor.

"Not necessary. Teddy already gave up his room." I smile smugly as I sit on the edge of his unmade bed.

"That Teddy." He shakes his head as his voice takes on a taunting edge. "I'm going to have to talk to him about being so nice to my annoying sisters."

"Teddy is nice to everyone."

"True," he says and then flicks on the bathroom light.

"What's the plan for tonight anyway?"

"Lots of drinking, then who knows. Wherever the night takes us."

Felix takes his beer and disappears into the bathroom. A second later, the shower turns on. I get up to leave, but pause in the doorway and say, "We should get a tree."

"A tree?" he calls over the running water.

“Yeah. You know, those things you decorate at Christmastime.”

“Uh, yeah, maybe. I’m not sure how much room we have for that.”

He’s right. The cabin is not spacious, but our parents already said the only tree we’re doing at home this year is the small artificial one mom puts up in the kitchen and decorates with Santa ornaments. She usually puts up at least five artificial trees throughout the house—ranging in size and color and theme, but my favorite is always the real one that goes up in the living room. I love going to pick it out, the way it smells and the way it looks all lit up at night. Stella and I planned to get one this weekend and surprise everyone, but then we decided to come here instead. All the good ones will be picked over before we get back.

“We’ll make room,” I tell him.

I only get a grunt in acceptance, but it’s good enough for me. One small, Christmassy win.

Chapter Three



We hang out at the cabin Friday night, and everyone goes to sleep pretty early. The next morning when I wake up, the guys are getting ready to go to the resort to ski, Stella too.

Felix smirks as he scans my sweatshirt. It reads, *Don't stop Believin'* with a picture of Santa Claus. "Did you get that for an ugly holiday sweater party or something?"

"What?" I gasp. "No. This sweater isn't ugly."

He chuckles. "Are you coming with us today?"

"And miss an opportunity to hang here by myself and read?" I shake my head. "No chance."

"You could come and sit in the lodge and read. Better view, better food, and we can hang out while I warm up between runs." Felix shrugs.

"Yeah!" Stella exclaims. "Come with us."

I glance around the messy living room. It isn't the cozy environment I had hoped for and the lodge at the resort is beautiful. Plus, they do have better snacks. "Okay. Let me grab a couple of books."

"A couple?" Teddy asks.

"She's a speed reader," Stella says proudly, like it's my superpower. Being a twin is funny like that. We both admire the things the other does better, even if it's something silly like reading faster.

We pile into two vehicles to head to the resort. As everyone else goes to rent gear and buy passes, I head to the lodge. It is my absolute favorite part of the resort. The restaurant sits off on one side, the bar on the other, and in between is a giant fireplace with lots of cozy chairs. I find one near the windows, overlooking the ice-skating rink. There's also an outdoor-seating area with a snack bar for those who want to grab something to eat, without taking off their wet gear.

Light snow is falling outside, and the sky is gray. I order a muffin and a coffee and take a seat with my book. I'm in the middle of a flirty romance and the hero is working hard to win over the heroine.

It only takes two paragraphs to suck me back into the story and I'm lost to the rest of the world. I don't look up again until I'm finished. I hug the book to my chest. It's the perfect way to spend the day, watching the snow, sitting near the fireplace, and finishing a great read.

I stand up and stretch and then pull out my second book. This one is a thriller set in a cozy mountain town in the middle of a blizzard. Curling up in the chair again, I just finish the first page when Stella flops down in front of me, bringing a blast of cold air with her.

"I missed this place." Her face is red, but her smile is huge.

"Me too."

She eyes the book in my hand. "Already on your second book?"

"Yeah," I say as Felix and Teddy join us. Teddy peels off his coat and gloves, and then rubs his hands in front of him.

"I need to dry off," he says, taking a seat.

"You only get wet if you fall." Felix grins. "I'm gonna get a drink. Want anything?"

"Nah." Teddy shakes his head.

"I'll come with you." Stella hops up. "I need something hot. I'm frozen to the bone. I should have packed some warmer clothes."

When it's just the two of us, Teddy stretches his long legs out in front of him and then takes the beanie off his head and runs his fingers through the thick strands.

"How was it?" I ask.

"Brutal. I let your brother talk me into going down a black diamond on my first day." He chuckles softly. "I think I rolled down most of it."

"You've never skied before?"

"Never. And from my performance out there this morning, I'm thinking I oughta stick to sports that don't require me to wear tiny sleds on my feet."

"There's also cross-country skiing, snowboarding—Stella loves that, or snowshoeing."

"Snowshoeing. Isn't that just like walking in the snow?" His gray eyes crinkle at the corners as he smiles.

"But with special shoes," I insist, then laugh. "They rent shoes and poles here for it. We should try it while you're here."

He stares at me a beat, without speaking, and I realize I've just suggested the two of us hang out. "I meant you should ask Felix to do it with you. Fair warning, he'll get bored ten minutes into the walk."

"Thanks for the heads up." His gaze drops to my book and then back up. "What about you?"

"What about me?" I squirm a little under his scrutiny.

"Which is your favorite winter activity? After reading, of course."

"I like snowshoeing. It's the only winter sport I don't feel like a complete klutz."

"You're not klutzy."

"Compared to Stella and Felix, I am."

"I heard my name," Felix says, plopping down into a chair next to Teddy. "Are you telling her how I kicked your ass on the slopes?"

"You got me," Teddy says with a chuckle.

Stella, Lucas, and Emmett are behind Felix, and they gather around in a circle, drinking and warming up. The snow stopped and the sun is shining. It's the type of winter weather that makes you feel like you should get out and do something, instead of sit inside (well, not me, but other people) and as soon as the guys finish their drinks, I can tell they're antsy to get back out there.

"You ready to fall down some more?" Felix nudges Teddy.

"I'm almost dry."

"Come on, Radford." Felix stands. "You can't give up yet."

Stella jumps up, ready to go too.

"Good luck," I say and wiggle my fingers at a reluctant looking Teddy.

"I'm gonna need it." He slowly gets to his feet and groans, looking around the room like maybe he's appreciating it in here like I do, then his gaze stops on me. "Staying in here looks a whole lot better."

Chapter Four



The guys start drinking as soon as we get back from the resort, and by the time eight o'clock rolls around, they're ready to kick it up a notch. The liquor bottles come down and more people fill the already-cramped living area.

I'm sitting with Teddy and one of his and Felix's teammates, Garrison, who lives nearby and drove up for the night, watching them play something on the Xbox. The rest of the guys have set up beer pong on the dining room table. The other couch is taken by a group of girls the guys met the first night—Tricia and Anna, and a couple more I haven't been introduced to yet, and in the kitchen are more people I don't know.

Stella is hiding in the bedroom talking to Beau, so I'm doing my best to blend in until she's done.

"Do you need another drink?" Teddy asks as he gets up from the couch. Tonight, he's wearing a white Valley U football hat and his dark blond hair curls around his ears.

The hard seltzer in my hand is nearly full, but I say, "Sure. Thanks."

Anna rushes to take his spot. Her hair is long and blonde, and she smells like cotton candy. "Is he your boyfriend?"

"Teddy?" I ask, watching his back move to the fridge.

She quickly nods her head up and down like a bobblehead.

"No," I say, and immediately regret it because her eyes gleam with excitement.

"I didn't think so, but I wanted to be sure. Thank you!" She hurries back to her friends and tells them the good news.

I feel a prick of irritation and unease because I really don't want to be stuck in the same house as my crush while he hooks up with another girl, but when Teddy comes back and hands me a cold can and falls into the seat next

to me, I push away my annoyance and move an inch closer to him.

“Same game?” Teddy asks Garrison.

“I think I’m out. I need to move around.” Slowly, he moves his booted foot from the coffee table and grimaces.

Teddy leans back on the couch. “What’s the latest word from the doctor?”

Garrison was injured in a football game earlier in the season. It was a nasty hit, though they all look pretty brutal to me. I cringe every time Felix gets sacked, which thankfully isn’t that often.

“He thinks I can rehab it without surgery, but I have to wear this fucking boot for another week. I’m losing my mind.”

Teddy stays silent, but nods. “Sorry, man.”

“That stupid fucker Ricci is going down next year. He should have been ejected for that dirty hit.” He gets to his feet and grumbles, “I need a shot or twelve.”

“Is he okay?” I ask when he’s gone.

“Yeah. His foot will heal, but he’s gonna be pissed for a while.”

“What did he mean about it being a dirty hit? They all look awful to me.”

“It came late, after the play. Garrison was already out of bounds when Ricci took him down. It’s tough for refs to call.” Teddy continues, “Things out there happen so fast. Guys have a hard time stopping but sometimes it’s just dirty.” Teddy releases a breath and holds out the controller to me.

“I’ve never played this game,” I say, but take it and sit up to place both of my drinks on the table.

“We can play whatever you want.” He navigates back to the menu to show me the options.

“Have you ever been injured playing football? Aside from the thumb dislocation last year.”

“Good memory.” The smile he aims at me makes me dizzy. “Not like Garrison. No broken bones or injuries that have kept me sidelined, but I’ve had plenty of bumps and bruises. What about you?”

“Me?” I shake my head. “I was never into any sports, except swimming, and one summer I played softball with Stella.” I shudder at the memory.

“I bet you looked pretty cute in a baseball cap.” He takes the hat off his head and places it on mine, then leans back to get a better look at me. “Yep. I knew it.”

“We wore visors.” Frenetic energy courses through me. Being near Teddy, especially when I’m talking to him, has this weird effect on me,

where I want to lean into the moment while simultaneously wishing I was invisible.

His smile widens. I leave on the hat. It's too big, falling over my eyes, but I don't care.

I place a hand to my cheek. "It's kind of hot in here."

He tilts his head to the door. "Want to step outside for a minute?"

I think the heat coursing through me is more from him being so close than the temperature in the cabin, but I nod. We abandon our spots on the couch and head for the front door. Teddy holds it open for me and I blush harder as I walk in front of him.

It hasn't snowed any more, but the front porch is still partially covered. We stand at the railing, looking out toward the tree line to the right of the cabin.

Teddy groans and rolls his neck.

"You can take three-hundred-pound dudes pummeling into you, but you fall to the ground on your own and turn into a big ole' baby," I tease.

"Yeah, yeah." He hits the brim of his hat, still on my head, and fights a smile. "I tried to keep up with your brother. That was a mistake. My ass is black and blue."

I laugh softly. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." He turns, so his back is against the railing, and looks over at me. "It's so peaceful out here. Feels like we're inside a Christmas movie."

"Yeah, I guess it does a little." I tip my head up to look at the stars. The cold is seeping in through my thin sweater and I hug myself for added warmth. "But we'd be the least festive house in the movie."

A rough chuckle leaves his lips and hangs in a cloud of cool air.

"We're totally festive. Felix is even wearing his Santa hat again." He gives his head a shake. "I made fun of him for it, but the girls flock to him in that thing."

"I'll tell you a secret about my brother." I lean closer. "Girls flocking to him might be a nice side effect, but he's wearing that hat because he loves Christmas. It's a Walters' family tradition. Felix and Dad wear Santa hats the entire week leading up to Christmas. My mom buys them in bulk."

"That's right. I remember that from last year. Why aren't you festive tonight? Did you run out of holiday sweaters?"

I brush my hair away from my ear and show him the dangly holly flower earrings. "And I have reindeer, Santa, Christmas trees . . . you get the

picture.”

“You Walters are freaks.”

“We love the holidays. I’m having fun being up here, don’t get me wrong. I love the cabin and the snow, but it doesn’t feel like Christmas without being home.”

“What’s your favorite part?”

Some time while we were talking, we both angled our bodies to face each other. Teddy reaches out and takes my hands in his giant palms, then rubs lightly.

His touch throws me off for a second, and I think my brain short circuits. “Picking out the tree and then decorating it with our old ornaments. But I love other things too. Like how Dad and Felix put up lights outside, and Mom wraps all our presents in special coordinating paper. It’s different every year, but the result is a work of art. Stella and I always make a bunch of cookies and we watch the first two *Home Alone* movies together.”

“They made more than two?”

“They shouldn’t have, but yes.”

“That all sounds amazing. I was honored to be a part of it last year.”

“I know it’s silly, but I really look forward to it.”

“That isn’t silly at all, it’s beautiful.”

I want to ask him what his family does every year, and if he misses going home for the holidays, but the way he’s looking at me makes speaking impossible. His gaze darts to my lips, and when it moves back up, there’s an intensity swirling in his stare that wasn’t there a second ago.

“There you are!” Stella says, opening the front door and peering out.

I’m slow to look, still too caught up in the guy in front of me. When I do, my sister steps out and then pauses when she takes in the scene in front of her. Teddy lets our hands drop.

“Am I interrupting?”

“No, I got too warm in there. Teddy stepped out with me for some cold air and then we got to talking.”

“Oh.” Stella’s smile says way more than that one word. “Well, that was nice of you, Theodore.”

He chuckles. “I better go reclaim my spot on the Xbox.”

His eyes briefly flick to me before he heads back inside.

“You and Teddy!” Stella screeches as soon as the door closes behind him.

“No.”

She hits the brim of the hat, *his* hat. I feel sort of silly wearing it now, so I take it off. “We were just talking.”

“If you say so.” Stella shivers. “It’s freezing out here. We really should have brought warmer clothes.”

I follow her inside to the kitchen. Stella grabs a bag of chips from the pantry and then an entire jar of salsa. “I thought we could watch a movie in bed? I’m exhausted. Unless you want to stay up and hang out.”

I look around the party in the living room. Teddy is flocked on either side by Anna and another girl.

“A movie sounds great.”



We watch *Elf* and eat the entire bag of chips and most of the salsa.

“I invited Beau to visit over break.”

“Here?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “After Christmas, before we go back to Valley. You’re going to love him.”

“That’s great, and Felix will be there in case he’s a total creeper in person.”

“Yeah. Felix can meet him too. But he isn’t a creeper. I met him in person, remember?” She laughs and falls back onto the bed. “I hope Felix is cool.”

“Why wouldn’t he be? He knows you date and make out with boys.” I gasp and cover my mouth with my hand.

The party has died down and only the faint sound of the guys talking drifts through the walls.

Stella’s quiet, only giving me a small smile. She’s already so nervous for us to meet him, which tells me exactly how much she really likes him. The three of us are close. It would be hard for any of us to date someone the others didn’t like.

“I can’t believe you met a guy at the airport. Only you. Guys basically fall into your lap.” I shove her foot lightly.

She sits up and grins at me. “It could be you if you’d actually talk to

Teddy like you did tonight.”

“Shh!” I glance at the closed door.

“Oh, relax. He isn’t eavesdropping.” She yawns and plugs her phone into the charger, then lies back down. “But seriously, this week is the perfect opportunity to make something happen.”

Her eyes flutter closed, and I get under the covers beside her.

“Want to go get a tree in the morning?”

“Maybe. First, I want to sleep for like eighteen hours.” She curls up on her side facing me. “Night, Holly.”

“Night, Stell.”

I fall asleep thinking about Teddy. I know my sister is right. I should do something, since we’re sharing the same space for a few days, but making moves on guys is not really an area in which I excel. Reading, school, shoes, Christmas trivia, knowing the lyrics to every pop song on the radio—those are topics I am much more versed in.

And with Teddy, there’s a lot at stake. He’s my brother’s best friend. If he doesn’t feel the same, it’s not like I can hide from him forever.

Stella is still sleeping when I wake up the next morning, so I quietly change and then take my toothbrush and makeup case out to the bathroom.

Noise from the television that was left on all night makes it hard to tell if anyone else is awake. Once I’m ready, I tiptoe through the living room. Lucas is lying on the floor in only his boxers, and Emmett is facedown on one of the couches. Garrison and the other guys that drove down must have left last night. The spot where Teddy slept is empty and Felix’s door is open and the sliver of his bed I can see is clear.

“Morning.” Teddy’s deep voice rumbles through my insides.

I jump and place a hand on my chest.

“Sorry,” he says as I meet his gaze. He leans against the counter with a tall glass of milk. He’s shirtless and even though I’ve seen him like this before, I have a hard time not letting my gaze linger on his broad shoulders and tapered waist or the light smattering of hair that trails down his stomach and disappears into his sweatpants.

“Morning,” I finally return his greeting, “I didn’t know anyone else was up.”

I glance toward Felix’s room again. The bed is definitely empty.

“He’ll be right back. He walked the girls back.”

“Oh.” I knew they were still here when Stella and I crashed, but it didn’t

occur to me until now that they might have stayed over. And if Teddy is the only other one awake . . . I shake away the thought. I do not need to picture Teddy or my brother hooking up.

I grab a glass from the cabinet and fill it with water, looking anywhere but at the guy next to me. He's had girlfriends before, but somehow thinking of him hooking up with a random girl hurts more. That random could have been me.

Felix returns, when it's borderline uncomfortable, and I have never been so glad to see him.

"Hey," I say cheerily.

"Morning."

"Just barely." The microwave clock reads ten fifty-eight. "I checked and there is a tree lot about a mile away."

He doesn't look stoked about my idea, so I continue to plead my case, "If we don't get one soon, they'll be sold out."

Felix kicks off his shoes and pulls a sweatshirt over his head. "No can do. I'm going to jump in the shower and then I have to go to Scottsdale. Mom texted last night. Apparently, she has carpet cleaners coming today."

"Did you tell her you were here?"

"No. Just said I'd take care of it." He shrugs.

It makes me smile, thinking of Mom worried about the cleanliness of her floors while on the beach.

"Are you coming back?"

"Yeah, we'll be back later tonight." He raises his voice, "Yo, Em, Luc. We're leaving soon."

Stella comes out of the bedroom, her eyes still half-closed. "You're going home?"

"Just for the day." He grabs a Gatorade from the fridge.

"Can I come with you? I want to do a load of laundry and grab some warmer clothes. I forgot how cold it gets up here."

"Uhh . . ." Felix starts, "it'll be tight, but I guess we could squeeze you in."

"She can have my spot," Teddy offers. "I'll stay here."

I glance between Stella and Teddy. "Stella, you can't leave. We were going to watch *Home Alone* and *Home Alone 2* today." My cheeks heat. I know it sounds silly, childish even, but it's a tradition. We always dedicate one day in the week leading up to Christmas to watch those two movies

together.

“We’ll do it another day,” she promises.

“I could come too, and we could watch it on the drive.”

“No,” she says too quickly, “you should stay here. We’ll watch the movies tomorrow.”

She smiles, eyes wide like she’s trying to communicate something. Usually, I know what she’s thinking, even without that look, but right now I have no clue.

“Okay. I guess I’ll bake cookies today and we can decorate them tonight.” That’s another one of our traditions I look forward to every year. I like to bake. Stella hates to touch the oven, but she sits and talks with me while I do it. Occasionally, she even helps decorate them.

My sister steps closer and grabs my hand. “Holly, can you help me find the concealer?”

“It’s in the makeup case.”

She takes a step toward the bedroom, tugging me with her. “Show me. I couldn’t find it.”

“We’re leaving in twenty,” Felix calls after us.

She drops my hand and shuts the door behind us. I walk straight over to the makeup case and pick up the concealer.

“I don’t need the concealer.”

“Then why did you ask me to help you find it?”

“So you would stop going on and on about cookies and movies. You are going to be alone all day with Teddy.”

My face floods with heat, and I glance to the door. “Shhh!”

“Holly, this is the perfect opportunity.”

“Spending the day alone with Teddy is the perfect opportunity to what?” I throw my hands up in the air. “I still haven’t mastered talking to him without feeling like I’m going to pass out.”

“So don’t talk. Tear off all his clothes and kiss the man.”

“Oh my god, Stell. Shhh.” My face is on fire.

She laughs as I continue to freak out. “Your face is so red right now. Teddy is hot and nice and just . . . good, ya know? He’s one of the good ones. Lots of girls want to tear off his clothes. I don’t know why you’re embarrassed that you’re among them.”

“Because he doesn’t see me that way.”

“I don’t believe that for a second. Though he probably won’t make the

first move because of Felix. You're going to have to do it."

"Yeah, well, that's never going to happen."

Chapter Five



Emmett stands from the couch. “Try not to miss me too much, Hol-Stell-whichever one you are.”

“Holly,” Teddy and Stella say at the same time.

“Geez, dude. You’ve known them as long as Teddy.” Felix shakes his head.

“Sorry.” Emmett shrugs one shoulder. “But you told me not to look at them twice when we met, so . . .”

“He gave us all that talk,” Lucas says, then looks at Felix. “So don’t go blaming us for not being able to tell them apart two years later.”

“Fair enough.” Felix laughs and tosses a chin jut and smile at Teddy. “You’re good staying?”

“I’m not squeezing into the back seat with those two,” he says and points at Emmett and Lucas. Then he gives my brother an easy smile. “I’ll be fine, man. I’m gonna ice my tailbone. Drive safe.”

The door closes behind them and silence falls over the cabin. I’m alone with Theo Radford.

An entire day, just the two of us, in this cabin? Sure, that sounds like a dream come true, but that assumes a lot of things. Including my ability to form sentences.

“I’m going to shower.” Teddy jabs a thumb toward the bathroom.



I'm rolling out cookie dough, proudly wearing one of my grandmother's old aprons, and listening to Christmas music.

I've known Teddy too long to feel uncomfortable being in the same space, but there is definitely a different type of tension when he comes out to the living room in jeans, holding his T-shirt in one hand.

"Hey, can you help me? I need to put some of this balm on my tattoo."

"You got a tattoo?" He's one of the few on the team that didn't have one. Felix has so many I've lost count at this point.

"Yeah." He smiles and those dimples make my stomach flip. "Two days ago."

Teddy invades my space in the kitchen and turns to show me. Over his left shoulder blade is an intricately drawn woman with large wings. She stands in profile with a fierce look on her face, a sword at her hip.

"It's beautiful. Does it have some significance?"

"She's my guardian angel. Figured it wouldn't hurt for her to have my back on the field, ya know? Plus, she looked awesome." He hands me a tub of tattoo healing balm.

"Your guardian angel is seriously hot and pretty badass."

His upper body shakes with his laughter. "No doubt."

I dip my fingers into the balm and then run it over the tattoo. His skin is warm and my heart races as I gently dab it onto the skin. The tips of my fingers linger there, tracing the outline of the black ink.

"All done?" His voice is deeper than it was a minute ago and the sound goes straight to my lower stomach.

"Yeah." I drop my hand and set the tub of balm on the counter.

I move to the sink to wash my hands and then go back to rolling out the dough.

Teddy puts on his shirt and then takes a seat at one of the stools on the other side of the counter. "I was thinking, if you want, I could go with you to pick out a tree."

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to. Plus, I'm not doing anything else today."

"What about that girl Anna? You aren't seeing her again?"

His brows pinch together. "Anna?"

"She was asking about you last night." I stare down at the cookie dough. "I thought, maybe . . ." I can't think of a way to finish that sentence without embarrassing myself, so I don't. "It's okay. I need to finish the cookies

anyway.”

“Okay.” He gets up and goes around behind me in the kitchen to the sink. He turns on the faucet, but I don’t look back to see what he’s doing.

I finish rolling the dough and then begin to cut out shapes with holiday cookie cutters Stella and I picked up on our way to the cabin—snowflakes, presents, Christmas trees, reindeer, gingerbread men and women, candy canes, bells, wreaths . . . we went a little overboard. Okay, fine, it was mostly me.

Teddy appears by my side, drying his hands on a towel. “How can I help?”

He drops the towel and scoops up a scrap piece of dough and tosses it in his mouth.

He has a boyish grin on his face as I smack at his hand. “No taste-testing until the end.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“You really want to help? Don’t feel like you need to hang out with me just because everyone else left. I’m fine on my own.”

“I really want to, Holly. And for the record, nothing happened with Anna. She stayed because Tricia did.”

“Oh.” It’s all I can think to say. My heart is beating so loudly, I’m certain he can hear it. Glancing down, I ask, “Do you want to use the cookie cutters or the spatula?”

“Whatever I can screw up less.”

I hand him the spatula. “Put the ones I cut out onto the pan. Leave an inch or so between them.”

I cut out more designs and Teddy uses the spatula to lift the cookies onto the pan. He curses as a Santa-shaped one sticks. He tries to help it off with his finger but mangles it.

“Shit.”

“It’s okay.” I step closer to help reshape poor Santa. One of his legs sticks out at a weird angle. Somehow, in trying to fix it, I make it worse and now there’s a bulge between Santa’s legs. Perfect. I just made the cookie anatomically correct.

“Oh well, that one can be our taste-test cookie at the end.”

He nods and tries another, getting a similar result.

“Here.” I hand him the bell cookie cutter and step around him.

He is meticulous in his work, and we get into a rhythm, only stopping

when I need to roll out the dough again.

“You really do this every year?” he asks, swiping another scrap of dough to eat.

“Yeah. We make sugar cookies, sometimes other kinds too. I basically live on sugar during the holiday break.”

He laughs. “Sounds nice.”

“What about you? What kind of things does your family do for the holidays?”

“It’s just my dad and brother and me. It’s pretty low-key. Nothing like the Walters’ family traditions. Definitely no cute, shaped cookies.” He holds up a snowflake cookie cutter.

His mom died when he was young. Something I knew from Felix, but have never heard Teddy mention.

“You don’t bake together during the holidays?”

“No. My dad makes two things—spaghetti and steak. The other nights of the week, we eat out or make sandwiches or something easy.”

“And what about you?”

“I don’t cook if I can help it.”

“If I had to eat the same two meals every week, I think I would have learned.”

“I like spaghetti and steak.”

We both laugh.

“Those are ready to bake.” I point to the pans.

I set a timer while he puts them in the oven.

“Ever made homemade frosting?”

He lifts a brow. “Didn’t even know that was a thing.”

“Do you like frosting?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“Just making sure. It doesn’t fall into your spaghetti or steak diet.”

We move around the kitchen. I get out the ingredients, he gets the measuring cups, and together, we make enough buttercream frosting for twice the cookies we made.

I hold out the spoon for him to taste. He leans forward, his lips part and his tongue darts out, just before his mouth covers the end of the spoon.

He groans as he pulls away, eyes falling closed, making butterflies swarm in my lower belly.

“Good?”

He nods, eyes still closed. “So damn good.”

I’m still staring at his mouth when he finally opens his eyes. I feel a ridiculous amount of pride at his praise.

The timer goes off and I quickly move to pull the cookies from the oven.

“Now we just have to wait for them to cool.”

“And then we can decorate them?”

“If you want.”

“I want,” he says, and his gaze drops to my lips.

I step back, suddenly aware I’m covered in flour and frosting. “I’m a mess.”

“Yeah, me too.” He glances down at his T-shirt.

“I’m gonna clean up.”

“Okay. Then, if you still want to, we can go get a tree.”

I half expected him to duck out by this point. It’s been a few hours since Felix and Stella left, which means they’re home and the cleaners are working. My time alone with Teddy is running out.

“Okay.” I blow out a breath. “Yeah, let’s go get a tree.”



At the tree lot, Teddy falls into step beside me and we slowly walk through the rows of firs and spruces. It’s the perfect weather for tree shopping. The sky is overcast and there’s a light snow falling. They have holiday music playing and lights strung up around the perimeter of the lot to add to the Christmas spirit.

“It’s like being in a snow globe.” I hold my arms out to my sides and turn in a circle.

“You really like Christmas, huh?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Everyone likes vacation and getting presents, but no, I don’t think everyone really likes Christmas like you do.”

“There’s just something about it,” I say, glancing over at him. The ends of his hair curl around the edge of the black beanie pulled down low to cover his ears. “It’s magical. The lights, the smells, the cheer. Anything feels possible

this time of year.”

I feel a little silly immediately after the words are out of my mouth, but Teddy grins at me. “I like Christmas too. When I was little, my mom made a big deal out of it. I miss that.”

“What kinds of things did she do?”

“She made gingersnaps. She only iced half of the cookie like they were dipped in icing. I don’t know why, though. Maybe that’s how they’re supposed to be. And she collected snowmen.” He smiles. “I forgot about that. They were all over the house.”

“I love that.”

We wander down the rows. It’s busy today with families and couples all picking out their perfect tree. I stop in front of a large Grand fir. It’s beautiful. I lean in and breathe in the scent.

“That the one?” Teddy asks.

“No.” I sigh and run my hand over a branch. “It’s too big for the cabin and too pricey.” I point to the three-hundred-dollar price tag. “Besides, Felix and Stella like the Douglas fir better, so we always get one of those. But this one smells better.”

He steps closer, his arm brushing mine and he inhales. “Smells pretty good.”

“Told you.” I step away and head toward a section of smaller trees, many are shaped funny or not as full. A half-off sign hangs behind them.

“A Charlie Brown Christmas?” Teddy asks.

“These trees need love too.” I wrap a hand around the top of the best of the ugly, unwanted Douglas fir trees. “What do you think?”

“I think if anyone can make that tree beautiful, it’s you.”

His compliment and the way he’s looking at me turn my legs to rubber. Maybe Stella was right, and Teddy sees me as more than Felix’s little sister. The thought makes me dizzy with hope. I take a step, wobble and fall toward him with the tree.

Teddy wraps one big arm around me, and with the other, he steadies the tree. I’m cradled against him. He’s warm and sturdy, and the mixture of smells—the snow and the trees and *him*—renders me completely helpless.

“Are you okay?” I can feel the question rumble in his chest. I wonder if that means he can feel my heart racing.

Reluctantly, I step out of his hold. “Perfect.”

Chapter Six



By the time we make it back to the cabin with the tree, the snow is coming down and covering the ground in thick blankets. Teddy parks and I hop out and stare up at the sky.

I stick my tongue out and catch a large snowflake. When I glance back at Teddy, his hat is covered in white, and he's grinning at me. He leans down and scoops up a handful of snow with a wicked glint in his eye.

"Oh, no," I say as he packs the snow together. I get my own snowball ready, but he's quicker and a big, wet heap of snow pelts me in the arm.

We fire more snowballs at each other, running around the small yard. Mine all miss. He might be bad on skis, but he's quick on his feet. He comes at me and wraps an arm around my waist to keep me from throwing another at him.

"Truce." His voice rumbles next to my ear.

I swivel in his hold, our faces inches apart. His gray eyes twinkle with mischief and something else I can't quite place.

"Truce," I agree. He lets go of me and then I fire at close range. This one gets him.

He shakes his head and laughs. "Come on. We better get your tree inside."

Together, we carry it into the cabin. Teddy stomps back outside to shake off the snow. "It's really coming down out there."

"Yeah." I pull my phone from my pocket. "I thought Felix and the others would be back by now."

"Zero chance his car is making it on those roads until they clear them."

"Crap, you're probably right."

I FaceTime Stella. She answers, holding up our parent's cat, Whiskers.

“Look how big he’s getting.”

“You’re still in Scottsdale?”

“Yeah. The guys decided to play nine holes of golf while the carpet cleaners were here. They should be back any minute. How are things with—”

“You need to hurry. It’s snowing. Like a lot. The roads are totally covered, and it does not look like it’s stopping any time soon.”

Her brows pull together in the middle, and she lowers Whiskers. “Hold on. Felix just got here.”

I listen as she relays the info to my brother. A minute later, Teddy’s phone rings. Stella and I are quiet while they talk.

Teddy paces in front of the window, looking out at the snow still falling. He brings one arm up and rubs the back of his neck as he says, “Not a chance your car can get through right now. Hopefully they get a plow out here soon.”

“What’d you do today?” Stella asks.

“Umm . . .” I’m distracted. It’s not easy, trying to eavesdrop on Teddy, and carry on a conversation with Stella. “We baked cookies and then got a tree.” I move the phone, so she can see the tree sitting in the living room.

My twin smiles. “Sounds fun.”

Felix says something to her, and she looks away from the phone.

“Looks like we’re staying put until the snow stops.”

“Really?”

“Felix doesn’t think his car will make it.”

“Who buys a front-wheel drive car?” I ask loud enough that hopefully he can hear me.

“Everyone in Arizona,” Stella says. “On the plus side, skiing will be awesome tomorrow.”

“If you manage to get here,” I mumble.

“Oh, cheer up, Hol. Sometimes you have to make the most with the cards you’re dealt.”

“Did you read that in a fortune cookie?”

“Made it up. Just now.” Her eyes widen. “Go have *fun*. I’ll check in later.”

“Bye, Stell.”

She kisses the phone and then ends the call.

The awkwardness that I feared all day sets in as the snow piles up. I lose all hope that my siblings are going to make it back when I check the weather app on my phone, and it says the snow is supposed to continue all night long.

My stomach is uneasy, but it rumbles for food.

“Hungry?” I ask Teddy.

He nods. “Always.”

“I’ll make dinner.”

“I can help.”

“No, no,” I say too quickly. I need a minute without him so close. My nerves are on edge. I plaster on a smile. “I know how you feel about cooking. I’ve got this.”

I open the fridge. Stella and I bought what we thought was enough groceries for the entire weekend, but after sharing with the guys, it’s dwindling fast.

“Turkey sandwiches?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

I pull out everything I need and make us dinner while Teddy puts on a movie—*Jingle All the Way* again, and his laughter at the cheesy holiday movie does funny things to my insides.

“Thanks,” he says when I hand him a plate with the sandwich and some chips.

“Welcome.” I eat standing up in the kitchen.

Between bites, I find the string of LED lights from my dorm room I brought to hang on the tree, and it looks even better than I imagined. I only wish I had two or three more strands. After that, I pull out everything to decorate the cookies.

Teddy sits on a stool in front of me, his body angled so he can watch the TV.

I watch him. He finishes his first sandwich in four large bites, then moves on to the chips. I’ve barely touched my food when he’s finished. I take my sandwich and push my plate of chips toward him.

“Thanks.”

“We’re almost out of food, but we have lots of cookies.” I hold one up. He snatches it from me and pops it in his mouth.

“Good,” he mumbles as he chews.

I give him a playful glare and smack his hand as he goes in for another cookie. I do a super-fast decorating job on a small bell-shaped cookie and hand it to him. “Sugar cookies without frosting are sad. It’s like unfrosted Pop-Tarts. What’s the point?”

He laughs, but after he takes the first bite, he nods. “Damn, that’s good.”

He shoves the rest of it in his mouth and then gets up and pulls a beer out of the fridge.

“That seems like a truly terrible combination,” I say, pointing between the two.

“You’re right.” He sets the beer back and then grabs the RumChata off the top of the fridge. “Cookies and cream.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you have a sweet tooth.”

He fills a coffee mug with the sweet liqueur and downs it. His face twists up. “That’s too sweet, even for me.”

He reclaims his beer from the fridge.

Together, we decorate the cookies. Well, I decorate, and Teddy eats them. I do my best on the Santa with the small third leg, but it ends up looking like he’s packing some serious heat in his trousers.

Teddy politely doesn’t mention it, but I notice he doesn’t eat that one, either.

By the time we’re finished, we’ve only killed thirty minutes. It’s still snowing out. A freaking blizzard. Just what I wanted, but not exactly how I wanted it.

“I don’t think they’re coming back tonight.” A weight settles in my stomach.

“Nope.” He gives me an apologetic smile. “Do you want to watch another movie or something?”

I nod. “Yeah. Might as well.”

Teddy takes two more cookies and his beer and heads to the living room. I no sooner than step out of the kitchen when the lights flicker. We both freeze. They go out, come back on, and then go out again and stay that way.

Chapter Seven



An eerie quiet stretches between us as we wait for the power to return. The Christmas tree with its small strand of battery-powered lights is the only thing still on.

Teddy goes to the window and looks out. “Neighbor’s house is dark, too. Do you have a flashlight or some candles?”

It’s not quite sunset outside and Teddy’s big frame is lit up as he stands with his back to the window, facing me. That’s when it sets in. I mean really sets in. I’m snowed in with Teddy. Freaking snowed in. Just the two of us. With no power.

“Holly?” The way he says my name, rough but somehow soft, snatches my attention.

When I meet his gaze, his gray eyes (though I can’t actually make out the color in the dim light) seek me out with concern and care. “We’ll be okay.”

How do I tell him that my concern isn’t that we’ll freeze to death but that I might say or do something idiotic and embarrass myself in front of him? This crush feels like it’s going to die a cold, humiliating death.

Once you make a big enough ass out of yourself in front of someone you like, you realize that there is absolutely no coming back from it. That’s it. The heart moves on. No, not the heart. The brain. It must be a survival technique. When all hope is finally lost, your brain stops sending dopamine or endorphins or whatever it is (science is clearly not my strong suit) that makes your body sing when the other person is around.

I don’t want to be over Teddy. This crush feels good, even if I am way, way out of my depth here.

This is one of those instances when I wish I were more like Stella. She would have no problem being snowed in with her crush. But I’m me, and

Teddy is still staring at me like I'm about to break down in front of him.

"Lights," I say finally. "I think there might be a flashlight in the master closet, and I saw some candles under the sink."

He moves into action, but I'm slower. He gets close, and I realize I'm in his path and start to move, but he's already going around me and now I'm in front of him again.

"Sorry," I squeak as he braces himself on my shoulders to keep from plowing me over. His chest brushes against mine and I get a whiff of his soap mixed with fir tree.

We both start to move again, but this time, we go in opposite directions.

I grab the candles under the sink and then search the other rooms, finding two more. When I get back to the main room, Teddy has a small flashlight and matches.

He turns the flashlight on and shines it around the dark room, then turns it back off and sets it on the counter. "These were in there too." He holds up the matches.

"Should we save them?"

He shakes his head. "Maybe one, but I doubt the power will be out that long."

We light the candles, leaving one on the kitchen counter, and I bring the others into the living room.

"Well." He blows out a breath and sits on the couch with his beer. "Not a lot we can do now but wait."

"We could put on a movie," I suggest and then immediately chastise myself. "But we don't have any power."

He laughs softly. "Would have been a great idea."

"I have my laptop. We could watch something on that."

"We should probably save it."

I nod, glancing outside. The sky is getting darker, and the snow is still falling. "For emergencies? In case we need to . . . email someone or something."

One side of his mouth lifts and I get a half-dimpled smile. "I meant in case we got bored later."

"Oh, right." I move into the kitchen and pour myself a glass of the RumChata.

"Who would we email, out of curiosity?" Teddy asks when I get back. I sit next to him on the couch. His presence feels even bigger in the near dark.

“I don’t know,” I say with an embarrassed giggle. “Maybe the power company?”

“Or a snowplow?” he teases.

“So maybe email isn’t the best way to contact someone in an emergency, but maybe as a last resort? At least I could email my parents to say goodbye.” The room is starting to cool off without the heat on. There’s a fireplace but only two logs of firewood because it has always been more about ambience than survival.

Teddy angles his body toward me and places one arm on the back of the couch. “That’s sweet.”

“Sweet? I just need them to know this is all Felix’s fault.”

He laughs. I really love Teddy’s laugh. It’s deep and uninhibited, louder than he is any other time. I take a sip of the drink. It’s sweet, but the liqueur heats my throat as I swallow.

“Who would you email?” I ask. “Your dad?”

“First off, we’re fine. No one is dying tonight.” He winks. “But if I were in a near-death situation, I’d probably try to get ahold of my little brother.”

I smile because it’s such a fitting answer for Teddy. “How old is he?”

“Seventeen.”

“Does he play football?”

“Yeah, but he’s a QB like your brother.”

“Uh-oh, Felix better watch his back.”

Teddy laughs again, this time quieter. “He’s pretty good. I don’t know if he’s going to play college or not. He’s already had a lot of offers, including one from Valley U, but he can’t stop partying and hooking up long enough to pass his classes.”

“Anyone else you would email? A girlfriend, perhaps?” I feel braver the more I sip my drink, which is half-gone I now realize.

“Girlfriend?” One brow quirks up.

I pull my feet up underneath me and lean closer. “I don’t know. You could have one.”

“You know I don’t.”

A blush warms my face. I do know that, but I’m happy to hear him say it anyway. “Why not? You’re one of the good ones. Hot and nice. I see the way girls look at you.”

“How do they look at me?” He seems to genuinely not know that every girl on campus wants him.

“Like they want to tear your clothes off and climb you.” He’s so big with all those muscles to explore. My insides are on fire as my words hang between us.

Teddy clears his throat. “I don’t know what that looks like, but I’m pretty sure the girls I like aren’t looking at me like that.”

I want to ask what kind of girls he likes because I don’t know what his type is, but I’m not quite that brave yet. So instead, I say, “It’s something Stella said the other day, but she isn’t wrong. You’re a great guy, Teddy.”

He smiles at me, both of those dimples popping out. “You’re pretty great too.”

Chapter Eight



An hour passes without power. A neighbor came by to check in on us and tells us the entire street is out. He called the power company (something I should have thought to do) and apparently, the storm knocked down a power line. In other words, we're in for a long night.

But he brought some wood when he saw our pitiful stack, and we now have a roaring fire to keep the main room warm.

Teddy and I settle in front of it on the couch with the plate of cookies and the bottle of RumChata. With the fire going and the lights on the tree, it feels intimate and fun. The alcohol is definitely helping. My insides are now warm and tingly and the initial awkwardness of being snowed in with my crush is gone.

"Do you want to watch a movie now?" Teddy asks.

"Reached peak boredom and no longer care about saving battery to send our final farewells?" I ask with sass I didn't realize I was capable of.

"I saw some paper in the kitchen, you can write on that if it comes to it."

"Okay, but if I don't get to say goodbye to my parents and blame this all on Felix, then I'm going to haunt you in the next life," I say as I get up to grab my laptop from the other room.

"That doesn't sound so bad," he calls.

I open the computer as I walk back. The battery is at 89%, plenty of juice to watch a movie or two. But the thing is, I don't want to watch a movie. Not now. We're talking and I finally don't feel like such a bumbling mess.

"I must not have plugged this in," I say, skirting the truth. "It isn't fully charged."

"Bummer."

I snap the lid closed and set it on the counter. "Want to play a game?"



Two hours and many games of Gin Rummy later, I am more than a little tipsy.

“Your turn to shuffle. I’ll be right back,” I say as I stand from the couch and my legs wobble.

Teddy eyes me carefully as I steady myself. “You should eat something.”

“I’m fine.” I use my phone as a flashlight in the bathroom. After I’m finished, I wash my hands and then text Stella to let her know the power is out, but we’re okay.

Her response is immediate, and I’d put good money on it being because she was texting Beau. *You’re snowed in with Teddy AND the lights are out?!* She then proceeds to add a bunch of emojis—snow, house, hearts, an eggplant.

I start to tell her it isn’t like that, but maybe it can be? I’m aware it’s likely the alcohol talking, but I let myself believe it anyway. At least we’re having fun and I’m actually talking to him.

Teddy is looking at his phone when I return. He slides it into his pocket and sits forward. I grab a cookie from the plate. The Santa one with a bulge, as chance would have it.

“You gave Santa a third leg,” I say, holding it up.

Teddy’s cheeks go pink. “I shouldn’t be allowed in the kitchen.”

I take a bite of Santa’s head and Teddy watches intently, his pupils widening. He clears his throat and picks up the cards. “Another game?”

While we play, I munch on cookies and pay more attention to Teddy than the cards in my hand. He smiles at me, playful and flirty, and more than once, his stare drops to my mouth.

“Do you want another drink?” I ask as I fill my glass again. All those cookies made me thirsty.

He hesitates. “That depends. How are you feeling?”

“What?”

“I want to be able to take care of you if you get sick.” He rubs the back of his neck like he’s embarrassed to have said it out loud. *Ugh*. That’s totally something a big brother would think and not a guy hoping to see you naked.

“I’m fine. I think the sugar helped.” I stand up and proceed to walk in a

straight line, arms out. The movement lifts my sweater above my belly button, and Teddy's gaze drops to my bare skin. "See? I'm fine."

His throat works with a swallow. His voice is like gravel when he says, "Yeah, I'll have another drink."

The way he watches me makes me feel powerful, or maybe that's the alcohol talking. I start for the kitchen, but he says, "I can get it."

He grabs two beers, opens one and takes a long drink. Then his eyes are on me again. My heart beats so loudly, I'm sure he can hear it. It feels like an invisible line is tugging us together, but he doesn't budge.

Stella's words echo in my head. *You have to make a move because he never will.*

I don't know how Teddy feels about me. These heated looks are in direct contradiction to his actions, but maybe Stella is right. Is it possible he has noticed me the way I notice him? That he sees me as more than Felix's little sister?

I go to him before I come up with an answer. His brows tug together in confusion at my nearness, but it doesn't stop me. My courage is a living, breathing thing propelling me forward. Lifting up on my toes, I kiss him. His lips are soft and warm. He tastes like sugar and beer, and I know I said it was a terrible combination, but I was so wrong.

My hands rest on his chest and I lean into him, so our entire upper bodies are mashed together. My body vibrates. It is everything I hoped it would be.

I'm so into it that it takes me a moment to realize that he is *not* into it. His immovable lips underneath mine sober me up instantly. I freeze, hoping he'll take over or come to his senses. He doesn't.

I step back, hand flying to cover my mouth, like I can erase that kiss by wiping away the evidence from my lips.

Oh god. What have I done? *What have I freaking done?!*

Chapter Nine



Teddy's expression is impossible to read. Shocked? Horrified? Stunned?

I move backward, fingers still covering my tingling lips.

"I'm sorry. The dim lighting, the alcohol, plus I think I have a sugar high . . ." I release a shaky breath. "I'm going to bed. See you in the morning, Teddy."

The back of my eyes sting as I move through the dark house to the room Stella and I have been sleeping in. When I throw open the door and step inside, it's freezing. *Holy crap.*

My phone is still out in the living room, so I rummage around in the dark to find a sweatshirt. Even after I pulled on the extra layer, I'm still so cold.

Lying on the bed, I stare up at the ceiling. This cabin is so small, I can hear Teddy moving around in the other room.

Why did I have to kiss him? I fling my arm over my eyes, which incidentally provides a little extra warmth to my cold face. If I get any sleep tonight, it will be a small miracle.

I'm never going to be able to look him in the eye again. *Groan.*

I wish I could text Stella. She always knows what to say or do when it comes to guys.

Teddy must have stopped moving around because when he starts again, I'm acutely aware of it. His steps get closer and then there's a knock at my door. I sit up, heart racing. My voice is caught in my throat.

"Holly?" Teddy's deep voice is gentle. He doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who would want to have a heart-to-heart after I jumped him and made an ass out of myself. Can't he let a girl lick her wounds in private?

"Yeah?" My voice shakes, but I'm not sure if it's the cold or my nerves.

The door opens a crack and Teddy finds me with the flashlight, then

moves it, so it's not blinding me. This time, when he speaks, his voice has a hard edge. "It's freezing in here."

I pull at the sleeves of my sweatshirt. "My dad is always saying the place needs new windows."

I can't believe I just kissed him and we're talking about windows.

He pushes the door wide, steps to the bed and takes the comforter. "Bring your pillow."

Scrambling from bed, I follow in a haze of embarrassment and confusion. He sets the flashlight on the counter, tosses the comforter in the master bedroom then takes my pillow and tosses it too.

"O-kay." I start for the room, but Teddy grabs hold of my arm.

"Wait." He lets go and then brings his palms together, rubbing them lightly.

"Whatever you're going to say, can you not?"

His gray eyes narrow as he studies me.

"I shouldn't have done that. Kiss you, I mean. I didn't mean it." The lie burns my tongue. "It was silly. I thought it would be funny, like a joke. And then it wasn't."

Not funny at all.

"Are you drunk?"

"What? No," I say quickly, and then add, "maybe a little."

"Did you kiss me because you're drunk?"

The more he presses me, the more frustrated I become. "No, I've thought about it for a long time, all right? Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to bed and sleeping until I forget this night happened."

He steps into my path. "Here's the thing, Holly."

I take a tentative step back. Something in his voice, his demeanor, makes the hair on the back of my neck prickle.

"We can pretend that didn't happen. That it was a joke or a spontaneous, meaningless mistake. I can do that. I'll never say a word about it to anyone."

My heart tears down the middle at how badly I've screwed this up. Maybe he can forget that easily, but I cannot.

He erases the space between us. "Or, we can try again. Your call."

My heart picks up speed and my mind spins. "Try again?"

He lets out a rough chuckle and his dimples appear in a cocky smile. "You caught me off guard. I wasn't expecting it and I was a little worried you were doing something you didn't mean because of the alcohol. Under

different circumstances, I would have kissed you a whole lot better than I did.”

“You didn’t kiss me at all.”

His smile slips into a smirk. “Then let me have another shot.”

I dip my chin, giving him permission, and that’s all the encouragement Teddy needs. Both of his rough palms frame my face and his mouth slants over mine. His touch is gentle, but his kiss is not.

I melt into him, letting him take control, and just savor it. When his tongue seeks entrance, I open wider for him. He’s tall, leaning down to reach my mouth, but when I move my hands around his neck, he stands a little straighter and pulls me up to him.

The movement presses our bodies flush and Teddy groans. I can’t believe I’m responsible for that noise, but it makes me bolder.

I curl my fingers in the thick hair at the nape of his neck and kiss him like I’ve always wanted to. If tonight, this moment, is it, I don’t want to have any regrets.

Still kissing, we move to the couch. Teddy sits down and brings me onto his lap. He’s hard underneath me, so very hard.

I get another delicious groan out of him as I roll my hips. I’ve never been particularly bold when it comes to sex. For me, getting intimate with someone requires a level of trust and vulnerability I haven’t felt with a lot of guys. And even with those I have slept with, I’ve let them make the first move, taking my cues from there, but Teddy is so responsive to my every touch that it makes me want to explore and catalog his every reaction.

When I sigh into his mouth, his kisses get harder. When I scrape my nails lightly down his shoulders, he nips at my lower lip. And when I can’t take it anymore and let my head fall back in pure bliss, he presses soft open-mouth kisses along the column of my neck.

The fire crackles behind me and when I lift my head, Teddy’s gaze burns into mine.

“You can have the bed. I’ll sleep out here,” he murmurs, but then brushes another soft kiss on my lips.

“Who’s sleeping?” My fingers dance along the hem of his shirt and slip under to his warm skin.

His rough chuckle does nothing to deter me, but Teddy takes my hands in his. “We don’t need to rush this. I don’t want you to do anything you’ll regret tomorrow.”

I could never regret him, even if it blew up in my face. Hide forever? Yes. But never regret.

I bring my mouth to his and rest my lips lightly against his. “I feel like if I stop kissing you, you’re going to disappear or I’m going to wake up tomorrow and it’ll all have been a dream.”

He pulls my bottom lip between his teeth and tugs gently. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I stand, taking his hand and giving it a tug. “Except to bed with me.”

He resists, giving me a conflicted look. “To sleep. And maybe make out a tiny bit more.” I bring my free hand up and show him with my thumb and pointer finger. “You can’t possibly want to sleep on this couch another night.”

“It’s not so bad.”

“Theodore.”

His laugh is silent, but it twinkles in his eyes. “I like it when you say my name.”

I take a step back. “Theodore.”

“You always call me Teddy.” His mouth twitches.

Another step. I take off one of my sweatshirts and toss it at him. “Teddy, will you please share your body heat with me tonight?”

He gets to his feet, and I walk backward, so I can keep staring and smiling at him. I can’t freaking stop smiling.

“Anything you want, *Holly*.” He makes a point to say my name in a deep, rough voice that is intentionally meant to taunt me the same way I’m doing to him.

He doesn’t know yet that everything he does drives me crazy.

Chapter Ten



I climb into bed and Teddy kicks off his shoes and then gets in beside me.

Rolling to my side, I fist his shirt and move closer. He might have been hesitant about following me in here, but there is absolutely nothing tentative about the way he kisses me.

It's a high so far beyond alcohol or the one-time Stella convinced me to try an edible. Kissing Teddy is like being on the spinning teacups while drunk and laughing hysterically.

We kiss until my lips hurt. My cheeks hurt too, from smiling. I'm giddy.

Lying on our sides, we stare at each other. Teddy's hand rests on my hip, and he traces little circles with his thumb. I'm playing with the strings on his hoodie, wrapping them around my fingers and occasionally using them as leverage to pull him closer for more kisses.

"You have a devious glint in your eye. What are you thinking about?" he asks.

"You. Me. How we spent the past hour sucking face. I still can't believe it's really happening." I lean forward and kiss him again. "I've wanted to do that for so long."

"Me too."

"You have not."

"I swear it. Ever since last year. You came downstairs on Christmas Eve wearing your little reindeer onesie. I was feeling sorry for myself, missing my family, thinking about my mom, and you just sat and talked with me. I don't even remember what about."

"Reindeer names."

"What?"

"You called me Rudolph and I said I didn't have a red nose, so we went

through Santa's other reindeer's names, but you said none of those fit, so we tried to come up with others." I'm certain my face is red with embarrassment. I'd forgotten about that conversation. "You make me nervous and I say the dumbest things."

"It wasn't dumb. You were cute. I love listening to you talk."

I shake my head in disbelief.

"I thought you were cute before then, but Felix is your brother, so I did my best not to think of you as anything but a friend. But that night, you were there for me in a way no one had been in a long time."

"What do you mean? I see girls hitting on you all the time."

"Yeah, sure, but they don't know me. Or even want to. Their intentions are shallow and I'm not into that." One shoulder lifts in a small shrug. "After my mom died, I don't know, I have a lower tolerance for superficial relationships, I guess."

"I'm sorry you lost her so young."

He nods. "Me too. I hate it more for my brother. He hardly remembers her."

"Will you tell me about her?"

"What do you want to know?"

I move closer. "Everything."

His lips slant over mine in a quick kiss and then he does.



Teddy and I stay up talking most of the night. About his mom, his dad and brother, about football. He asks me stuff too, about being a twin, about my first semester at Valley. I don't think I've stayed up all night talking to anyone else this way, except Stella.

We leave the bedroom door open so that some of the warmth from the fire seeps in. Even so, we really do need to snuggle for warmth.

When I wake up, Teddy is on his back, and I'm curled up on my side with my head on his shoulder. I glance up and see his eyes open.

"Morning." His voice is deep and rough with sleep.

"Hi."

“Power came back on.”

I sit up and look out the window. The sun is shining, and the house is warm. “Have you heard from Felix?”

“They’re on their way back.”

Something like disappointment washes over me. Teddy must read my expression because he says, “Come here.”

I drop onto his chest, and he kisses me, slow and tender at first, but we both know our time alone together is limited and each kiss grows more frantic. He’s hard beneath me and my body trembles with every brush of him against my core.

He has a tight grip on my hips and starts to move me over his length, as he thrusts up to provide more friction.

I briefly wish there were fewer clothes between us, but honestly, the way my body soars, it’d probably be over far sooner than I want if we were naked.

When his hands finally move, it’s under my sweatshirt to cup my breasts. He groans. “So perfect.”

He lifts up to press kisses to the top of my cleavage over my bra, then falls back and presses harder into me.

“Do you want to take these off?” I hook a finger in the waistband of his sweatpants.

“No time for that.”

I stop, thinking he means there’s no time to keep going, but he reclaims control of my body, placing those big hands on either hip, doing the work for me. I’m feverish with need as my orgasm hangs just beyond my grasp.

“Come for me, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart. A word I never imagined Teddy using for me. It does the trick, sending me over the edge in a swirl of emotional and physical climax.

As the last of my orgasm falls away, Teddy’s hands still on my hips.

“Wha—” Before I can finish the sentence, I hear a car door shut outside.

I scramble off Teddy. He’s slower to get up but swings his legs over the side of the bed and runs a hand over his bedhead.

My gaze goes to the massive erection tenting his sweatpants. “How are you going to hide that?”

“Shower.” He winks and then disappears. The water comes on a second later. I adjust my clothes and finger-comb my hair. I’m rushing into the living room as they enter the house.

Stella gives me a knowing smirk, Emmett nods and heads straight for the

fridge, Lucas plops down on the couch, but Felix comes up short and his gaze narrows. “Hey. What’s up? You look weird.”

Your best friend just gave me the best orgasm of my life, fully clothed at that. Obviously, I don’t say that. Instead, I stick my tongue out at him. “You look weird.”

“Long drive.” He runs a hand through his hair. “Roads are still pretty icy close to the cabin. What time did the power come back on last night?”

“Uhhh . . .”

“And where’s Teddy?” He looks around.

“Shower.” Probably taking care of himself. My face is so hot. I duck my head and pick up the mess from last night in the living room while Felix heads toward his room.

“Wait,” I call at the last second, remembering my stuff is in there. “I left a few things.”

I rush past him and get my comforter and pillow. Both smell faintly of Teddy and I breathe him in.

“Gross.” Felix scrunches up his nose. “You slept in my bed.”

I roll my eyes. “The other room was freezing without the heat on.”

“Why is Teddy’s shirt in here?” He picks it up from the end of the bed, where one of us tossed it mid-makeout.

“I don’t know.” The words come out squeaky and defensive. “He must have taken it off before he got in the shower.”

Felix stares at me a beat before he says, “Okay. I’m going to change and then let’s go check out the slopes.” He waggles his brows. “Fresh powder.”

Chapter Eleven



Everyone has the same idea we did about enjoying the fresh snow. I promised Stella I would ski with her, so I dutifully strap on my gear, and we head for the bunny hill.

She peppers me with questions about last night, but it's all I can do to stay upright, and talking about kissing Teddy is a major distraction.

"Stell, can we talk about this later?"

She sighs, loudly. "Fine. You're doing that all wrong. You have to make the wedge, like a pizza, remember?"

"I'm trying."

"Here." She moves in front of me to help guide me in position.

Thirty minutes and several trips down the hill later, I'm finally ready to get on the lift.

"I need to pee first," Stella says.

"Now?" I laugh.

"I had like a gallon of coffee on the trip back." We move over to the food hut next to the skating rink. There are bathrooms inside, so you don't have to trek all the way back inside the resort in times like these. She takes off her skis and then hands me her poles. "Be right back."

While I wait, I watch families skating together. Dads holding on to their little ones and pulling them along; kids with skating aids marching around with huge grins on their faces.

There is holiday music playing over the outdoor speakers and the air has a festive feel with all the happy laughter and smiles of pure joy. All of it makes me miss my parents. I hope they're having fun and I can't wait to see them and cram all the holiday traditions we can into the rest of the school break.

"Yo, Holly!"

I turn at my name to find Felix, Lucas, and Emmett skiing over to me. Teddy is behind them. His cheeks are red, and one side of his pants is covered in snow.

“Been out yet?” my brother asks.

“No. We were just about to go.” I tip my head to the hut. “Stella had to use the bathroom. What are you guys doing back so soon?”

“Snack break,” Felix says.

“And Teddy needs to warm up.” Emmett snickers.

I fight a smile. “I want to laugh, but I have a feeling I’m going to be in the same position as soon as I get up there.”

The rest of the guys take off their gear and head inside, but Teddy lingers. He has a blue hat that matches his coat pulled low over his ears, but the ends of his hair curl around the back.

“I’m pretty sure I broke my tailbone.” He winces as he rubs the side of his butt.

“That’s not where your tailbone is.”

He glances over to where Felix and Emmett disappeared before kissing me. We didn’t have time this morning to talk about what last night meant or if we’re going to keep doing it.

“Stella knows about us,” I tell him when he pulls back. “Not everything, but she’s always known how I felt.”

He nods. “I figured.”

“What about Felix?”

“I’ll tell him,” he says, “I haven’t had time today, but I will tell him. I owe him that.”

“We should do it together. I don’t want you to feel like you have to ask permission. This is between us.”

Except I don’t really know what *this* is, but he kisses me again, so I guess it involves kissing, and I’m good with that.



We ski all day, then go back to the cabin long enough to shower and change. Lucas had to leave to get home for the holidays, but the rest of us head back

to the resort for a night out. We get a big corner booth in the restaurant. Stella is on one side of me, Teddy the other.

We order a bunch of appetizers to share, and the mood is fun and light. Felix and Emmett are teasing Teddy about falling down the mountain today. My brother has this huge grin on his face as he tells us how his feet were over his head and Teddy looked like Sonic the Hedgehog in a cloud of blue rolling down the hill, snow flying everywhere.

Teddy lifts his glass to his lips with one hand, but the other finds my bare thigh under the table. I thought this skirt was a good idea. It's red and green flannel, short. Very holiday but still sexy. And I paired it with my favorite over-the-knee boots. I did not imagine this happening, though.

I make a squeak of surprise, which I cover with a cough. Stella drops her stare to my lap and then giggles into her napkin. Thankfully, no one else looks twice.

Teddy chuckles quietly and lets his fingers graze higher. I squeeze my legs together, but now his hand is trapped between my thighs. Two inches higher and he could feel how wet he's making me.

Which sounds nice and I could be into him having his hand up my skirt in public under different circumstances, but not with my brother across the table.

I set my napkin on the table and scoot closer to Stella. "Come with me to the bar."

"Why?" she asks, lips twisting in amusement. "Something wrong?"

"You got a fake ID I don't know about?" Felix asks.

"No. I want to see if they'll make me one of those holiday drinks, the Christmas mimosa, but you know, virgin."

Teddy was taking a drink and now shoots the liquid out of his mouth as he starts coughing.

"Sorry," he says, voice tight. "Wrong tube."

My face burns. I shoot him a *get your head out of the gutter before my brother figures us out* glare and then I push against Stella, forcing her to move.

"Okay, okay. Let a girl get her shoes on." She stumbles as she slides into the stilettos she'd taken off while we were seated.

"Our server is coming. You can order it from him," Felix calls behind us. I don't look back, but I'm sure Teddy is laughing.

"I don't know how you wear these." Stella winces as she walks.

“Practice.”

“Hmm.” She hums. “I need more of it because those boots are amazing.” She gives me a once-over and then her lips quirk up at the corners. “Teddy seems to have noticed as well. You guys are cute.”

I blow out a breath as we squeeze into an open spot at the bar. “Yeah, well, I have two years of pent-up sexual frustration. I’m going to combust.”

“Should have followed him into that shower this morning.”

I finally told Stella everything while we were getting ready for dinner. She was appropriately excited for me, but telling someone just made it all feel so much more real, and now I am dying to tell Felix, so we can stop sneaking around.

Is he going to freak out? I don’t think so, but I’m worried his reaction will change how Teddy sees me.

“He’s looking over here,” Stella says, leaning one elbow on the bar top.

I peek over my shoulder to meet Teddy’s playful stare. Emmett says something, pulling his attention away, but his gaze returns a second later.

“I can’t handle any more teasing.” I fidget, trying to calm the buzz skating over my skin and pulsing in my core.

“You know what you need?”

“Yes. A six-foot-two football player with fingers like magic and a kiss that makes my knees weak.”

“Daaaang.” Stella laughs lightly. “You have it bad.”

“So bad. I didn’t think it was possible to like him more. What am I going to do?”

“I have an idea.”

“It was a rhetorical question. We’re going to tell Felix and then we won’t have to steal kisses and touches when no one is looking.”

“I think you should lean in. Have a sexy, little holiday vacation fling. You can tell Felix after we leave. And I have the perfect way for you to dish out a little teasing of your own.” She lifts a brochure from the bar and holds it up. “The resort is having their annual party. A very fancy party, where we can get all dolled up and dance under the twinkle lights. Teddy will eat his heart out seeing you all done up and not being able to touch you.”

Stella holds her arms out and looks up at the ceiling. “How fun would that be? I’ve always wanted to go, but we’ve never been here during the party.”

My phone buzzes in my purse. I pull it out and get a little zap of excitement when I see Teddy’s name.

“Theodore?” Stella asks.

“Yeah.”

I show her the screen, *You can't hide from me forever, sweetheart.*

Laughing, Stella says, “He is a tease. I so love this for you. Playful and sexy.”

A wistful look crosses her face.

“You should invite Beau.”

“He’s busy with his family.”

“Bummer.”

“Yeah.” She nods her agreement.

I take the brochure. Images of Teddy and I dancing and kissing float through my mind. “What would we even wear to this?”

Her face lights up. “Does that mean we’re going?”

I meet Teddy’s stare across the room. His eyes darken and his mouth twists into a smirk.

“Absolutely.”

Get ready to eat your heart out, Teddy.

Chapter Twelve



“You’re not coming?” Teddy asks the next morning when everyone else is getting ready to head to the resort. Today they’re snowboarding and Stella is next-level excited.

I shake my head. “Nope. I am going to go shopping for a few last-minute gifts and then get more groceries. Someone ate all the food. Even the cookies.”

“Can you pick up some more mixers?” Felix asks, shrugging on his coat. “Garrison and James are coming up tonight.”

“Wait, you guys are partying here tonight? Stella and I were going to finally do our holiday movie marathon and make gingerbread houses.”

“Tonight? Why can’t you do that when we get back home?”

“You know Mom will be in a tailspin, trying to get everything ready. The only thing the three of us are going to be doing Christmas Eve is helping her.”

He shrugs. “I can try to get everyone outside or in the living room, so you can have the kitchen.”

Except everyone will be trekking in and out for booze. I sigh. “I guess we’ll do it tomorrow before the dance. Are you guys going to that?”

“You know it.” He slaps Teddy in the arm with the back of his hand. “I even convinced this one.”

My brows rise and my gaze slides to Teddy. “Did you?”

“Everyone else is going. I figured I might as well.” His lips twitch with amusement. I convinced him, thank you very much.

“All right.” Felix claps his gloved hands. “Let’s roll out.”

“Bye!” Stella calls with a smile, quickly following after Felix.

Emmett leaves too, but Teddy lingers.

“Sorry about tonight.”

“It’s okay. I knew when we pulled up and Felix was half-naked and wearing his Santa hat that this vacation was not going to go like I planned. I just miss it, you know? All the silly things we do every year.”

A hint of understanding crosses his face.

“It’s stupid. Here I am feeling sorry for myself because things aren’t going perfectly, and you aren’t even going to see your family for Christmas.”

“You can still be disappointed. It’s important to you. Anything I can do?” He inches forward until his pinky finger curls around mine.

“I’m good,” I say. And I am. Better than good, in fact.



After everyone is gone, I go to a few stores. I still need to get Stella a Christmas gift, but I don’t find anything for her. She’s so good at picking things out for me, but I struggle with her. She always just steals my stuff anyway, which is how I talk myself into buying the new pair of shoes I find. They’ll look great with the dress I plan to wear to the dance tomorrow night. I also pick up mixers for Felix, some more groceries to hold us over until we leave, and enough cookie dough and icing to decorate a thousand more cookies.

I put on *Christmas Vacation*, which makes me miss my dad even more (he’s a total Clark Griswold with the crazy amount of lights he puts on our house every year), and I bake cookies.

I am pulling the last batch out of the oven when the front door of the cabin opens and Stella steps inside. Her cheeks and nose are rosy, and her hair is pulled back in a windblown ponytail. She smiles as she says, “It smells so good in here.”

Felix is the next through the door. “Holly!”

Teddy and Emmett are behind him. They all peel out of their coats and outerwear. Felix snatches a cookie from the cooling rack.

Smacking at his hand, I say, “They aren’t decorated yet.”

“So?”

Teddy steps forward and grabs one, takes a bite, and then looks at me as

he says, “It’s like eating an unfrosted Pop-Tart.”

“Which is still delicious,” Felix says seriously.

I grab a plate and set it on the counter. “These are the broken ones. Eat these.”

“We got something for you too.” My brother lifts a sack onto the counter.

“For me?”

I dig in while Felix explains, “I feel bad that you and Stella planned this whole trip and I sort of ruined it.”

“You feel bad?” I question. “Who are you and what have you done with my brother?”

One side of his mouth pulls up. “Ha, ha.”

I pull out a wad of red material and unfold it in front of me. It’s a holiday sweater. A really, *really* ugly one. It has a cat knitting a stocking with the ski resort logo.

“I don’t know what to say.” I look hesitantly from Felix to Stella.

They both bust up laughing.

“We all got them.” Stella lifts the bag in her hand and takes out another sweater, somehow even more hideous than mine.

One by one, they each show me their sweaters, all equally hideous.

“These are truly awful,” I say. “Why would you buy these?”

“An ugly holiday sweater party!” Stella beams.

“Wait, really? Tonight?” Excitement bubbles up inside me.

“It was Teddy’s idea.” Felix lays his sweatshirt over one shoulder.

“This was your idea?” I quickly glance at Teddy, who gives me a sheepish smile, and the tips of his ears turn a slight pink.

“We got booze and mixers to make those Christmas mimosas you like and . . .” Felix grins wide while he digs inside another bag and pulls out a box of Jolly Rancher candy canes—my favorite. “Merry Christmas, Holl.”

I take the box and then hug him with my free arm. “Thank you.”

“I call shower first,” Emmett says. “Wait until you see me in this sexy snowman sweater, Stella.”

He does a little dance, holding up the sweater in front of him.

“I’m Holly, you idiot,” she says.

“Wait, what?” He looks between us and everyone else laughs.

“Don’t do that to me. I think I finally got it.” Emmett shakes his head and disappears into the bathroom.

Felix unpacks the booze and throws in a couple of frozen pizzas for

dinner, while Stella showers in the other bathroom.

It's just me, Teddy, and Felix, and I make eye contact with Teddy and mouth, "Should we tell him now?"

Teddy shakes his head and mouths something back, but I can't make sense of it. It doesn't matter though, because Emmett takes the world's fastest shower and reappears a minute later, dark hair still wet, but wearing jeans and his snowman sweater. He looks ridiculous.

"You want next shower?" Felix asks Teddy.

"Nah, go ahead."

"Are you sure? Might not be a lot of hot water left after I'm done."

Teddy chuckles, but says, "Go ahead. I want to text my brother and dad."

Felix nods and shuts the door behind him as he goes into the master bedroom.

Teddy moves closer to me in the kitchen, takes another cookie, and whispers, "Sorry. I do want to tell him, but you know that girl he hung out with the other night, Tricia?"

"Yeah."

"Well, he's been texting her the past two days to hang out again, and I guess she told him she'd already left, but then today, we saw her with some other guy at the resort."

"Ouch."

"I don't want to rub it in his face when he's down. Let's have fun tonight and we can tell him tomorrow."

"You're a good friend to him." I lift up my sweater. "And this is amazing. How did you talk them into it?"

He rubs at the back of his neck, something I noticed he does when he's uncomfortable. "I may have had to play the, *I'm not going home for Christmas this year* card."

I laugh. "Seriously, thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. You haven't seen what I look like in my very festive, very *small* sweater." He holds out the white sweatshirt. It says Merry Christmas in red sequins that turn white when you flip them the other way. And it's about half the width of him. "There weren't any more extra larges."

"Oh, this is going to be amazing," I say.

Chapter Thirteen



The party is amazing. The guys are hilarious in their sweaters (Emmett cut the sleeves to show off his biceps—which admittedly are nice, but he looks ridiculous), the mimosas are perfection, and Felix has on his Santa hat and demands the TV stay on *Elf* the entire night.

We’ve just restarted it and are halfway through the second time, which is a lot of Will Ferrell in an elf costume. The guys make a drinking game out of it, picking different words for each other and drinking every time Buddy says their word. Poor Teddy got ‘Santa,’ and he is *feeling it*.

“You’re pretty,” he says, when I take a seat next to him on the couch. His eyes are hooded and his sweatshirt is pushed up his forearms because it doesn’t come all the way down his long arms. His head falls back, and he keeps staring at me. “My mom would have liked you.”

My heart kicks up a notch. “Oh yeah? Because I’m pretty in my holiday kitty sweater?”

He moves his head side to side slowly. “She really loved Christmas. I think it’s why my dad doesn’t like to celebrate it anymore.”

That makes my heart squeeze. I can’t imagine.

“But she’d also think you’re really pretty. And nice. And pretty. Did I mention you are pretty?”

Stella is on her phone next to me. She looks up long enough to laugh at Teddy. “You mentioned that a few times, Theodore.”

“I meant it. I need water.” He gets to his feet. The sweater is so small. The bottom hem barely covers his stomach. But, somehow, he still looks sexy.

“Water is good,” I tell him. “Maybe a few cookies too. I hear they help for this sort of thing.”

He grins. “Hope this night ends like that one.”

I know it won’t, but the thought of it makes my stomach flip anyway.

“Beau is definitely coming to visit over the break,” Stella says, when it’s just the two of us left in the living room.

“Really? That’s great.”

Her body deflates with a breath. “It is great, but I’m nervous. I want it to go well.”

“I’m sure we’ll all like him, if you do.”

“Yeah.” She nods, but she doesn’t look convinced. “He’s so excited to meet you.”

“I’m excited too.”

“You should invite Teddy. We can go out one night together, the four of us.” She gives me a hopeful smile.

“Yeah.” I find him in the kitchen guzzling a glass of water. Teddy meets my gaze. His eyes are hazy, but he smiles and those dimples appear, and then he winks at me.

I can’t believe this is happening. Me and Teddy, making eyes across the room and planning double dates. It didn’t start out how I expected, but I don’t want this vacation to end.



The next day, Stella and I spend hours getting ready for the dance. It feels like prom all over again. We try on every dress we brought until she settles on a red one with tiny straps that show off her toned arms and shoulders. She lets me do her makeup but opts for a simple braid for her hair.

I go all out. Big curls, heavier makeup, sexy green dress, and my secret weapon—sexy shoes.

“When did you get those?” Stella stares at the strappy gold shoes with admiration.

“The other day when you guys were snowboarding. Are they too much?”

“No. They are stunning. You are a goddess.” She turns to stare at herself in the mirror. “I wish Beau were here. Although, I’d be worried he’d take one look at you and regret meeting me first.”

I laugh. "Oh, please."

Her face is marred with insecurity that is so rare to see on my twin's face that it throws me for a loop.

"No way. You are gorgeous and everything is going to go great when he comes to visit."

"Hol, there's something I haven't told you about Beau." She sits on the edge of the bed.

"What?"

"Let's go!" Felix calls from the living room.

I crack open the door and tell him we'll be right there, and then look to my sister.

"Never mind." She stands and her mouth curves up. "Let's do this! I want to see Theodore swallow his tongue when he gets a look at you."

Stella goes out first. I take one more look at myself in the mirror and follow.

The guys are sitting in the living room playing video games. Emmett notices Stella first and then his stare slides to me.

"Woah," he says. His gaze bounces between us. "I don't know which is which, but you both look *super* hot."

Felix smacks him even before he looks away from the screen. "You're talking about my sisters, dude."

"Sorry, but they are."

They continue bickering, but it's background noise because the second that Teddy looks up at me, everything else falls away and it's just the two of us. He stands. I think one of the guys complains that the game isn't over, but Teddy crosses the room to me. He doesn't speak as he takes me in. His hair is styled neatly, but still curls at the ends. The black button-down shirt he's wearing stretches over his broad chest and back.

"Hi," I say quietly.

His throat works with a swallow, but he still doesn't say a word.

Stella giggles and mutters, "Told you so."

Chapter Fourteen



The ski resort lodge has been transformed for the party. There are lights strung from the ceiling, and trees decorated in every corner, as the band plays holiday tunes.

People are dancing and standing at the bar. It's an interesting mix of families and couples. I see Tricia and send her a mean glare. The guy that she's with keeps checking out other girls when she's not looking. It's hard to feel sorry for her.

Teddy stays by my side, occasionally brushing his fingers against mine or touching my lower back. I'm never going to survive the night without kissing him. I'm keeping an eye out for a dark corner to shove him into.

Stella is on her phone, texting Beau, I'm sure.

"Put that away," I tell her. "You're missing this and it's incredible."

"Okay, okay." She tucks it into her purse and adjusts the strap of her little Prada crossbody bag. "You're right. I've wanted to go to this party for years."

Emmett spins and holds out his hand to her. "Dance, Stella?"

"Impressive. You can finally tell us apart."

He holds up his hand. Something is scribbled in ink. He stares at his palm as he reads, "Holly is in green, and Stella is in red."

"Oh my gosh." She laughs. "That is truly pathetic." But she slips her hand into his.

"I'm going to the bar," Garrison says. He and James both came back for the party tonight, and so did a few more of their teammates that were close enough to drive up.

"I'll come with you." James looks to Felix. "Walters?"

"Yep." He pops the p and nudges Teddy. "A couple of hot chicks just

walked in alone. Let's go talk to them."

Felix takes a step and pauses, waiting for Teddy. An awkward beat passes between them. Oh no. We didn't plan for this. Felix still doesn't know, and of course, he wants his best wingman to troll for girls with him. The thought of Teddy talking to other girls, of them flirting with him and thinking they have a shot of going home with him tonight, makes jealousy course through me.

"No thanks, man." Teddy laces our fingers together and takes a step toward the dance floor.

My pulse races as I watch my brother stare at our joined hands. Felix's dark brows rise, and I can see understanding slowly dawn on his face. "My sister, really?"

Heat trickles up my neck.

Teddy seems completely unfazed. He smiles. "The only hot chick I want to talk to is right here."

Felix makes a gagging sound. "Can everyone stop referring to my baby sisters as hot?"

"Sorry, buddy. Your sister is hot, and I like her." His gray eyes pool with warmth. "A lot."

My stomach is doing somersaults. I step closer to Teddy and squeeze his hand, then wait for Felix's reaction.

"I need a drink. We'll talk about this later, Theodore," he says, but my brother's lips pull into a smile before he heads off to the bar.

"That's one way to tell him," I say as Teddy wraps his arms around my waist.

"Felix is cool," he says.

"He already knew?"

Teddy bobs his head side to side. "Not exactly. I guess last night I must have said something about the girl I was talking to. This morning, the guys were giving me shit and asking me who it was. I actually think Emmett figured it out, because he asked me on the way here if I could put a good word in with Stella."

I glance over where the two of them are dancing. Stella is looking at the doorway.

"He can't even tell us apart." I laugh. "Besides, I think she is off the market." I inch closer and rest my hands around the back of his neck. We sway to the music.

He drops a kiss to my lips. "Too bad for Emmett."

I laugh and rest my head on his shoulder.

He runs a hand down the back of my head, threading his fingers in my hair. "I can't believe I'm dancing with the hottest girl at the party."

Laughing, I smile up at him. "Are you eating your heart out?"

He cocks his head to the side. "What?"

"Nothing." I snuggle into his big chest again. "Nothing at all."

We stay for two more songs before Teddy pulls me off the dance floor. Everyone else is occupied, so we sneak outside and walk around the building to a secluded spot on the property. He wraps his arms around me to keep me warm and we get lost in long, hungry kisses.

He makes a rough, frustrated sound deep in his throat when I reach down and trail my fingers over the bulge in his pants.

I already knew Teddy was built, from the dry-humping session the other night, but I feel a jolt of pleasure at just how fantastic he is. Long and hard, and yes, thick.

He mutters under his breath and groans as I explore. I stroke him over his clothes, getting more of those sexy noises out of him, but I need more.

His entire body shudders when I press my body into his. "You're killing me, sweetheart."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. I'll die a happy man. Turn around."

I comply, facing the other direction. His hand drops to my thigh and then slowly grazes up and underneath the skirt of my dress. If anyone were to walk out here, we'd look like a happy couple cuddling in the night, but under my dress, Teddy's fingers push my panties to the side and rub small circles over my clit.

"Not fair. I can't reach you." My words are breathy, and goosebumps race up my arms.

Teddy sweeps my hair away from my neck to kiss me. "Just enjoy, sweetheart."

He nudges my legs farther apart. I let my head fall back on his shoulder as his fingers pump in and out of me at a slow, torturous pace.

The Christmas Waltz plays inside, and occasionally happy voices and laughter filter out with the music. I've often felt like I'm on the outside, looking in, but when I'm with Teddy, it's like everyone else is missing out, instead of the other way around.

"Teddy." I gasp as pleasure builds and spikes.

“Sweetheart,” he murmurs and sucks hard on the side of my neck.

Spots dance before my vision as I come. Teddy holds me as I sink into him and gulp in air. His dick twitches between us.

I swivel around and peer up at him. “Your turn.”

He shakes his head. “We should get back to the party.”

“Don’t cockblock me, Teddy.”

His deep laughter rings out into the night, then he places a quick kiss on my lips and says, “When I come, I want to be inside you, sweetheart.”

He lifts our raised hands and places a kiss on my wrist as we walk back.

“How much longer do you think we have to stay?” I ask, anticipation for him being inside me already has my body tingling again.

One side of his mouth lifts. Before he can speak, raised voices grab our attention, and our steps slow as we come around the corner.

Stella and all the guys are standing on the front steps, and Beau’s there too. Oh my gosh, Beau is here! Except, something is obviously wrong. His lip is bleeding and Felix and Garrison look murderous.

“Stella?” Felix’s gaze is hard as he stares between Beau and Stella. “What the hell is going on?”

“Beau is the guy I’ve been talking to. We met at the airport. Neither of us knew the connection at first.”

I look to Teddy.

His expression is hard, but he still speaks softly when he says, “That’s Beau Ricci. He plays football for Colorado.”

Garrison circles Stella and Beau, looking like a wild animal about to attack. “I have been dying to run into you off the field, Ricci.” His voice carries in the quiet night. “Let’s do this. Me and you.”

“I didn’t come here for a fight,” Beau says.

“Too bad.”

Garrison moves to punch him. Beau steps away from Stella, shielding her as much as possible.

Teddy’s steps get quicker, and the two of us hurry over to the action.

Beau doesn’t try to fight back, but he holds Garrison at arm’s length, so he can’t continue to hit him.

“Fight me, you piece of shit.” Garrison lowers his head and lunges for him.

“No!” Stella yells. She steps forward like she’s going to get between them.

Felix gets there first and places a hand on Garrison's chest. "Take a walk before someone else gets hurt."

"He broke my fucking foot." Garrison's voice rises. "My football career might be over because of this prick."

"You almost hit Stella. Take a fucking walk," Felix says again. "I need to talk to my sister."

Garrison looks annoyed at being ordered around by my brother, but finally relents. His shoulders fall and his fingers unfurl. "What the fuck ever, Walters." Garrison knocks into his shoulder as he blows past him.

I move to stand next to my sister. Tears stream down her face and she looks so defeated, it hurts my insides. She wraps her arms around my shoulders, clinging to me. Felix looks like he might murder someone. I glance around at everyone. My head spins. "I don't understand. What's going on?"

Felix's voice is hard and strained, like he's fighting to keep control. "We're just trying to figure out the same thing. Stella, please help me understand. Did you invite him here? Are you dating this asshole? Beau fucking Ricci, really?"

"She didn't invite me. I drove up to surprise her. She had nothing to do with this." Beau gives my sister a look that under normal circumstances would make my stomach flip, but right now, it's twisted in knots.

"I was going to tell you," Stella says, stepping back to Beau's side. "This isn't how I wanted you to find out, but yeah, we like each other."

Beau wraps an arm around her. Felix fumes at the action, and his jaw flexes.

"No." My brother slices a hand through the air, then runs it over his head. "This isn't happening. Stella, you can't date this guy. You know what he did to Garrison. His dirty hit cost him the season."

"That was an accident." Stella is steadfast in her loyalty. Always has been and for some reason, she's decided that Beau is worth it. I don't know what to think.

"I'd never take a guy out on purpose," Beau says. He has dark hair, full lips, and a square jaw—Stella is a sucker for a square jaw.

"Yeah-fucking-right." Garrison has circled back. He looks only slightly less pissed off. He steps toward Beau. When Felix tries to intervene again, he holds up a hand. "I'm cool."

He doesn't seem cool. His shirt is untucked and the balled fist at his side

is red and swollen, but Felix lets him by. “You expect me to believe that shit, Ricci? You fucking coward.”

“You don’t even know me,” Beau says with a small shrug. He wipes blood from his lip. Garrison gets in his face, but Beau doesn’t back down. “I don’t want to fight you, but I’m not walking away from Stella unless she tells me to.”

Beau is different than I expected. All of Felix’s teammates are ready to pounce, and he’s so chill about it. Maybe because he’s way outnumbered. Maybe he really does care for my sister enough that he’s willing to get his face pounded.

“Okay, that’s enough.” Teddy’s voice is low and controlled, and everyone listens. He glances at the entrance, where security guards are surveying the situation. “We need to take this somewhere else before they call the cops.”

Felix nods. “Agreed. We’re done here. It’s time for you to leave, Ricci. Keep your dirty games to the field and leave my sister out of it.”

Felix turns for his car. The rest of the guys are already piling in. We brought two vehicles tonight, but Stella and I rode with Felix. My brother tosses Teddy the keys to his Corvette. “Come on, Stell.”

She doesn’t budge from Beau’s side.

“Stella,” Felix says again.

“No,” she says. “This is dumb. You can’t tell me who to date. Beau is a great guy. If you’d just take a breath and get to know him, you—”

“It’s okay,” Beau interrupts her when it’s clear that Felix isn’t listening. His voice lowers where only she and I can hear him. “Go with your brother. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry. This wasn’t supposed to go this way.” A tear slides down her face.

He wipes it away with the pad of his thumb. “It’s okay. Go, baby.”

Chapter Fifteen



“You didn’t even give him a chance!” Angry tears fill Stella’s eyes. She leans forward from the back seat to yell at Felix.

Teddy is silent as he drives us back to the cabin. I hate when Stella and Felix fight. I’d usually be the one trying to make peace, but this is messy, and I don’t know who is right here.

“You’re catching me a little off guard here, Stell.” Felix’s voice is softer but still has an edge. “You and Beau Ricci?!”

“Yes!” She throws her hands up in the air. “He isn’t the guy you think he is. He’s funny witty, and sweet.”

“Sweet?” Felix’s voice rises in question. “He has a reputation for being a player.”

“He likes to have a good time.”

“The guy is a wrecking ball, Stell.”

“I know, I know. You think he took Garrison out on purpose. I don’t believe that for a second. You don’t know him like I do.”

At the cabin, we pile out of the car. Garrison is loud as he paces the front porch, obviously still riled up.

“Ah, shit,” Teddy says. “I got him.”

Felix lets out a long breath, then looks to Stella. “Let’s talk about it tomorrow.”

“There is nothing to talk about. I like him. I’m going to keep seeing him.”

“How do you know he isn’t just using you to piss me and the guys off?”

“That’s a low blow even for you.” She stalks off.

“Fuck,” Felix mutters. He looks to me for backup, but I don’t have any idea what to say.

I chase after Stella. I find her in the bedroom, packing.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to go home.”

“Stell.” I sit on the edge of the bed. “You caught everyone by surprise. Give him the night to calm down.”

“No. I can’t stay here and listen to them talk about what a shitty guy he is.” She waves a hand toward the living room. She’s not wrong. They are talking smack about Beau. “He is a good guy.”

“I believe you,” I say.

“You do?”

“Yeah.” I inch closer. “I wish you would have told me.”

“I wanted to. I almost did a hundred times. But I didn’t want you to have to keep something from Felix. It was hard enough for me.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I have no idea. But tonight, I want to curl up with Whiskers and sleep in my old bed.”

“Are you sure? We can stay in here, watch a movie in bed or get really drunk.”

“I’m sure. I want to go home and wake up tomorrow and forget this entire trip happened. Please?” she pleads and then sighs. “Oh crap. I’m sorry. You want to stay for Teddy.”

“No. I mean, yes, but it’s okay.”

“Holl—” Her brown eyes are filled with so much pain, it makes my chest ache.

“If you want to go home, then let’s go home. Whatever you need.” I squeeze her hand for reassurance. “Let’s go home.”



It takes no time to pack up. Felix tries to talk us out of going back tonight, but he’s still so pissed, he isn’t very convincing. They both need time to cool off.

Our goodbyes are stiff, the entire mood of the cabin so different than it’s been all week.

Teddy comes outside as I’m putting our stuff in the back. His shirt is untucked and the top two buttons are undone. His hands are shoved in his

front pockets. “Is she okay?”

I shut the back and lean against it. “She’s pissed. I can’t blame her.”

“Yeah.” His jaw flexes.

I cross my arms at my stomach. “I can’t believe Garrison.”

Teddy’s head tilts. “What do you mean?”

“He *punched* him. Without even hearing what he had to say. It just made everything worse. Now Felix and Stella are pissed at each other. It’s a mess.”

“He was looking out for Stella.”

“Is that what he was doing? It seemed like he was just getting payback for his own shit.”

One of Teddy’s shoulders lifts in a shrug. “Maybe so, but can you really blame him? Ricci cost him his season and maybe next year’s.”

“You said yourself that the hit was clean.”

“I said it was a tough call, but if I were Garrison, I’d have wanted to do the same thing. And he knew dating Stella was going to piss us off. Coming here was ballsy.”

“How can you say that? You don’t even know him.”

He doesn’t quite meet my eye as he says, “Drive safe. Get some rest.”

Something about this whole scene, him not answering my question, his words and almost dismissive tone, make my hackles come up. “You sound like my brother.”

Instead of my boyfriend. But I don’t say that part because we haven’t really established that.

He rubs at the back of his neck. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Something? Anything?

I let out a breath as I compose my thoughts. For years, I’ve felt like Teddy only saw me as Felix’s little sister, but he’s never made me feel as small as I do right now. And worse, his words have left me questioning if I’m justified in my irritation. I don’t know if he’s right or if I am, but I want to talk about it.

This is not the goodbye I had in mind. I pictured kisses and promises to talk over the break, maybe making plans for when we get back to Valley, but Teddy and I stand awkwardly in front of each other, not knowing what to say.

“I should go,” I say finally.

He nods curtly. “Yeah. Drive safe.”

“You already said that,” I mumble, and then I get in the Jeep and drive away from my winter wonderland.

Chapter Sixteen



“Mom and Dad’s plane just landed,” I say as I step into the living room. Stella is curled up on the couch with Whiskers.

She sits up and he jumps off and trots away, probably to go lie in the kitchen window—his favorite spot.

“Time to put on a happy face and fake some holiday cheer.”

I laugh lightly. “Dad was already asking if we pulled out all the lights for the house. He’s ready to go full Griswold.”

Stella smiles, but it’s so half-hearted that it makes my insides hurt. She hasn’t wanted to talk about it at all. We both crashed as soon as we got back last night, and this morning, we watched Hallmark movies and ate junk food. She’s still attached to her phone, but I haven’t seen her texting as much.

Her willpower is far greater than mine. I haven’t heard from Teddy, and it’s killing me. We left things in such a weird place. I don’t know how to move forward.

“Go take a shower. I’ll pull out the lights and help Dad. Mom will want to unpack and start the laundry before she does anything else. Should buy you an hour or two.”

“Thanks, Holly.” She stands and picks up the discarded ice cream container and chip bag. “Is Teddy coming with Felix?”

“No. He’s going to Emmett’s house for break.”

“Really?”

“He’d already made plans to go there. Plus, we didn’t leave things in the best place.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. It just felt weird as we were leaving. I know he’s Felix’s best friend, but last night, he made me feel like when we were twelve and

Felix's friends would come over and ignore us."

"I'm sorry my drama caused trouble for you."

"Teddy's actions are not on you."

She nods. "It was a crazy night. Maybe he'll change his mind and come here again."

"Maybe."

"Have you texted him to ask?"

"No," I admit.

"You want him to make the move this time?" One side of her mouth pulls up into a small smile.

"Is that wrong?"

"No. I get that. You deserve to have someone make the move."

The sound of the garage door opening cause both of us to freeze. I glance out the front window in time to see Felix's orange car pulling up.

I move into the kitchen to greet him as he comes inside through the mudroom. I wait, heart rate picking up speed, for another person to step in behind him, but the door swings closed.

"Hey," Felix says when he sees me. He drops his bag to the floor and his mouth pulls into a tight smile.

Slowly, Stella gets up and comes to join us. They stare at each other. I can almost see a giant cartoon bubble above my sister's head, waiting for Felix to apologize or say something. He doesn't.

She sighs, loudly. "I'm going to shower."

When she's gone, Felix says, "You pissed at me too?"

I think for a second. "No, but you two should talk."

"Yeah." He comes over and hugs me. I want to ask him about Teddy, but Mom and Dad pull up before I can get the words out. With Stella in the shower, Felix and I are held captive to stories from their vacation.

They're tan and smiling. I can't remember the last time my mother didn't rush off to unpack, but she leans against the kitchen island and stares at Dad with this big cheesy grin.

Eventually, though, Dad's impatience and excitement break up story time and Felix and I are dragged outside to the storage shed. Dad rummages for everything he needs, handing off items and instructions for where to put the lights. He has a whole system that is not to be messed with.

"You and Teddy, huh?"

I blush. "Yeah. I mean, maybe. I'm not really sure where we left things."

Felix nods slowly.

“Is it weird?”

He thinks for a couple of seconds. “Not really. A little, maybe, but I can see it. Teddy is the best guy I know.”

“Who knows if anything will happen when we get back to school,” I say. I wait for him to offer up some form of reassurance. Usually I’d get that from Stella, but I haven’t wanted to pile on to her Beau drama.

Felix gives a half-hearted shrug that is the furthest thing from reassuring.



Later, when all the lights are up, I leave Dad and Felix to admire our handiwork and wander back inside. Mom and Stella are in the living room, putting up an artificial tree.

My heart sinks. “I miss having a real tree.”

“A real tree doesn’t make sense this year. And the lots are probably picked over at this point.”

Stella holds out the star for the top. “Want to do the honors?”

I brush off my disappointment and step forward. “Absolutely.”

Mom gets takeout for dinner and then she and Dad head off to bed early, exhausted from their trip. Felix, Stella, and I move into the living room. The tree is lit up and I put on *Christmas Vacation*. It’s awkward, since they’re barely speaking, but at least they’re not completely ignoring each other.

My brother’s phone buzzes, and he pulls it from his pocket and then stands. “I think I’m going to head up to bed, too.”

“Already?” I whine.

“I’m beat.” He starts up the stairs, already tapping away on his phone.

“Did I miss something?” Stella asks. “Did he meet someone or is he just avoiding me?”

“Not that I know about, but you know Felix, he always has girls blowing up his phone.”

We watch the movie for a few minutes in silence.

“Anything from Teddy?”

“No.” I flip my phone over in my hand to stare at the blank screen.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“It’s fine.” I smile and go back to watching Chevy Chase.

“I know you’re bummed and trying not to act like it, but it’s okay to be sad or disappointed or whatever you feel.” She takes my hand. “If Theodore doesn’t see how completely amazing you are, then he’s an idiot.”

“Thanks, Stell.”

“Beau has some cute friends.”

I laugh. “Let’s not give Felix a heart attack.”

Chapter Seventeen



I'm the first to wake up on Christmas morning. I know this because if Stella had woken first, she would already be in my room, jumping up and down with excitement. And Felix always sleeps in.

I don't know how he does it. I can't sleep in, no matter how late I stay up the night before. There is just something enchanting about Christmas morning. The air feels different, joyous, light, and yes, magical.

Throwing off the covers, I slide my feet into my reindeer slippers and shuffle out of my room. Mom and Dad's voices carry faintly from downstairs. I spend a few minutes in the bathroom, getting ready, and when I come out, Stella is up.

"Merry Christmas!"

She rubs sleep from her eyes and murmurs back, "Merry Christmas."

I wait for her, and we go downstairs together. To my absolute surprise, Felix is already up, dressed, and has a cup of coffee in his hands.

"Merry Christmas," he says, and tips his mug in greeting.

"Breakfast before or after presents?" Mom asks, setting out the flour for her traditional Christmas morning homemade biscuits. Every year she asks and every year, the answer is the same.

"Presents!" Dad shakes his head and smiles as he takes a step toward the living room. "Who could possibly eat before seeing what Santa brought?"

Felix, Stella, and I share amused glances before we follow him. Mom is always last, making us wait just a few minutes longer to get started. I think she does it to build the anticipation or maybe just to annoy Dad.

Stella gets to open the first present. When we were little, she somehow convinced Felix and me that because she's the youngest (by one minute!) she deserved to be first at something. I think she used that line to get her way a

lot when we were younger, but this is the only thing that stuck.

She holds up a pair of swim goggles and smiles at Dad. “Thank you.”

He winks. “Welcome.”

After that, we tear into presents at random. I get some new books that were on my wish list, a bracelet, and new notebooks and pens.

Felix gets practice gear and clothes, and stuff for his apartment. He chuckles when he opens the present Stella and I got him. I wrapped it in a football poster I got from the Valley U bookstore and made sure his face was most prominent. He still hasn’t gotten used to all the attention, which makes it slightly more tolerable that he’s such a big deal.

“Thanks, guys,” he says, eyes twinkling with laughter, as he holds up the ‘World’s Okayest Brother’ mug.

All three of us get things we didn’t ask for but always receive: new toothbrushes, floss sticks, vitamins, socks, and gift cards to Target and various fast-food restaurants.

By the time we’re done, our gifts are stacked up in piles beside us and wrapping paper is strewn everywhere. Dad pulls on the new ‘I survived the Griswold Family Christmas’ sweatshirt we got him and begins to clean up. Mom heads straight for the kitchen to get breakfast going.

Felix says he’s going to help Dad, which probably means he’s going to nap, and Stella and I put on *A Christmas Story* and flit between watching our favorite scenes to helping Mom in the kitchen.

The day passes with all our usual tradition and merriment. As we gather around the dining room table for our Walters’ Family Annual Christmas Day Ultimate Game-a-thon (for the record, I am not the one that came up with that awful title), Felix puts on his jacket and says he’s going to meet up with some friends.

“On Christmas?” Mom asks.

“He knows he’s no match for my mad skills,” Dad says as he places his tiles on the board to kick off our Scrabble game.

Felix swings his keys around one finger. “I won’t be long, promise. I’ll be back in time for Boggle.”

Stella sinks down in her chair beside me. Things are still tense between her and Felix. If they’ve talked it out, they haven’t come to a resolution.

Stella says she still believes he’s a good guy, but she can’t deny that Felix got in her head a little, so she’s letting things simmer. As I look closer, her phone is mysteriously not in sight. In fact, I don’t think I’ve seen her texting

all day. That would make two of us. After checking every hour, on the hour, for a text from Teddy, I gave up around dinner time and left my phone upstairs, so I couldn't torture myself with it.

Maybe everything is fine and he's just busy with Emmett and his family. Maybe what we had at the cabin was a moment, and nothing else will come of it. It's the not knowing that is the hardest.

"Ugh, you're killing us," Dad groans as I get a triple-word score. My second of the game and I'm officially out of letters.

"She cheats," Stella teases. "I swear she cheats somehow."

"I need more coffee." Mom covers a yawn as she stands. "I think I have jet lag."

Headlights flash in the front window.

"Back just in time," Dad says as he starts to put away Scrabble, and Stella gets Boggle from the game cabinet. "And it looks like he brought a friend."

My head snaps up. Sure enough, a second set of headlights turn into the driveway. My heart beats wildly, hope rising with it. I push out of my chair and heads to the front door.

Teddy's truck comes to a stop behind Felix's car. My feet have a mind of their own, moving quickly toward him. My brother grins as I round the front of Teddy's truck.

The driver's side door finally opens, and Teddy hops out with a hesitant smile. "Hey."

"Hi." I'm frozen three feet away from him. "What are you doing here?"

Felix shuffles toward the house, giving us some privacy.

"I wanted to call, but I wasn't sure what to say. I'm sorry about how we left things."

"Me too."

He steps closer and takes my hand.

I've missed him. After two years of dreaming of being with him, the reality was so much better.

"I want to be with you. Do you want to be with me, or did you just take looking out for your best friend's sister a little too far?" I add in a little laugh at the end, like I'm half-joking, but my pulse races while I wait for his answer.

"Felix is like a brother to me. He's my best friend. I owe him a lot. Of course, I'm always going to want to look out for you and Stella because of that."

“But?”

“I like you. I’d like you even if you weren’t his sister. And it’d be a hell of a lot less complicated.” He smiles tentatively. “I want to be with you too.”

“We could have had this conversation over the phone, you know?”

Quiet laughter slips from his lips. “What can I say? I like how the Walters family does Christmas. And I also needed to deliver your present.”

My parents and Stella file out of the house.

“Theo!” Mom calls from the front porch. She is the only one that calls him that, but he doesn’t seem to mind. “I’m so glad you could join us.”

“Sorry to impose on your Christmas game night.”

“It’s no imposition,” my dad says. “Come in, come in. Holly was just destroying us at Scrabble.”

Teddy’s lips twitch with amusement as he looks to me. “One second. I need to grab something out of my truck. Felix?”

My brother nods and he and Teddy go to the back of the truck. Felix lowers the tailgate and then the two of them pull out a tree. I gasp and move closer. A Grand fir.

“I heard you might need one of these,” Teddy says, a slight flush painting his cheeks.

I toss my arms around him, breathing in him and the tree. His hands are occupied, trying not to drop the tree, but he leans into my touch and his lips brush against my temple. Felix chuckles. “I think she likes it.”

Chapter Eighteen



The next two days are packed full of all the holiday things we missed out on before Christmas. We bake cookies and other desserts with Mom, we make our gingerbread houses, we drive around and look at all the holiday lights in the neighborhoods that go all-out every year, and play games and watch movies. My heart is so happy.

Felix and Teddy leave tomorrow. The Valley U football team's season is over, but the guys are attending bowl games with some of their teammates and coaches. I swear they've been done for only a few weeks and they're both talking about off-season practices, summer camps, and going all the way next year.

Stella and I are planning to spend a few more days at home and then we'll all meet up at Valley. Felix and his roommates are having a New Year's Eve party at their apartment. I can't wait to spend more time with the guy lying next to me.

We're taking up one couch. My head rests on his chest and one of his big, beefy arms is slung around my waist. Felix is in the recliner, and Stella is sitting on the love seat. Teddy's chest rumbles with laughter at the movie. I glance up at him, the goofy smile on his face and the way the lights dance across his face and darken the shadows of his dimples through the light scruff that's appeared since he got here.

He catches me staring at him instead of the movie and dips his head to kiss me. "You're not watching the movie."

"Now neither are you," I quip back.

His laughter spills into my mouth. Soft kisses turn a little hungrier, and then something soft collides with the side of my head.

I pull back in time to see the pillow land on the floor next to the couch.

Felix holds another up like he's ready to launch it. "I'm cool with my best friend making out with my little sister, but you know, not in front of me."

Teddy runs a hand down the back of my head, tangling his fingers in my hair. "Noted, bro."

I look at him with outrage. "Just like that? He says stop and no more kissing?"

"Later." He winks.

"You're missing the best scene," Stella says. She turns the volume up as Kevin runs through the snowy park to give the pigeon lady a turtle dove.

She cries every single time.

After the movie is over, Felix gets to his feet. "I'm going to bed."

"Same." Stella pushes the throw blanket off her.

"Eight tomorrow morning?" Felix asks Teddy.

"I'll be ready."

"Night, Holl," Stella says. "See ya later, Theodore."

They go upstairs and it's just the two of us hanging out in the living room. Mom and Dad went to bed hours ago.

Last night was the same, we stayed up for hours talking and kissing. I didn't make it to my own bed until well after three in the morning.

I get up and go grab the present I wrapped and placed under the tree earlier today. I bring it back to the couch and sit it in front of him. "I have something for you."

"You didn't need to do that," he says, but smiles.

He tears into the paper with the biggest grin.

"It's just something silly," I say when he has the tin completely unwrapped.

He gives it a little shake and his brows rise in question. He pries the top off, and when he looks inside, his mouth falls open in surprise. "No way. You made gingersnaps!"

"Well, I tried."

He picks one up and takes a bite.

"Are they anything like what your mom used to make? I tried one before I iced them, but I wasn't sure."

He nods as he chews. "Exactly. You even got the icing right. One half-dipped in icing, the other plain."

Before he's even finished the one in his mouth, he picks up another. "I forgot how good these are."

“Let me taste.” I reach for one, but Teddy moves the tin, holding it up where I can’t get any, and takes another bite.

“Hey!” I exclaim playfully.

He keeps the tin up high as he makes a big show of throwing his head back and closing his eyes as he chews. A sexy groan escapes. He mumbles around the cookie, “So good.”

Instead of making another attempt at reaching the cookies, I crawl into his lap. I wrap my legs around him and press our chests together.

“You don’t share very well.”

“They were a gift,” he says when he’s done chewing, “from my girlfriend.”

My brows lift.

“I mean, if that’s what she wants to be.”

“She wants to be.”

His mouth descends on mine. He tastes like ginger and sugar. We kiss until my body trembles and we’re both panting, then we move to the floor in front of the Christmas tree. Mom was so tickled that Teddy brought us a tree, she moved the artificial one we had in the living room to the dining room, and put his in its spot. I love how it smells and the way it looks, but mostly, I love how he knew the perfect thing to get me. He was paying attention that day at the tree lot. Maybe he always was.

As he lavishes me with long, sweet kisses, he pulls my shirt over my head. The way he looks at me, my desire mirrored back, makes my body flush.

His hand slides around the back of my neck and draws me closer. “You’re so beautiful, Holly.”

He fingers the necklace, running his thumb over my name.

We fall to the ground. Our kisses are more urgent as we strip each other down.

I climb on top of him. His dick nudges my entrance, and he shifts, so he isn’t poking me. “I don’t have a condom.” His hands roam over my side, back, and up to cup my breasts. “Think your brother is asleep yet?”

“You are so not asking my brother for a condom.”

He scrunches up his nose. “Yeah, that’d be weird.”

I lean over him, my boobs are conveniently in his face, and he takes advantage of the position to capture one in his mouth. Reaching under the tree skirt, I pull out the strip of condoms I put there with the cookies.

I sit back and hold them up, letting them dangle from my fingers.

His chest moves in a quiet laugh. "Under the tree?"

"I couldn't think where else to stash them."

"What if someone else had found them?"

I lift one shoulder and let it fall. "I would have blamed Felix."

Laughing, he pulls me back down to him and then rolls us, so he's on top.

"Are you sure?" he asks, staring down at me with those soft gray eyes.

"Positive." I beam up at him. "I've dreamt about this for so long."

He dips his head to place a kiss above my belly button. While his mouth travels lower, his gaze flicks up to mine. "Me too, sweetheart."

He leaves a trail of wet kisses down my stomach and on my inner thigh. His broad shoulders push my legs apart. He hooks an arm around one, opening me wider to him, and his mouth covers my sensitive core. His tongue flattens and then flicks across the bundle of nerves.

My body is liquid heat as he brings me closer and closer to the edge. Only when I'm panting and muttering his name on an endless loop does Teddy roll on a condom and position himself.

He slides in slowly, disappearing inside me an inch at a time. He stills when he's fully buried. I hold my breath and dig my fingernails into his forearms. It's so good. Too good. And the man hasn't even moved.

He drives in gently at first, but we're both too close and too amped up. We won't last long, no matter how slow and sweet he goes.

I come with his name on my lips, and he follows a second later, swallowing my words and kissing me like he'll never get enough.

He falls to the floor beside me, immediately finding my hand and lacing our fingers together.

"That was . . ." I trail off as I gulp in air.

"Yeah," he rasps.

I let my head fall to the side, so I can stare at him. His happy, satiated smile re-energizes me.

"Again?"

He barks a laugh. "Yeah, sweetheart. Again."

"A million times more?"

"A million and one." He drags the pad of his thumb along my lower lip, leans closer, and then gives me a soft kiss.

"A million and two?"

His smile widens.

“A million and three?”

“Mhmm.” He chuckles. “But first, I need another gingersnap.”

“Are you finally going to share?”

We sit up, and Teddy grabs the tin of cookies. While he’s distracted by my bare chest, I steal the tin from him. His arms wrap around me a second later. He whispers petty threats for all of two seconds before his mouth finds my neck.

I finally get a bite of his precious gingersnaps. And he gets me. Again.

And again.

Epilogue



Teddy

A hot girl stands in the open doorway of my bedroom. Music from the party is loud, and the bass vibrates the floor.

The girl pops a hip and gives me a sweet, sultry smile. Her red hair is down in loose curls around her shoulders. She fingers one strand as she smiles shyly. Sexy black boots cover her legs all the way up to her thighs.

Everyone dressed up tonight, including her. The black dress hugs her frame in all the right places. “Hi, Teddy.”

She’s a very hot girl, but she’s not *my* hot girl.

“Hey, Stella.”

She lets her hand drop to her side and smiles. “How do you always know? Even Felix did a double-take with my hair all down and done up like Holly’s.”

“You look nice,” I tell her, then *my* girl steps around her into the room.

She has on a gold dress and a pair of matching strappy shoes that lace up her toned legs. Her hair is down, and she has on a Happy New Year headband. She wouldn’t be my girl without a little extra holiday cheer.

The truth is, I don’t need to be able to tell them apart (though I can). It’s a feeling when Holly is nearby. From the moment I met her, I knew she was someone I wanted to get to know better. At first, it was because she was my best friend’s sister. Felix and I clicked right off the bat. Within days, he felt like family. So naturally, when his parents and sisters came to visit, I wanted to meet the people he talked about so much.

The Walters family is tight. Something my family used to be. I miss that.

But with every interaction with Holly, I was more intrigued. I like how she’s slow to speak, but eager to listen. She makes people feel seen and heard

and important. She doesn't offer up a lot of herself, but it just makes people all the more curious.

I like how she knows every word to the movie *Elf*, and when she laughs, her entire body shakes with the movement.

It's a hundred different things, and counting, that I like about Holly. I can't wait to discover more.

As discreetly as possible, I grab the gift box from my desk drawer and shove it in my pocket. She crosses the small room in the house I share with Felix and Emmett, and I meet her halfway and wrap an arm around her waist. "Hey, sweetheart."

She loves it when I call her that. Her cheeks flush and the flecks of green in her eyes are more prominent.

"Hi." Her voice is breathy as she leans into me.

"Okay, well. I'm out of here," Stella says. As she leaves, she calls, "You passed the test, Theodore."

Laughing, Holly faces me and presses her body flush against mine. "I have something for you."

"Oh yeah." I run my hands along her back and dip my head down to kiss her.

"It's in the kitchen."

"So far away." I press her tighter against me and kiss her again. Now that we're both back at Valley, we've been spending days and nights together. I figure we have at least a year or two of making up for lost time.

"Come on," she says, taking my hand and pulling me out to the party.

There are a lot of people crammed into our place. It's an old three-bedroom house, two blocks from campus. The keg is out back on the patio and liquor bottles are lined up on the kitchen counter. The door to the backyard is propped open, and people filter in and out.

Holly walks into the kitchen and then turns around. She drops her hand to the counter. "I left it right here."

"You left what here?" I ask, pouring myself a drink.

"A headband that matches mine. I thought tonight, you and I could be twins."

I scan the counter and then beyond to the living room. My lips pull up into a smile when I spot Emmett.

"Found it," I say and point to him. He has on the headband with a neon pink T-shirt that says, 'Happy New Year,' in messy Sharpie handwriting, and

also about a dozen beaded necklaces. He is next-level festive and dancing in a group of girls.

“Emmett!” she yells, but he doesn’t hear her over the music.

“It’s all right. I swiped these from someone earlier.” I pull a pair of paper glasses with the new year in big font across the top and slide them on my face.

The smile she gives me makes the uncomfortable and silly thing worth it.

“Now let’s dance, sweetheart.”

We join the dozens of others crammed into the living room, dancing until we’re both exhausted. The night, and the year, is ticking by. The countdown is on. Five minutes left in the best year of my life.

Holly and I get drinks and then go outside to get some fresh air. She snuggles close to me to keep warm.

I slide the glasses onto the top of my head. “I have something for you.”

Her brows lift in intrigue. “Sparklers?”

“No.” I chuckle. “But that would have been a good idea.”

I pull the box from my pocket and hold it out to her.

She takes it hesitantly. “Teddy. You didn’t need to get me anything.”

“I know. And I didn’t. At least not how you think. It was my mother’s.”

Her brown eyes grow larger, and she tries to hand it back. “Teddy. I can’t —”

I push it back toward her. “You can. Open it.”

Holly flips open the jewelry box and peers inside. Her head tilts to the side as she smiles and then brings a finger to run over the green holly leaves.

“I told you, she liked the holidays too. She had a bunch of holiday jewelry. I kept thinking about this necklace while we were at the cabin. I couldn’t remember for sure if it was holly leaves or if I’d just convinced myself that because I wanted to make some cosmic connection between you two. I asked my dad to look around and see if he could find it.”

After I told him about Holly, he was happy to track it down and send it. We don’t have the same type of relationship as the Walters family, but we’re working on it. I told my dad and brother I was coming home for Christmas next year, no matter what. It’ll never be the same without Mom, but it doesn’t mean the three of us can’t be together and find our own way to keep celebrating.

“It’s beautiful, Teddy. Will you help me put it on?” She takes it from the box and holds it around her neck for me to clasp. Once it’s on, she touches

the necklace and smiles. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. She would have loved you.” I swallow around the lump in my throat. “Because I love you, Holly. I know we’ve only been dating a short while, but I’ve been falling for you a little at a time for as long as I’ve known you.”

Her lips part, but she doesn’t speak.

“I’m sorry. Shit, did I freak you out?”

Her head slowly shakes side to side. “No. I love you too.”

People begin to countdown. “Ten. Nine. Eight.”

I don’t wait for one, I kiss her. We’re still making up for lost time, after all, and I don’t want to waste a single second.



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Rebecca Jenshak is a *USA Today* bestselling author of new adult and sports romance. She lives in Arizona with her family. When she isn't writing, you can find her attending local sporting events, hanging out with family and friends, or with her nose buried in a book.

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