



HOPE
HOLLOWAY
AND
CECELIA SCOTT

THE
Asheville
CHRISTMAS
GIFT

❖ CAROLINA CHRISTMAS * BOOK TWO ❖

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Hope Holloway and Cecelia Scott

Carolina Christmas Book 2

The Asheville Christmas Gift

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A Personal Note from the Authors

Welcome to the mountains of Asheville, North Carolina, the backdrop for our first collaborative writing endeavor. We hope you love the sisters, the story, and the setting of this holiday trilogy as much as we do. This concept was born during a week-long cabin vacation with our husbands, while we watched the sun rise over the Blue Ridge Mountains. Charmed by Asheville and the surrounding area—where Cece lived a few years ago—we started brainstorming the story of three sisters who returned to the mountains for a life-changing holiday. The idea got ahold of us and soon we were sketching out characters, plots, and a system for co-writing that has worked wonderfully. We like to think of this trilogy as a Christmas gift to our readers who've been loyal and enthusiastic since we started writing. We hope you are enchanted, delighted, and warmed by this Carolina Christmas.

With love and joy,
Hope & Cece

*This trilogy is dedicated with love to our angel in heaven, sweet Sarah.
We miss you every day.*

The Carolina Christmas Trilogy

[The Asheville Christmas Cabin](#) – book 1

[The Asheville Christmas Gift](#) – book 2

[The Asheville Christmas Wedding](#) – book 3

Chapter One

Angie

ANGIE MESSINA HAD no idea what had transpired in California, but something had sent her sixteen-year-old daughter across the country on her own. Brooke had arrived at the family's cabin at ten o'clock on a snowy night in the Blue Ridge Mountains, three thousand miles from home.

All Angie knew was that her resourceful, intrepid, and obviously desperate daughter boarded a plane in San Francisco and ended up in Asheville, North Carolina. Then she got an Uber up the mountain and fell into Angie's arms, crying and pleading for her mother not to send her back. This from the drama queen who'd sounded as though she'd actually *die* if she had to spend the month with Angie in "some creepy cabin on the other side of the universe."

Instead, Brooke had opted to stay alone at home with her father in Menlo Park, and then she planned to spend Christmas week with her boyfriend's family up in Lake Tahoe.

But here she was, and here, Angie hoped, she would stay.

Before Brooke supplied any details on her decision, the house filled as everyone returned from the eventful Christmas tree lighting in town, all as shocked as she was to find a new arrival at the mountain home where they were spending the entire month of December.

In the midst of the greetings and hugs, Brooke slyly sidestepped direct questions about why she was there, but she hugged her cousins, kissed

Angie's sisters, Noelle and Eve, and congratulated her great-aunt Elizabeth on her engagement.

Finally, Brooke turned to Angie, her big brown eyes brimming with anxiety and a few tears.

"Can I talk to you privately?" she whispered.

She didn't have to ask twice. With a quick excuse, Angie whisked her to the second-floor bedroom, where she found Noelle, throwing her belongings together.

"I'm going to move down to the den and the pullout sofa," her sister said, pulling back her long dark hair to give Brooke and Angie a warm look.

"You don't have to do that, Aunt Noelle," Brooke said.

Noelle shook her head. "You stay in this room with your mom, Brooke. I know you two have a lot to catch up on and I'll be really comfy down there, where I can tap away on my laptop early in the morning and not annoy my roommate."

"Thanks, Noelle," Angie said, fully aware that her sister was being kind and generous, allowing Brooke and Angie much-needed privacy.

"Of course." She smiled at Brooke, her own eyes misty. "My sweet niece is here! We've been talking so much about you these last few weeks and I know your mom is over the moon to have you here for our Asheville Christmas."

Angie braced for Brooke's typical noncommittal teenage shrug and a quick, "Whatever." But she stunned them both by reaching for Noelle and giving her a hug.

"Mom's always happy when she's with her wombmates," Brooke said with a quick laugh at the reference to the fact that her mother was one of triplets. "Especially now," she added. "Things have been rough."

Did she know *how* rough, Angie wondered as she and Brooke helped Noelle gather some things.

In the past two weeks—the first half of a month-long Christmas getaway with her sisters and their aunt—Angie had discovered that her husband of eighteen years was cheating on her. Now she knew that Craig's cool distance, which had grown so bad the past year or so, was much more than the result of a man obsessed with his job.

She'd also battled a distance with her daughter, who had grown uncharacteristically sullen and snotty the past few months.

Was Brooke in trouble? Well, she was here and not in jail, the hospital, or

on the streets, so that was at least somewhat of a relief.

Or had she come all the way here to tell Angie that her husband, Brooke's dad, was a lying, cheating scumbag? Too bad Angie had already found that out on her own and was planning to pack up tonight and get on the first plane to California in the morning. In her heart, she knew she had to confront Craig face to face, start the process of a divorce, and attempt to fix what she could of their broken family.

Once they were alone, Angie dropped onto one of the twin beds and stared at her daughter. "Color me stunned."

Sighing, Brooke sat across from her on the other bed. "I know, Mom. Please don't kill me for doing this."

"Kill you?" Angie scoffed. "I'm so happy to see you, I could cry. But you don't look happy at all. Will you tell me?"

Brooke swallowed and nodded. "Yeah, I will."

"I'm here for you, baby," Angie assured her, leaning forward to reach for Brooke's hand. "Whatever you need."

"What I need is to not go back there."

The ice in her voice sent a chill through Angie. "What happened?"

Brooke forced a smile and looked around, as if seeing her surroundings for the first time. "This place is cute if you like that super rustic vibe. Why haven't we been here before?"

Okay, she needed time and didn't want to dive in. Angie nodded, knowing her daughter well enough to play along.

"This cabin—"

"Cabin? Uh, Mom. It's huge. Not exactly the one-room log spider-fest I was picturing."

Angie conceded that with a tip of her head. "It's been in my family for a hundred years, and has been added onto over the years. I think I told you I spent summers and Christmases here with my sisters and parents, but..." She shifted on the bed, broaching a subject she rarely mentioned to her daughter. "You know, we were here when my parents were killed in a car accident when I was about your age. So, after that, we stopped coming."

Brooke made a sad face, showing a surprising amount of sympathy. "Yeah, it would be hard."

"But Aunt Elizabeth, my mother's sister, decided to renovate it this past year and invited my sisters and me here to make new memories. Remember, you—and Dad—were welcome, too, but..."

“I was a total brat when you told us.” She snorted and shook her head. “Sorry.”

It was the closest thing to a heartfelt apology Angie imagined she was going to get, so she accepted it fully. “You were—*are*—pretty wrapped up in your own life,” she said. “But now you’re here. You going to tell me why or should we procrastinate some more?”

Brooke slipped into a smile, suddenly looking very young and fresh and so much like the girl she’d been as recently as last summer. But at the beginning of her junior year, just three months ago, something—a new boyfriend and some very sketchy friends—had changed her daughter from a fairly happy, easygoing young girl into a mouthy, secretive teenager Angie barely recognized.

“Let’s procrastinate,” Brooke said with a wry smile. “What’s the deal with the old dude and Aunt Elizabeth? Are they seriously engaged? And why is her hair gray? And did I hear him call her Bitsy? Like, seriously?”

Angie laughed. “Yes, seriously. And they got engaged tonight. In fact, if you’d showed up a few hours earlier, you could have gone to the Christmas tree lighting in town and watched the proposal like we all did.”

She expected an eyeroll and the usual pronouncement of, “Lame!” but Brooke surprised her yet again by pressing her hands to her lips.

“Sweet,” she whispered.

“It was,” Angie agreed. “Anything else, or will you tell me now?”

She thought for a moment. “Those three boys look a lot bigger.”

Angie had to laugh, and went along with one more detour. “Yes, Eve’s sons are growing, and they are wonderful. You’ll get to know them now that you’re here.” She lifted a brow. “As soon as you tell me why.”

“Okay, Mom, okay.” She let out a sigh and rubbed her palms on her jean-clad thighs, her gaze cast down. “I just...I don’t know where to begin.”

“Just start.”

“I had to get away.” Her daughter looked up at her, her dark brown eyes troubled behind thick lashes. “I couldn’t stay there, and I’m...I’m not going back.”

“Brooke, what happened?” Angie moved from her bed to get next to Brooke, terrified that Craig had somehow hurt her.

“Vance is a jerk,” she said abruptly, her voice quivering.

Oh, okay. Boyfriend problems. *That* she could probably deal with.

Angie reached for her daughter, placing a gentle hand on her arm and

giving it a squeeze. “I’m so sorry. What did he do?”

“I don’t even know how to tell you all of this, Mom. It’s complicated and messy and I’ve been a super crappy person lately.”

Angie felt tears well in her eyes. “Honey, whatever you did in the past is forgiven, okay? I’m your mother, not judge and jury. You can talk to me.”

“Thank you.” She drew in a slow, deep breath and shifted her body on the bed so she was facing Angie directly. Twirling her dark hair around in her fingertips, she took a deep breath. “It all started when I decided that this year was going to be different at that school.”

“Different?” Angie asked, confused.

“Look, I know Dad wanted to show off by having me go to Willows Academy.”

“It’s the best school in the county,” Angie said, always supportive of the expensive private school, certain it would be an excellent education for Brooke.

“It’s also wall-to-wall with the kids of tech billionaires who never, not once in their life, heard the word ‘no’ from a parent.”

Angie drew back, surprised to hear that level of maturity from a girl who never took well to the word no herself.

“Anyway,” she continued, “my first two years I had no friends. I couldn’t connect and then, last summer, I did that tennis thing at our club, and I met Vance. Well, to be honest, Vance met me. I totally set my sights on him and knew that if I could be his girlfriend, I’d be in with the *crème de la crème* of Willows.” She snorted. “Except, it turns out they are the *crème de la crap* and I never want to see any of them again.”

“Oh, honey. What happened? They have cliques? Mean girls? Are they drinking?”

She gave a dry laugh. “If only, Mom. Nothing so, uh, innocent.” She looked into Angie’s eyes, the pain in hers evident. “I hate to burst your sweet bubble. It’s way darker than that.”

Angie winced. “Do I want to know?”

“Not really. There’s a secret society that only the coolest, richest, most reckless kids get into and...I got invited.”

Angie just stared at her. “And...”

“And I was pretty excited until...hazing weekend.”

“Oh my God, Brooke.” She covered her mouth, a punch of shame and guilt smashing into her gut. How could she not know this was happening in

her daughter's life? "Did they hurt you?"

"No. Because you didn't raise a dummy, I'm happy to say. I chickened out at the last minute, ran away, and made a complete fool out of myself. I'm not only the laughingstock of Willows Academy, I'm a pariah, and that group—the society? I swear to God, Mom, they will make my life a living hell if I go back. I know things that I'm not supposed to." Fear made her eyes darker and wider. "I'm not scared they'll hurt me, but I'm not entirely sure I'll feel safe and please don't suggest the police and *please* don't make me go back."

Angie blew out a breath. "We'll find another school."

"Dad will blow a gasket if I leave Willows."

"Let him blow it. I don't care."

Brooke's eyes flickered with surprise. "Maybe he won't, though. He totally blew me off when I called him and begged him to come get me at that place up in the woods last weekend. He told me I got myself up there, so I could get myself back."

Because he was too busy going to hotels with his...lover. "He wouldn't pick you up?"

"Of course not," she said. "Dad's idea of good parenting is full access to a platinum card, which I darn near melted on an Uber from Santa Cruz—"

"You were in Santa Cruz?" Angie gasped.

"For the society thing, but I got home, no thanks to Dad who didn't care that they wanted me to..." She shuddered. "Don't make me tell you."

Angie groaned with physical regret. "I'm so, so sorry, Brooke. I should have been there for you."

"Mom, you were here. And you invited me. You wanted me to come. You wanted Dad here, too, although I don't know why, since he's the literal worst."

Angie couldn't argue that.

"So I got home and tried to figure out what to do," she said, looking up at Angie. "Dad was MIA, naturally, so I booked a flight to Charlotte, then another to Asheville, got an Uber and got to the address you texted us when you left. It was so dark and empty, I thought I had the wrong place, but I saw your sneakers by the door and..." Her voice wavered. "I knew you couldn't be far..." She fought a sob. "And I really, really needed—"

"Oh, baby!" Angie threw her arms around Brooke and let her sob, fighting her own tears and a cocktail of emotions that ranged from the darkest anger to the deepest love. "I'm so, so sorry you had to grow up like that and

go through that all alone.”

“It’s fine.” She swiped her nose with the back of her hand, easing back. “Please don’t make me go back.”

Transferring to another school mid-year wouldn’t be easy, but maybe things weren’t that bad. Brooke was too tender right now to hear anything but an agreement.

“We’ll figure it out, I promise.” Angie put her hand on Brooke’s cheek. “And we’ll have Christmas here after all.”

Brooke nodded and leaned back, bracing herself, but her hand hit something hard and she turned, noticing the half-filled suitcase behind her. “We should take that down to Aunt Noelle,” she said.

Angie swallowed. “It’s not hers,” she said. “It’s mine.”

“You didn’t unpack yet?”

“I was, uh, planning to go back tomorrow.”

Brooke blinked. “Why? I thought you were staying here until after New Year’s.”

How long could she keep the truth about Craig from Brooke? Was it too much on top of everything else this girl was dealing with? Probably, but Brooke had been honest and she deserved the same.

“Things with your dad and I have gotten...complicated.”

“Oh.” Brooke’s cheeks grew pale. “So my theory was right.”

Angie frowned. “What theory?”

She shook her head. “Just forget it. Whatever is going on with you and Dad...it’s fine. I don’t care. It’s not my problem.”

“What is your theory?” Angie pressed.

“I think...” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I think Dad might be...having a, um, you know...”

“Affair,” Angie finished for her. “You knew?”

Brooke shrugged. “I never had, like, concrete evidence or anything like that, but it was starting to get pretty obvious. He’s never home, he’s always staying in these random hotels. I heard him on the phone with her and it was totally gross. I’m young, but I’m not stupid.”

Angie’s heart dropped with a thud. “What a pig to expose you to something like that.”

“It’s the least of what I’ve been through.”

Angie wrapped an arm around Brooke, rocked with pity for her little girl. “Brookie,” she whispered, using a long-retired nickname. “How’d we end up

here?”

“I don’t know, but... What are you going to do about Dad?”

She swallowed, not ready to drop “file for divorce” on Brooke’s narrow shoulders yet. “I’m not sure yet. I haven’t even talked to him.”

Brooke nodded. “Okay. Whatever you want, Mom. I’m on your side.”

“I really hope there aren’t sides,” Angie said.

“There will be. But can I be real?”

Could she take any more realness? What other bombs would Brooke drop?

“Sure,” she said, bracing herself.

“I haven’t eaten since I left the airport in San Francisco. Is there a Sweet Greens around here?”

Angie gave a dry laugh of relief. Finally, something she could handle. “No, but there’s a Rocky’s Hot Chicken Shack and we have buckets of the stuff downstairs.”

“Ew.” Brooke scrunched up her face. “Mom, you know I only eat plant-based.”

“Mm-hmm.” Angie stood up, gesturing for Brooke to follow her out of the bedroom and back downstairs. “That might change while you’re here. You never know.”

“Uh, no. No one changes that easily, Mom.”

“Yeah? We’ll see about that.” She gave Brooke another hug. “Let’s scare you up a salad that you won’t eat when you see the fried chicken. And then I’ll put my suitcase away, because you and I are spending the next two weeks right here planning a big Christmas, a barn wedding, and, oh, I’m volunteering at Biltmore House, which is a castle that will put your secret society friends’ houses to shame.”

Brooke’s jaw loosened as she searched Angie’s face, a million questions in her eyes. Then she just laughed and hugged her.

“All right. I’ll try the fried chicken, Mom.”

“Darn right you will.”

Arm-in-arm, they went back downstairs to announce they were staying and, for the first time in a long time, Angie’s heart soared with hope and happiness. There was still trouble ahead, but with Brooke here, it might be a lot easier to face it.

Chapter Two

Eve

THE NEXT MORNING, Eve sighed as she woke in the arms of her husband, who had arrived to surprise her at last night's Christmas tree lighting. Not only had he managed to make the event, as promised, he'd announced that he wasn't going back to work in Charlotte until early January.

"What a gift," she murmured, dropping a kiss on his shoulder.

"Mmmm." He woke slowly, pulling her into him for a real kiss, married long enough that a bit of morning breath didn't bother them. "Speaking of gifts, what do you want for Christmas, dearest wife of mine?"

She smiled into another kiss, then inched back. "I got what I want, Dr. David Gallagher. You, here, with me, waking up together with days stretched ahead to do nothing but enjoy our boys and our life and our marriage." She wrinkled her nose. "Too cheesy?"

"A little," he said with a laugh, then tapped the tip of that nose. "But sweet, and I'm happy you're happy."

"What about you? What do you want for Christmas?"

He studied her for a moment, then gave the slightest lift to one brow, as if to say, "You know."

And she did.

"You're not letting go of Baby Number Four, are you?" she asked.

"I can't, Evie," he admitted. "And I know your issues. I'm never home, I work crazy hours, and you're already up to your eyeballs with three very

active boys.”

“Plus, I’m a few days from forty and I don’t know if another baby would be as easy to conceive—or carry—as the first three,” she said. “Yes, I love the idea—in concept. But a lot of things about it are daunting, including the fact that my husband is a very, very busy brain surgeon.”

He nodded, quiet.

“Mothering isn’t for the faint of heart,” she added, propping herself on her elbow to make the point. “I mean, look what Angie went through last night.”

“She seemed pretty happy when she came down with Brooke.”

“Happy Brooke’s here, yes, but honey, she got *herself* here with a plane and an Uber.” Eve sat up completely, the very idea stunning and scaring her so much. “She’s sixteen, David. She’s only a few years older than James!”

“*Five* years older than James.” He gave her a playful smile, tugging her back down close to him. “Kudos to Angie for raising someone so resourceful. She got here safely.”

“I would have been beside myself if I were Angie, knowing that my kid had been traversing the country alone and I wasn’t even aware of it.” She shuddered. “I can’t imagine. I check the window fifty times when the boys are playing outside.”

David gave her a look that was part playful, part stern as he stroked his thumb along her cheek. “Evie, you know that one day the boys are going to grow up, right?”

“Well, yes, but...not yet. Not for a while.”

“But they have to learn some things on their own.”

“Not how to fly across the country alone,” she countered.

“How to grow up. I love that you’re involved, but there’s a fine line between an attentive parent and a, um, control freak.”

She didn’t bother to disagree; her need for control was legendary and the source of both amusement and some friction in the family.

“I’ll let go when they’re not young. They’re kids. James is eleven—”

“And smarter and more capable than some doctors I work with.”

“Bradley is turning eight next month.”

“Not exactly a risktaker.”

She had to laugh at her uber-cautious son. “And Sawyer?”

“Okay, the Wild Thing needs constant supervision,” he conceded. “But he has two older brothers. And here? Your sisters, aunt, and now his big cousin,

Brooke. Plus Sonny's dog, Lucky, never leaves his side."

"That's here. This isn't real life. Sadly."

David frowned, searching her face. "What does that mean?"

"Oh, nothing," she said quickly. "I love our life in Charlotte, I promise. It's just that being here in the mountains, with my sisters? And Aunt Elizabeth? It's heavenly. I love being surrounded by family and nature, with a slow pace and jaw-dropping views. I love this part of North Carolina and sometimes I dream of chucking it all and living here."

"Like...chucking my practice, patients, and salary?" he asked on a laugh of disbelief.

She looked at him for a minute, tempted to ask if it would really be that bad. But he was the one who'd studied for eons to be a neurosurgeon with a brain specialty, and she couldn't even plant a thought like that.

"I *also* dream of a little girl," she clarified. "And I promised you last night that we can talk about it."

"Not constantly," he said. "What I really want to do for the next few weeks is be alone with you. We've got help galore, and I'd love to explore this mountain town with you. You're not the only one who feels distant when I'm at work, you know. I miss you when we're apart."

She searched his face, lost in his ever-changing hazel eyes that always gazed at her with love. "We're so lucky, David."

"That I work all the time?"

"That we're solid," she said. "I love you. And to prove that to you, I'm going to really work on letting go of control with the boys. Especially James. He's going to be in middle school next year."

"I think you'll be glad you did, Evie. And you know what else we need to do if we're ever going to have another baby?"

She looked at him, not sure what he meant.

He laughed and pulled her into him, kissing her deeply. "Practice."

"That's the fun part," she agreed, closing her eyes as she melted into him.



HOURS LATER, Eve still felt like she was walking on air. She hadn't been kidding when she'd told David how much she loved this life, and today was a

perfect reason why. The boys were outside playing in the few inches of snow with Lucky, who could be heard barking happily.

Her two sisters were hanging out in the sunroom, talking with Brooke, while Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Sonny—it had been quite easy to start calling him by that name—had just arrived back from Ingles with a huge lunch spread.

David and Eve helped them set out the food, chatting about the upcoming wedding they were planning to have on New Year's Eve.

“First things first, though, darlin’.” Sonny McPherson, the Southern farmer who'd captured Elizabeth's heart, took a step back from the kitchen island and looked out at the ten-foot tree they'd recently cut and stood next to the fireplace in the great room. “We gotta decorate that tree. What are we waiting for?”

“Oh, we will soon enough,” Elizabeth said. “But not the angel on top.”

“Why not?” Sonny asked.

She laughed and glanced at Eve.

“Well, there's an old tradition,” Elizabeth said. “Back from when the girls were little. Christmas Eve *Eve*, we celebrate three more birthdays, not just the baby Jesus.”

“We would hang whatever new ornaments our mom gave us,” Eve added, “and then the birthday triplets got to place the angel at the top of the tree.”

“That's a sweet tradition,” Sonny said, smiling at Elizabeth with the same love that had been in his eyes last night when he'd asked her to marry him.

“So we'll keep it,” Elizabeth agreed, brushing back a lock of silver hair that had slipped over her face. She looked even more radiant than usual today, but that was understandable. She was a woman of sixty-three who'd accepted her first and only proposal at the end of the Asheville Christmas tree lighting. “We'll hang the ornaments soon enough. Maybe get Caro and her family, Hannah, and Jace, too.”

“Who's Jace?” David frowned in thought. “The man Noelle was kissing last night?”

“Hey! I heard that,” Noelle called from the sunroom. “If you're gonna gossip about me, bro-in-law, do it to my face.”

They laughed as she came into the kitchen, followed by Angie and Brooke.

“Well, what's the deal with him?” David asked. “You looked like more than old friends.”

“You have a boyfriend, Aunt Noelle?” Brooke’s eyes widened. “Dang, that didn’t take long. You’ve been here less than two weeks.”

“It took twenty-five years,” Noelle said. “He officially asked me to be his girlfriend two and a half decades ago, Brooke, and I never gave him an answer. Now *that* is playing hard to get.”

As the laughter died down, Noelle shrugged. “Honestly, we like spending time together with the full knowledge that the clock is ticking. When I have to go back to New York, it’s over.”

“You could do long-distance,” Aunt Elizabeth said.

Noelle made a face. “Nah. Not fair to him or Cassie, his little girl. They truly need stability in their lives and I’m an art dealer with an apartment in Manhattan and a long-term plan to live in London. Cute Jace and even cuter Cassie are not going to be part of that.”

Eve could have sworn she heard a note of regret in her sister’s voice, but lunch was served, and she slipped out to get the boys in and cleaned up.

She wasn’t surprised when Angie joined her, stepping out to the patio for the first moment of alone time they’d had all day.

“You doing okay?” Eve asked after she called the three boys to come into the house.

“I am,” Angie said. “And so is Brooke.”

“That’s good, but, whoa. She got herself across the country.” Eve shook her head. “I’d freak out.”

“Well, since I didn’t know she was on a plane, I couldn’t. But, that girl has been through the mill. And Craig was useless with a capital U.”

“Have you called him?” Eve asked.

Angie curled her lip. “I’m avoiding him, but I asked her to text him last night and tell him, and, big surprise, he didn’t even call or text me to talk about it.”

“Geez, he’s checked out,” Eve said.

Angie snorted. “He’s toast, Eve. I just have to figure out how burned.”

“Mom, I saw bear tracks!” Sawyer announced as he bounded up the stairs, his face flushed from running around in the cold air. “His feet are big, too.”

“Maybe it’s Bigfoot,” Angie said dryly.

“Yes! C’mon, Lucky!” Sawyer kicked off his boots and did a one-eighty into the house, followed by the golden retriever, who’d basically attached himself to the youngest Gallagher boy. “Bigfoot! That’s what we’ll call him.”

“He’s ridiculous, Mom,” James said as he followed.

Last, her middle son, Bradley, came up the stairs, the only one with the wherewithal to remember to bring Lucky’s leash and the ball he’d been chasing.

“Have there been Bigfoot sightings around here?” he asked, with just enough trepidation that Eve had to bite her lip.

“Daily,” Angie teased. Then she threw her arm around Bradley’s neck. “JK, little man. The only sightings are Ingles’ world-famous cookies, which you get after lunch.”

The boys headed in, but Eve and Angie stayed outside for a few minutes, quietly enjoying the air and each other.

“I feel like I love it here more each day,” Eve said, tilting her head back to let the winter sun warm her face.

“Amen to that,” Angie agreed. “I was dreading packing that bag and going back to California, but now I’ve got a reprieve.”

“Think she’ll stay or disappear as quickly as she came?”

“Oh, she’ll stay,” Angie said. “She got in with a bad crowd and doesn’t even want to go back to her school in January.”

“You could homeschool her,” Eve said. “It’s not that hard.”

Angie gave her a look. “I could fly to the moon, too. No, thanks.”

“Well, if you change your mind, I can help. And speaking of changing her mind, what do you think Noelle’s going to do?”

Angie frowned. “About?”

“Leaving Jace for a second time,” Eve explained. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her like this with a man.”

“She’s never given any man a chance,” Angie agreed. “But I honestly can’t see her giving up her life in New York, and didn’t she say her next promotion puts her one step closer to living in London and running that office of Sotheby’s? She’s been working toward that dream for as long as I can remember.”

Eve wasn’t convinced of that. “Look at Aunt Elizabeth, her idol. She’s wearing overalls and planning a barn wedding.”

Angie laughed and shook her head. “Nah. This is just a trip down memory lane with a cute guy and his even cuter daughter. Our city girl isn’t going to go country mouse.”

“Stranger things have happened, you know.” Eve put an arm around Angie and nudged her toward the front door. “Come on, let’s go eat.”

As they ate, talked, and laughed, Eve continued to soak up the day of contentment. She'd meant it when she told David she loved being here, surrounded by family.

"So, what's new at your farm?" David asked Sonny. "Weren't you expecting a foal?"

"Athena is hanging in, still not delivering," Sonny said.

"But she's ready," Noelle said, joining them at the table. "Jace said she's getting really restless and should deliver anytime. Poor thing. She's eleven months pregnant."

Eve shuddered. "Ouch."

"She'll go when it's her time," Sonny said. "It's the sheep I'm having problems with."

"What's the problem?" David asked, sounding oddly interested in farm life, which touched Eve.

"I have three of them, and I pen them with two llamas and a couple of goats."

"Llamas?" Sawyer sat up and gasped. "I've never seen one."

"I got a black one and a white one," Sonny said. "Good as gold. So are the goats. It's my sheep that keep escaping. One every day, it seems."

"How?" David asked.

"I wish I knew, but I end up having to go find them in the woods like Jesus leaving the ninety-nine to find the missing one," Sonny said with a laugh.

The boys didn't get the biblical reference, but they kept all eyes on Sonny, clearly fascinated.

"The fence seems to be intact," he continued. "Still, one of them sneaks out once a day through a secret getaway, and I can't risk losing one."

"A secret getaway?" Bradley and Sawyer asked in perfect awe and unison.

"It's a break in the fence, and the only way I'd be able to find it is to sit out there all day and half the night and watch them like a prison guard." Sonny shook his head. "I don't want to do that."

"I will!" Sawyer said, standing to make his point.

"It actually sounds fun," James agreed.

"I don't know about fun," Bradley said. "But you can't keep losing sheep."

Sonny laughed. "No, I can't. And if you boys want to be shepherds, I'll

pay you for your efforts with a bonus if you find the break.”

“Pay us?” James looked up, always motivated by extra money to buy video games.

“Bonus?” Sawyer beamed. “I want one of those.” Then he looked at Eve. “What is it?”

She laughed. “It’s usually money, but you’re not going to stand out in the cold day and night.”

“Aw, Mom!” Sawyer whined.

“Why not?” James asked.

“It would be cold,” the ever-wise and cautious Bradley said.

“Yes, it would be,” Eve agreed. “And that’s not the only reason why not. You can’t stay out in a field alone.”

All of the attention in the room shifted to her with varying degrees of questions and uncertainty, but the only gaze she held was David’s. He looked...keen on the idea.

Seriously? “They can’t,” she said on a laugh to him. “Can they?”

“Well, they could,” he replied, drawing out the last word. “If we’d let them.”

“It’s not unsafe,” Sonny said. “It’s just boring.”

“What if one of the boys got lost?” Eve asked, lifting a brow. “Not that I’m naming names—*ahem*—Sawyer.”

“Lucky will be there,” Sonny said. “He knows those woods and is a good guard dog.”

“And I’ll keep an eye on everything,” James offered. “I’m old enough and I could borrow someone’s phone or, uh...” He lifted his brows. “Get a phone of my own.”

She looked at David again, hoping for help she knew she wasn’t going to get when he shrugged.

“No phone yet, James,” David said. “But you can borrow mine.”

Eve blinked at him.

“I think it could be good and fun, profitable for the boys,” he said. “And...it could free us up to do some sightseeing and shopping.”

“A husband who wants to sightsee and shop,” Elizabeth cooed. “I think that’s a gift right there, Eve darling.”

What he wanted was time alone with her, Eve knew. And what she’d promised was to let go of some control. Wasn’t this the perfect opportunity? From the look in her husband’s hazel eyes, he sure thought so.

“Well, maybe Sonny can take you over to the farm today and you can look around and see how much is involved before you—”

“Yay!” Sawyer was already jumping up and down, high-fiving James and Bradley. “We’re gonna be shepherds!”

“Let’s all go over today,” Elizabeth said, looking around. “I’d like to look at the barn and figure out just how to decorate it for a reception in two weeks.”

“I love that idea.” Eve stood to start clearing the dishes. “Angie, Brooke, Noelle? You guys up for a little trip to the farm?”

Brooke and Angie shared a look and a quick second of silent agreement. “We’re in,” Angie said.

But Noelle shook her head. “I have to call my boss,” she said. “I blew her off so hard last night and it might cost me a big client. I’ll pass.”

“Well, if you change your mind, you’ll know where we are,” Elizabeth said.

As they cleaned up and planned the trip to the farm, Eve listened to her sons excitedly talk about their new job. As she rinsed a dish, David put a strong arm around her waist and added a kiss on her hair.

“Look at you, letting go.”

She turned and looked up at him, smiling. “Baby steps.”

“Operative word being...” He put his lips by her ear to whisper, “Baby.”

They laughed and kissed, adding to the glow of her very happy day.

Chapter Three

Noelle

LUCINDA BUTLER'S greeting was as cold as the frost around the edges of the window where Noelle stood, gazing out as she made the call.

"So, I'm guessing you will not be here for the auction run-through tonight or the actual event tomorrow." The other woman let out a disgusted sigh. "I had to call in Georgia Fantome, who will handle the auction but slice off fifteen percent that will come straight from our bottom line."

And Noelle's commission.

"I'm really sorry, Lucinda," she said, and kind of wished she *was* sorry. But truth be told, the kiss she'd shared with Jace Fleming last night and the promise of many more just like it over the next two weeks was worth the hit to her bank account.

What was it that Angie had said the day they got here? *There's more to life than money*. Yeah. There was the thrill of kissing Jace.

"But you're in great hands with Georgia," she added when Lucinda was silent for a beat too long.

"I'd be happier if it were you and so would our client. Mr. Harrington was not thrilled, to say the least."

She winced. "You called him already?"

"Well, you didn't. You're too busy taking a month-long vacation."

"Lucinda, I'm not on vacation. I sold the Darrow last week. I outbid Collier on the East End Gallery deal in Chicago." She tried to keep the

defensiveness out of her voice, knowing that none of Sotheby's other directors of luxury art management could claim two deals that big in the past week.

"*Barely* outbid Collier," Lucinda said in her clipped tone.

Nothing was ever quite good enough for this woman, Noelle thought as irritation skittered up her spine.

"I thought I had the auction covered," Noelle said, knowing it was a waste of time to blame the Sotheby's colleague who had agreed to help but backed out at the last minute. Harrington was Noelle's client, and this was her auction and it was her decision not to go back for it. "I'm fully responsible for the problem," she added. "And I understand what it will cost."

"Do you, though?" Lucinda demanded. "It's not just your commission on the table, Noelle. It's the Harrington account, which is sizeable. And your promotion, which is still...not finalized."

She managed not to grunt at the threats, but closed her eyes and swallowed. "I realize that," she said, wondering just how long she'd have to eat crow. "But like I said, Georgia Fantome is one of the best dealers in the business. She'll bring her own clients and the auction will be a huge success."

"And if she walks off with the Harrington account?" Lucinda said. "That's on you, too."

Noelle sighed and dropped back to the sofa that was still open from when she'd slept on it the night before. Part of her just wanted to crawl under the covers and go back to dreaming about Jace. Another part of her wanted to hang up the phone and rush down to Sonny's farm to plan a wedding. A big part.

No part of her was that concerned about losing the Harrington account.

"Okay, then," Lucinda said with that voice that indicated she'd closed the topic.

Thank goodness. There was time to go to Sonny's farm and plan a wedding. "Lucinda, I'll give you a call later this—"

"We're getting the Sheldon Basil estate sale on January second," Lucinda interjected. "Will your vacation be over in time for you to manage that, or will you need a few extra weeks?"

The sarcasm wasn't lost on Noelle, pushing her patience.

"I'll be back, Lucinda." She wouldn't like it, but she would be.

Wait. She wouldn't *like* it? Since when? That estate sale was monstrous.

"Fine. I'll email the inventory list and photos," Lucinda said. "I'll expect

you to handle every aspect of that sale, Noelle, top to bottom. I'll want the pricing and an inventory as soon as possible, and maybe a few early sales for the biggest pieces. Don't pass it off, please."

"Of course not." Even though it meant way more time at the computer than she wanted to spend between the middle of December and the beginning of January. "I'll be happy to have it to you in no time. Thank you, Lucinda."

The other woman hung up without even saying goodbye, leaving Noelle with a sick feeling in her heart.

When work felt uncertain or she lost a deal, Noelle always coped the way Aunt Elizabeth had taught her. Make a bigger deal. Get a better client. Knock your boss's socks off.

Or...head down to the farm.

Yep. Aunt Elizabeth taught her *that*, too. A recent lesson, but still valuable.

Twenty minutes later, she was rolling Eve's van around the bend and pulling into Red Bridge Farm. She couldn't help looking for Jace's truck, since he was here so often, but she didn't see his big Ford.

Climbing out, she walked toward the red barn, making a mental note to swing by the stables and check on poor pregnant Athena. But the sight of Aunt Elizabeth on a ladder to a hayloft pulled her right into the massive wooden structure perched on a rise overlooking the hills.

"What are you doing up there, Bitsy?" she called, jokingly using the nickname that Elizabeth's fiancé had hung on her.

"Just trying to see if we've got outlets up here so we can string lights." She made her way down the ladder, plucking hay from her ponytail. "Done working already?"

"Done getting reamed by my boss, more like. I had to give up my auction commission to Georgia Fantome."

Aunt Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "She's a snake," she said with the authority of someone who had held Georgia Fantome's position for many years and was even more successful than the other art dealer. "She'll steal your commission *and* your client."

"So I've been warned. Ask me if I care."

Elizabeth let out a hoot. "Now we're talkin'. Next thing you know, you'll be wearing overalls." She leaned back and eyed Noelle's designer jeans. "Want to borrow a pair?"

"Don't push it," she deadpanned. "Where is everyone?"

“Brooke and Angie went to see the pregnant horse. Eve and David and the boys went with Sonny to learn shepherds’ duties. I’m here...” She turned and looked around the two-story barn. “Planning my wedding.”

Noelle smiled at her. “Now there are words I never thought I’d hear you say.”

“Right?” Her blue eyes danced. “Look at me being a bride.”

“You know, Aunt Elizabeth, I never envisioned you getting married.” Noelle took a few steps and ran her hand along the old wooden siding inside the barn. “But I *really* never envisioned you getting married in a barn.”

Aunt Elizabeth cracked up, shaking her head in a way that showed she, too, was as flabbergasted by her own one-eighty as Noelle was.

“You know what, darling?” she asked. “You think you have your life planned and that big man upstairs just chuckles and throws Sonny McPherson in your path.”

Noelle sighed, walking over to a string of vineyard lights that had been stretched out over the hay, the weight of the call and all her recent emotions on her shoulders. “I have to tell you something,” she said.

“Vineyard lights are so last year?”

Noelle smiled. “They’re perfect. And...so are you.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth put her hand on her chest. “What brought that on?”

“Love,” she whispered. “The love I have for you, the love you have for Sonny. All of it.”

Elizabeth smiled. “It’s a good thing, that love.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Elizabeth,” Noelle added, holding out both arms as her voice caught. “I should never have doubted your love or your choices or your wisdom.”

Hugging her, Elizabeth patted her back as if Noelle were a little girl again. “You didn’t doubt long, and I completely understand.” She added a kiss on Noelle’s cheek before drawing back to look at her. “I taught you how to be discerning. That’s what a good art dealer is and it’s one of your greatest qualities on the job and in life. You were just evaluating the investment, and that takes time.”

“You’re making excuses for me because I was closed-minded.”

“Not at all,” she said. “It’s over and forgotten, my dearest darling.”

Awash with relief, Noelle hugged her again, so deeply grateful for this woman. “I adore Sonny, I really do,” she told her aunt. “He’s a good man with a huge heart and a kind soul. And he’s also the luckiest farmer alive to

win the heart of..." She smiled and gave a sly look. "Bitsy."

Aunt Elizabeth thrust a victorious fist in the air. "I love that name!"

"I love you," Noelle told her, laughing and hugging one more time.

"That horse is fat!" Brooke's voice broke them apart, and the comment made them laugh again.

"Don't call Athena fat," Noelle said, turning to see her niece bound into the barn. "I understand it hurts her feelings."

Angie was right behind her. "What's gonna hurt is giving birth to a horse," she joked. "Hey, Noelle. How did it go with your boss?"

"About what I expected, but whatever." She gestured toward the space around them. "What's the plan for the wedding in here?"

"The ceremony will be at Creekside Church," Elizabeth told them as they all walked toward the front of the barn. "But I think we can have a fabulous party in here for a hundred or so of our closest friends."

Brooke looked up toward the hayloft. "Can I go up and look? I've never been in a barn in my whole life."

"Of course," Angie said, giving her a nudge.

Off she went, leaving Angie and Noelle looking around and thinking about what the room could look like. Only for Noelle, it looked like...more work than she had time for.

"What's wrong?" Angie asked when Noelle sighed again.

"Nothing. It's just that my boss handed me an entire estate sale, which will have me on my laptop most every day between now and the wedding day. And I'd rather decorate this barn, do some more Christmas shopping, hang with the fam, and..." She lifted her brows.

"Make out with Jace," Angie teased.

"Pretty much."

"Then bag it," Angie said. "A wedding's more important."

She blew out a sigh and looked at Elizabeth. "It's already costing me my commission. Another work problem and I could lose the promotion, and possibly my job. And that feels like...London Bridge will be falling down."

Angie rolled her eyes. "The promotion isn't a guarantee you'll get the London job."

"It's one step closer," she said, not really wanting to explain the corporate ladder she'd been so intently climbing for years. "A year or two off, but one step closer. So I need it."

Elizabeth launched a gray brow into her slightly wrinkled forehead.

“What you need is joy, love, peace, contentment, and a little...” She reached back to her ponytail and plucked out another piece of straw. “Hay in your hair.”

“I also need to pay my bills.”

Angie snorted. “Girl. What did I say to you when we got here?”

“There’s more to life than money,” Noelle repeated without even thinking.

“Good motto,” Elizabeth said.

Noelle just felt her shoulders drop with the pressure of it all. She lived for her job, her clients, and her deals. And, yes, her creature comforts. Why did they all suddenly feel so...heavy?

“You know what?” Brooke called, pulling their attention as they looked up to see her laying on the hay, her head hanging over the loft.

“Brooke! Be careful!” Angie exclaimed.

“I’m fine. But you know, you could drape a bunch of white lace from this side to that, and lights. And flowers. This could be really pretty, Aunt Elizabeth.”

“Lace and lights? Oh, I love that!” Elizabeth exclaimed.

“And a hundred people?” Angie asked as she started walking off the space. “We can do that with tables and a buffet.”

Meanwhile, Brooke chattered on about the way to hang the lights and Elizabeth gushed over a dreamy, rustic wedding warmed by heat lamps and love.

And Noelle stood in the middle of the barn and...fought some tears. She didn’t want to dig up antique values, set up an estate sale, or make millions for someone who already had plenty. She didn’t want to be beholden to Sotheby’s, to work, to...money.

She wanted to plan a dream wedding for her beloved aunt. She wanted to spend evenings with Jace and help milk goats with his daughter and simply have two more weeks of bliss.

“I’m thinking greenery, too.” Elizabeth was back on that ladder, halfway up to Brooke, who was chattering just as excitedly.

“And maybe an archway down there,” Brooke said. “Covered with those big red Christmassy flowers.”

“Poinsettias,” Angie chimed in, pointing out the open doors. “Don’t forget the trees outside. We can light up the whole grounds for the wedding.”

“Yes!” Aunt Elizabeth gripped a rung with one hand, waving the other.

“Lights everywhere!”

Noelle gazed up at her, feeling that lifelong sensation that she wanted to *be* that woman. She’d always felt that way about Elizabeth, even when she was very little and her mother was still alive. From the moment she could look up, she’d looked up—literally and figuratively—to Elizabeth Whitaker, who just seemed to know how to live.

Would she have walked away from a major estate sale when she was Noelle’s age?

“I just want it to be special,” Aunt Elizabeth admitted as she climbed back down. “I know I’m sixty-three but...I never had a big white wedding. Who says I can’t have one now?”

“Absolutely no one,” Angie said.

“Of course, all that really matters at the end of the day is that I’m marrying the man I love. Christmas lights and streamers are far secondary to that.”

She *embraced* change, Noelle thought. While Noelle ran screaming from the very idea of something new.

“Speaking of men that people love...” Angie sidle up next to Noelle. “I just saw your very own love interest drive up in his big F-150 looking all flannelly and hot.”

Noelle felt a jolt of anticipation. “Jace is here?”

“Heading into the stables, no doubt to check on Peggys. Why don’t you go say hello?”

“Because I’m planning a wedding with you.”

Angie cocked her head. “You’re staring at Elizabeth, imagining that it’s your wedding we’re planning.”

“I am not!”

“Fine, you’re not. But go see him anyway, because you’re happier when he’s around.”

Noelle smiled. “A little, maybe.”

“You were that way at fifteen with him, too, you know,” Angie said. “Both of you with stars in your eyes every time you were together.”

For a long time, Noelle didn’t say anything, but then she gave up the fight. “I’ll be back in a minute,” she whispered. “I need some stars in my eyes.”

Angie laughed at that and gave her a playful push. “We won’t plan too much without you. We might talk about you, but no planning.”

Giddy, Noelle headed out, not giving herself a chance to second-guess the decision.



INSIDE THE STABLES, Noelle could hear Jace's voice, low and gentle as he talked to Athena. Passing Jasper, the horse she'd once told all her problems to, she paused and stroked the big brown guy's nose, then took a few steps closer to Athena's stall.

Without making a sound, she got on her tiptoes and looked over the wooden door to see Jace on the ground with the horse, who spent as much time laying down as standing up.

"You gotta just let go, sweet girl," he said softly. "It won't be too tough because I'll be here with you the whole time, I promise."

Chills rolled up her arms at the words, the tenderness in his voice, and the depth of her feelings for this man. They may not have seen each other for twenty-five years and, in that time, he'd married, had a child, and then become a widower.

But Jace had always had this effect on her, she realized. When they were not much older than Bradley and met on the mountain and started fishing together. When they were in middle school and started to feel the first heady crush. When they were fifteen and shared their first kiss.

Was it *his* first kiss, she suddenly wondered. It had been hers but—

"Oh, hi." Jace popped to his feet. "I didn't know you were here."

She inched the doors open, a little surprised at how weak he made her knees with nothing more than a smile.

"Was it your first kiss?" she asked.

He drew back with a soft laugh, his silvery-blue eyes glinting with amusement. "Last night in town at the tree-lighting? No."

"That time by the creek. When we were teenagers."

The softest flush deepened his cheeks, making the scruff of his beard look even more attractive. "What if it was?"

"It was mine."

"First kiss? At what? Fifteen? Late bloomer."

She smiled and fought the urge to fold into his arms, clinging to the wood

door instead. “How’s our big mama?” she asked.

As if on cue, Athena rolled a little on her back, like a puppy looking for a tummy rub. A really, really big puppy.

“She’s ready and restless,” he said.

Noelle eyed the horse and came a few steps closer, crouching down to give her a stroke of love. “Just rest, Athena. I’ve heard you never sleep once they’re born anyway.”

“Not the case for horses.” Jace joined her, putting his hand on Athena’s belly. “See that huge rise there? That’s the foal. It should be turned the other way.”

“Oh, poor thing. Breach?”

“Yep, but if it doesn’t turn, I’ll do it.”

She looked up at him, struck by how capable he was. Tough and tender. She’d always loved that about him.

Well...*liked* that about him.

“What brings you to Red Bridge Farm today?” he asked.

“Planning a barn wedding.”

His eyes flashed. “Cool. I bet that’s fun for you.”

“Yeah, it’s...” She considered dumping her work problems on him, but decided against it. “It’s great to see my aunt so happy,” she said instead. “I told her as much and she forgave me for being a big skeptic over her romance.”

“She’s a good woman,” he replied. “Of course she forgave you.”

They smiled at each other and settled on the ground next to Athena in the most natural way.

“How’s Cassie?” she asked, realizing she thought about his sweet little girl almost as much as she thought about him.

“She’s good. I just came from the church for her all-afternoon play rehearsal.”

“Oh, yes, the Nativity play on Christmas Eve. How’s it going?”

“Honestly? Not well.”

She inched back, surprised by that. “She’s having problems with her part as an angel? She was typecast, you know. She *is* an angel.”

“You’re sweet and I don’t disagree. But the problems aren’t with the cast, it’s with the crew.”

“What’s wrong?”

“They’re just short-staffed. Apparently, moms are busy at Christmas,” he

said, laughing at the obviousness of that. “And we lost the set director, who was a talented artist. Right now, there’s no backdrop. At the meeting this morning, every one of the moms just stared...at me.”

She laughed. “Either they noticed how cute you are or they just elected you to be the new set director.”

“Noelle, I can’t *color*, let alone paint. I could build a set and offered to, but they just want canvases painted with night skies and, you know, a big star.”

“Huh. I know a little about art. Maybe I could help you.”

“Do you have time for that?”

Only if she wanted to bag the estate sale, infuriate her boss, and risk everything she’d ever worked for.

She opened her mouth, trying to decide how to tell him that.

“Yes.” The word came out like her mouth had a mind of its own.

“You do?”

No, she did not. She did not have time to paint Nativity scene backdrops for a church play. Or plan a barn wedding.

“I can paint,” she said. “And I happen to know a little girl who’s pretty good with a crayon. I’ve seen Cassie’s art on your refrigerator. She can help me. We’ll get it done.”

He didn’t say a word but looked at her the way he always did when they were alone—as though no one else existed on the Earth and he couldn’t look away.

“Thank you.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome.”

“Oh, and Noelle?” He inched closer. “It was my first kiss.”

“Late bloomer,” she teased.

He closed the space between them. “Let’s try to recreate it.”

As his lips met hers, she closed her eyes and everything else in the world just disappeared as she kissed this incredibly special man.

She had to do this, had to live this life and experience all of this...just this once. She’d pay the price later and it would be worth it.

Chapter Four

Angie

“WAIT. WHAT?” Brooke sat up in bed and frowned, blinking at Angie as she finished dressing in her best slacks and a sharp gray sweater. “Did you say you’re going to work? Since when?”

“Not work, exactly. I’m volunteering, remember?”

Perching on the opposite bed in the room they shared, Angie reached down to slide into her boots, but her gaze was on Brooke. Her daughter blinked sleep away and pushed all the way up, brushing locks of dark hair off her face. Was it possible that in the few days she’d been at the cabin that Brooke had actually changed?

She certainly seemed more relaxed than when she’d arrived. She’d slid into mountain life with surprising ease, only spending a fraction of her time on the phone and actually enjoying hanging out with her aunts and cousins.

“What do you do there?” she asked. “I know you said something about that Biltmore museum, but, honestly, Mom? I wasn’t paying attention.”

“It’s called the Biltmore Estate, and the main house is officially the largest home in America.”

Her jaw slackened. “Bigger than Jeff Bezos’s or Bill Gates’s or Mark Zuckerberg’s?”

“Combined. And has a few Monets.”

“Not sure what that is, but okay. Why are you volunteering again?”

Angie zipped up her boot and inched back, looking at Brooke. New

Brooke. Approachable Brooke. Brooke without her phone in her hand twenty-four-seven. She decided to go out on a limb and test this likeable version of her daughter.

“You know what? Why don’t you come with me? I promise you’ve never seen anything like it.”

She was fully prepared for a scoffing laugh and to be told that museums were for losers, but Brooke threw back the covers and popped up. “Gimme ten minutes and stop at Starbucks on the way, and you got a deal.”

A little while later, they were cruising down the highway toward the Biltmore Estate as Angie told Brooke about the incredible home of George and Edith Vanderbilt, built in the late 1800s.

“So, I agreed to help the head curator prepare an exhibit that would feature the room of two of the servants—”

“And you did this...why?” Brooke asked.

“Because those servants were your great-great-grandparents.”

“Really? That’s kind of cool. Too bad they weren’t, you know, the Vandies.”

“Yeah, then we’d own a Monet,” Angie agreed with a chuckle. “But not only did great-great-granny Angelica Benson work there in the 1920s, she saved a baby named Claudia from a fire in one of the guest rooms. The infant’s parents, who were distant relatives of the Vanderbilts, rewarded her with the land that the cabin is built on.”

“No way.” Brooke picked up her Starbucks cup and lifted it in a mock toast. “Go G-G Granny. Why have you never told me this?”

“Because I didn’t have any idea. Eve and I were getting Christmas decorations out of the attic the day we got here, and I found two newspaper articles and some of Angelica’s belongings.”

“Were you named after her? Angel is pretty close.”

“Maybe, but it was also part of the Christmas triplet theme, so I don’t know. I do feel a connection to the woman, so I contacted the Biltmore Estate and made pals with the head curator. She liked me so much, she asked if I’d volunteer.”

Brooke had her phone out, clicking through it. “Look at that place!” she crooned. “It’s a literal palace.”

“I told you, you’ve never seen anything like it.”

“And they lived there? My great-greats?”

“In the servants’ quarters on the fourth floor,” Angie said with pride

fueled by a zing of excitement at her daughter's seemingly genuine enthusiasm. "You'll see it for yourself in about fifteen minutes. And I can show you what I've been working on with Angelica and Garland's possessions and letters for the display."

Brooke gave a half smile, reaching over the console to touch Angie's leg. "It's good to see you excited about something, Mom."

Angie had to hold back the sting of tears that burned in her eyes at the comment, because crying would be, *like, totally uncool*. Almost as uncool as driving Eve's "mom van." But Angie didn't care, because it had felt like forever since Brooke showed a modicum of interest in her mother's happiness, or lack thereof.

Was it time to have a deeper conversation?

Since Brooke had arrived, they'd danced around the subject of Craig, the cheating husband and distant father. Brooke had opened up a bit more about the sickening hazing and initiation rituals of the secret society, but by unspoken agreement, they had kept any other conversations to lighter topics.

Angie fully planned to ask Craig for a divorce. But would that turn Brooke's already topsy-turvy life completely upside down? Should she broach the topic now?

"So, I know you mentioned that Dad hasn't been home much lately, and you knew about the..." Angie cleared her throat, shifting in the driver's seat of Eve's van with discomfort. "Other woman."

"Yeah." Brooke blew out a breath. "He's never around, Mom. It's like not even having a father."

Angie felt her heart crack, and she wondered just how badly this girl had been failed by both her parents. "I'm sorry, Brooke."

"For what? Marrying the wrong guy? If you hadn't, I wouldn't be here."

Angie sighed. "I just feel like I should have been there for you. We failed you."

Brooke was quiet for a long time, staring out the window for a full minute before she turned to Angie. "Mom, you didn't fail anybody. You tried pretty hard, actually."

"Too hard?"

Brooke laughed. "A little, but I was...I don't know. Jaded. Lost."

"Oh, honey." This time, she reached over and put her hand on Brooke's arm. "You feel less lost now?"

"I'm okay," she said. "I'm ticked off at Dad, honestly. It's gross that he's

with another woman and that he drinks so much.”

Angie cringed. “He does drink a lot.”

“It’s why I never wanted him to teach me to drive, so here I am, sixteen and without a license.”

“Why didn’t you ask me to teach you?” Angie said.

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “For one thing, I thought if I spent too much time with you, you’d start asking questions about Vance and...you know. The society thing.”

Angie felt her eyes shutter. She didn’t know enough to even ask those questions, and that was a little sickening.

“And, I hate to say it, but you’re so sad all the time,” Brooke continued. “And I know that’s because of Dad being a jerk and me being all caught up in my own life.”

“I should have just—”

“No, Mom. You didn’t have to do anything but come here.”

Angie threw her a look, not sure what she meant. “Come here?”

“Yeah, you’re happy here. You seem...better.”

“It’s my sisters,” she said as she pulled the van off the exit and they passed Biltmore Village. “I’m always better around them.”

“I guess. I just like you better here.” She made a face. “Is that a mean thing to say?”

“No, it’s a very enlightened thing to say. And I appreciate your honesty. I’m sorry I was so dense and clueless that I didn’t even know what you were doing with your friends.”

“Don’t be.” Brooke reached over. “It’s all cool, Mom. And, holy cow, so is this place!”

They let the conversation drop while Angie drove the van in and let Brooke experience the awe of Biltmore Estate. No, she hadn’t told Brooke she’d likely be filing for a divorce. She’d tell Craig that first.

Still, they’d made huge progress today and now, she wanted to focus on the unparalleled beauty of Biltmore House.

“I have tickets to bring everyone here a few days before Christmas for a private tour,” Angie told her. “But let’s take a peek on our way to the fourth floor.”

After they parked, Angie used her staff pass to bypass the line and walk right up to the front door to chat with one of the guides.

Inside, they did a quick walkthrough of the main floor, pausing in the

Banquet Hall with its soaring ceiling and multiple fireplaces. They took a few minutes to see the two Monets hanging in the Salon, and peeked into the oversized Library that housed ten thousand books.

Then they stopped in the curator's office to meet Marjorie Summerall, Angie's main contact and the woman who'd given her this position. She was out for a few hours, but had left instructions for Angie to head up to the fourth floor to the "folding room" where they'd laid out the artifacts for cataloging.

Now, Angie thought as they walked down a far less grand hallway than they'd been in downstairs, Brooke would get bored. The phone would come out when work had to be done, and that was fine. She could amuse herself or self-tour the house while Angie worked for a few hours.

At the folding room, Angie turned to tell her all that and let Brooke off the hook, but her daughter just breezed by her, taking in the chaos that needed to be organized.

"Look at all this!" Brooke exclaimed.

"I know it looks like junk, but every piece in here is historical and over one hundred years old. My job is to take pictures, do a little research, and catalog everything for the exhibit. Do you want to—"

"Help? Yes."

"Are you serious?" she asked with a laugh, but Brooke was already across the room, gazing up at the green velvet dress that Angie had found in the attic.

Without a word, she touched the soft material, then gingerly picked up the flowered brooch that had been a gift from Mrs. Keegan Winchester, the mother of the baby Angelica had saved.

"Those belonged to your great-great-grandmother Angelica," Angie said, her voice rich with pride.

Brooke stunned her by holding the brooch to her chest, fighting tears. "Honestly, Mom, I didn't even feel like I had grandparents, let alone great times two. I can't believe this. It's the coolest thing ever."

Holding on to that high, high praise, Angie slipped off her jacket.

"Then let's get to work, kiddo."



JUST AS BROOKE'S enthusiasm started to wane—she was only sixteen, to be fair—they got a text calling them home for tree decorating and cookie baking. They finally met the esteemed head curator, Marjorie, and Angie made arrangements to come back in a few days. Her hours were hers to arrange, the kind curator assured her.

All in all, it had been a banner day with Brooke, but she knew her daughter was ready for some alone time—or phone time—to think through all they'd talked about. So maybe the whole cookie and tree thing might be too much.

“Can you stand some socializing?” Angie asked when she pulled up to the cabin and saw Sonny's vintage truck and several unfamiliar cars that she suspected belonged to Sonny's daughters. “This could be kind of a *thing*, knowing Aunt Elizabeth.”

“I'm fine,” she said, tucking her phone back into her pocket. “What is that rad truck?”

“That's Uncle Sonny's from 1950. I guess you didn't see it when we were at his farm. Cool, huh?”

“It's *sick*. I wonder if he'd let me take a picture in it for Instagram? That would get tons of likes.”

Angie gave her one more warm and appreciative smile. “I'm sure he would.”

Brooke seemed to have a bounce in her step as they got out, pausing to check out the truck, then heading up the stairs. As soon as Angie opened the door and saw a packed kitchen and heard loud laughter and chatter over Christmas music, she glanced at Brooke, whose eyes flashed.

“Lots of small talk. You up for it?”

“Sokay, but who *are* all these people? And do I smell...cookies?”

“There you are!” Aunt Elizabeth floated over, somehow moving with that sophisticated grace she'd developed in her jet-setting life as an art dealer. It didn't matter that she wore her newly signature overalls, red socks, and had a Santa hat perched on her head. The woman was still elegant. “How did it go at Biltmore House?”

“Amazing,” Angie said. “Brooke was so excited to learn about her great-great-grandparents.”

“Well, maybe you can fill me in,” Elizabeth said. “My mother, your Great-Granny Jane? She never talked about them, so now you and Angie will be the family experts. Come, come. Kick off your boots and coats. My soon-

to-be stepdaughters are here!”

The entire great room seemed to be upside down and sideways with Christmas. Sonny and David were deep in the middle of the annual male tradition of untangling strings of lights for the trees. Eve and Bradley unwrapped ornaments, carefully laying them out to be hung in whatever order Eve decided was appropriate.

In the kitchen, a full-blown cookie-making operation was underway under Caroline’s direction. Hannah and Noelle pressed shapes into dough while James wielded a rolling pin with the confidence of a samurai with his sword. Sawyer and a boy Angie remembered meeting in town—Joshua, Caroline’s son—sat at the table surrounded by sprinkles and icing and piles of cookies waiting for their artistic touch.

Over it all, a cheerful version of “Jingle Bells” echoed from the speakers up to the wooden beams of the two-story great room.

“Whoa,” Brooke whispered. “Festive.”

Angie threw her a look, ready to give her permission to take a pass, but that same spark of interest she’d seen at Biltmore House put a glint in Brooke’s eyes.

“You want to...” Angie wasn’t sure how to finish that.

“We need you on baking!” Hannah, Sonny’s younger daughter, darted over to greet them. With her freckled cheeks and happy brown eyes, the young schoolteacher was a ball of warmth and fun. “Maybe help the boys with the piping bag,” she said under her breath. “Or all the cookies are going to say *Star Wars*. And you won’t be able to read it.”

Brooke laughed. “Not sure what a piping bag is, but I’ll give it a go.”

A few minutes—and some introductions—later, they all had their jobs, laughing, chatting, and singing with the music. Every time Angie glanced at the table where Brooke sat with the younger boys, her heart softened like the dough in front of her.

Was this “old” Brooke back after a bad semester with the wrong people? Even old Brooke had never been a huge socializer. Since she’d been a toddler, Brooke had protected her quiet time, frequently retreating to her room after school, exhausted by large groups.

Or was there something else in the Asheville air?

She didn’t know, but she liked it.

While she mixed cookie dough, Angie’s gaze moved around the room from the kids to the tree to her sisters, all of it so deeply familiar that she felt

that ancient and indescribable joy that seemed to come only with Christmas memories.

All those memories included two people who weren't here: Mom and Dad. But the fact was, they'd hardly mentioned their parents after the first few days here, at least not during the happiest moments like this.

Late at night, out on the porch, the triplets and often Aunt Elizabeth did meander down memory lane. All of them were working to hold the dear memories of being with their parents, but not wallow in them.

So far, they'd succeeded.

Now, it seemed, Aunt Elizabeth was ready to invoke their memories with a light and happy tone, and Angie didn't mind at all.

"Yes!" Sawyer held up a cookie, pulling her out of her thoughts. "The headless gingerbread man rides again!"

That's what this Christmas was, she mused, watching Eve as she pointed to the precise spot on the tree where she wanted the silver bell that had always been Dad's favorite. As kids, they'd always hung that one first, and put it in a place where Jim Chambers could see it from his favorite recliner.

She swallowed a lump in her throat as Eve turned and caught her eye, then they both looked at Noelle, who was watching and obviously thinking the same thing.

Elizabeth surprised Angie from behind by wrapping a loving arm around her.

"They're here," she whispered. "In spirit."

Angie managed to nod and look down at her dough, hoping no one noticed the single tear that just got added to the recipe.

She waited for more, but they didn't come.

Maybe it was because her own daughter was laughing quietly with Eve's son, and she was surrounded by family—new and old—and truly enjoying the beauty of tradition.

If Mom and Dad are looking down, Angie thought, they'd be really, really happy.

Eve came over, abandoning the tree for a moment, ostensibly to check on the baking, but she slipped next to Angie and whispered, "You okay? 'Cause there are no onions in that dough."

"Just a drop of salt," Angie replied. "And, yes, I'm fine. I'm happy."

"So's Brooke," Eve said with a sly nod toward the table. "She's actually a really sweet teenager."

“She is...here.”

“It’s the magic of the cabin.”

“It is,” Angie agreed. “I hope it lasts.”

A burst of noise and laughter came from the kids, interrupting them.

“That tree is perfect!” Joshua said in awe as he pointed to Brooke’s cookie.

“It’s not bad.” Brooke held the cookie out, examining her own work.

“Wow!” Sawyer slid over to get a better look. “Brooke, you’re the best cookie decorator in the whole world! That tree even has ornaments!”

“Nice job, girl!” Hannah cooed.

“Good cookie, Brookie,” Angie teased. “It’s fabulous.”

“Cookie Brookie!” Sawyer howled with laughter. “Cookie Brookie!”

“That’s what we’ll call you!” James asserted, pointing the rolling pin at his cousin. “And you’re the official decorator from now on.”

Brooke laughed heartily. “All right. I didn’t think it was that great, but I appreciate the confidence, cuz.” She pulled a scrunchie off of her wrist and tied her hair up in a messy bun. “So send me more cookies.”

“We’re running out of a few things,” Caro said, stepping back. “Who wants to take a trip down to Ingles so we can carry on for a couple more hours?”

“Now that I’d like to do,” Brooke said. “If I could do it in that awesome red truck.”

Sonny looked down from the ladder where he was stringing the last section of lights at the top of the tree. “You can drive, Brooke. The keys are in my jacket.”

Her shoulders dropped. “I still don’t have a license.”

“Really?” James asked. “Cause I want mine the day I turn sixteen.”

“Which is not for five years,” Eve reminded him.

“Yeah, well...” Brooke threw a quick look at Angie, clearly not wanting to share the real reasons she hadn’t had driving lessons from her parents. “Oh, you know, it’s complicated in California.”

“What’s complicated?” Sonny asked. “You just get behind the wheel and learn.”

“You should teach her, Dad,” Hannah said. “Caro and I learned in that beast of a mid-century truck and let me tell you, if you can drive that thing, you can drive anything.”

Brooke looked up at Sonny. “It’s really the coolest truck. I was just

hoping to snag a picture of me behind the wheel for my Instagram account.”

“Honey, if you’re behind the wheel, the truck should be moving. Let’s do a few driving lessons over the next few weeks. I usually take my other truck, but this one needs to be driven and loved.”

“That’d be amazing!” Brooke exclaimed, looking at Angie with a real gleam in her eye. “Thank you!”

“More Asheville cabin magic,” Eve murmured as the room got noisy again.

Angie looked at Brooke, then her sister. “I just hope it lasts when we’re not here anymore.”

Chapter Five

Eve

EVEN ON A WEEKDAY, the quaint cobblestone streets of historic Biltmore Village were packed as Eve and David strolled through the upscale stores to do some Christmas shopping. With the boys on “sheep duty,” they had the day to completely relax, and instead of heading into downtown Asheville, they’d picked this much smaller enclave for their outing.

Eve loved the tree-lined streets, period architecture that complimented the nearby Biltmore Estate, and, of course, the achingly adorable holiday decorations that had all the streetlamps wrapped in garlands and white lights in the store windows.

And, she thought as they walked past a sweet-smelling bakery, she loved her wonderful husband, who so rarely went shopping. Busy with homeschooling, she did most of the family purchasing online, so this enchanting little town was the Christmas outing of her dreams.

Arm-in-arm, they perused the village shops, peeking at antiques and jewelry, already having selected a beautiful engraving of a butterfly for Angie and a cozy scarf and hat set for Noelle.

“I could stop in a toy store, but...” Eve peered down the next avenue. “I’m not hopeful they’ll have the latest PlayStation console that is on three very important Christmas lists.”

“Another console? I thought they loved the Switch.”

“They do, but this new PlayStation is the thing that apparently every boy

over seven and under twenty-seven wants. It's the most elusive gift in America."

"Don't worry, that tree will be full Christmas morning," David said. "Anything else we could get?"

She handed him her cup of hot chocolate so she could check her phone. "Okay..." She scrolled through the lengthy, detailed, and categorized note entitled Boys' Christmas Lists. "Noise-canceling headphones," she said. "James needs them for independent study. It gets loud in our little classroom, you know."

"An academically driven Christmas request," David said. "I love it."

"So we can hit Best Buy on the way home for that and the off-chance we'll walk in the minute a PlayStation magically appears," she said, thinking through the schedule. "Oh, Bradley wanted a new set of colored pencils, but I think I saw an art supply store, so we could get him a whole kit with supplies and a sketchbook. He's been so into drawing lately."

"And he's good at it," David added. "Maybe we've got an artist on our hands. Or an architect. Or a graphic designer."

Eve leaned her head against David's broad shoulder. "He could be anything. They all could."

"Is that the last of the list, then?"

"Well, I am missing one person."

"Who's that?"

"You!" she said, beaming up at him. "I have no idea what to get you!"

David laughed and waved a hand, wrapping his arm around her shoulders as they walked over to a bench on the side of the walkway and sat down. "Honey, please. You do not have to get me anything."

"David, it's Christmas. I will not be caught without the perfect gift for my husband."

"Evie." He kissed her hair, nestling her closer. "I'm just happy to be here with you and the boys. This vacation is the gift. I'm loving this time so much, and it's exactly what we needed."

She sighed with contentment. "I'm glad. The whole thing is so much better with you here. I really have time to think and feel and enjoy every moment."

He glanced at her, a question in his eyes. "So, while you're thinking, have you considered...the one thing I really want?"

"It's such a huge decision," she said, plucking at a thread on her jeans.

“And I’m torn.”

Her heart was screaming that she wanted to dive in and have another baby and do it all again, one more time. But could she even get pregnant easily at forty? Carry a baby without complications? And then there was the issue of David’s hours, so—

“David Gallagher? Is that you?”

They both looked up as a man Eve didn’t recognize walked over to them. David instantly stood, his whole face bright.

“Terrance!” He reached for a friendly handshake that very naturally turned into a guy hug and a shoulder pat.

“It’s great to see you, David.” The other man’s greeting was just as warm, his whole face lit as he gazed at David. “It’s been too, too long, my friend.”

David turned to Eve. “This is Dr. Terrance Robinson, one of the chief physicians when I did my residency at Atrium. Amazing doctor, this guy.”

“Oh, hello.” Eve shook the man’s hand and met his intense ebony gaze. His close-cropped hair was a mix of black and silver, but his espresso skin showed few lines for a man who had to be in his mid-sixties. “David’s mentioned you many times. It’s wonderful to meet you, Dr. Robinson.”

“Oh, it’s just Terrance, and it’s great to meet you, Eve.” He glanced at David. “The mutual admiration society goes both ways, as you know, young man. Teaching you was one of the highlights of my career as an educator.”

“Are you still teaching?” Eve asked.

“Actually, I left university life a while ago and opened a family practice down in Hendersonville. It’s about twenty minutes from here, a little smaller than Asheville, very nice, if you don’t mind a rural area.”

“I think we made a few trips to Hendersonville when I was young,” Eve said.

“Eve’s family has a cabin out near Candler,” David told him. “She came here as a child for summers and Christmases.”

“Then I’m sure you did get down to Hendersonville. Great little town and getting discovered very quickly. But the population boom is good for my practice. Where are you now, David?”

“I’m with a neurosurgery group in Charlotte,” he said.

“Ah, I see.” He angled his head. “Great work, and lifesaving. But, whoa, that’s a grind, I bet. Long hours.”

David laughed and glanced at Eve. “We were just discussing that. I’m loving this break in the mountains and not ready to rush back to the OR after

the holidays.”

“I get that,” Terrance said. “It’s an awesome job and I’ve loved every minute as a physician and teacher. But the surgery gig can wear you down if you do it for too long.”

Once again, David and Eve shared a look and a soft laugh.

“Did I hit a hot button?” Terrance asked with a chuckle.

David tilted his head, conceding the point. “You understand, Terrance. The adrenaline rush of surgery followed by the bone-deep satisfaction of a good result is a strong professional cocktail.”

Eve had never heard him say it quite like that, and it made her realize just how much he loved his job, and how much he got out of it.

“But like any cocktail,” Terrance said, “that can take a toll. As a matter of fact, I’m thinking about retiring.”

David drew back, surprise in his expression. “Really? Man, you can’t be sixty.”

“Sixty-two,” he said. “It’s a little early, but my wife wants to golf and take the grandkids to our beach house and travel to Europe. I discovered years ago that there is great truth to the happy wife-happy life motto. And, honestly, the years go by at lightning speed. I feel like every time I turn around, one of my grandkids is onto another milestone. They grow up so fast.”

David sighed and nodded. “I do know that.”

“But my life in Hendersonville is nothing like that of a neurosurgeon in a market like Charlotte,” Terrance added with a wry laugh. “You are going much faster and much further, and probably drive a Porsche.”

“Well, I drive a van,” Eve said quickly when David didn’t answer, as the older man’s words clearly hit home.

“Oh? How old are your kids?” Terrance asked.

“Eleven, eight, and six, all boys,” David offered, getting a huge smile in response.

“Oh, wow. You’re in the thick of it now, aren’t you? I’ve got grandkids that age and, man, I love to take those little ones fishing. My daughter lives here, and I take her kids out every weekend.”

So he wasn’t too busy to fish with his grandchildren, Eve mused.

“Good for you, Terrance,” David finally said. “You’ve earned retirement.”

“I just need the right doctor to take over my practice,” he said. “Hard to

find, as I'm sure you know."

They made some more small talk and soon said their goodbyes, with David and Terrance exchanging numbers so they could stay in touch. Then Eve sat back down to sip her now-cooled hot chocolate.

"Well, that was a blast from the past," David said as he joined her. "Terrance Robinson. Always liked him a lot."

"He obviously has a lot of respect for you," she said. "And how interesting that he's retiring early." She leaned into him with a sly smile. "And looking for a doctor to take over that sweet family practice of his that allows him enough time to fish with his grandchildren."

David gave a dry laugh. "I see where you're going. To...what was the name of his town? Hendersonville? Right."

She smiled and swallowed the suggestion that was teasing her. Couldn't David be that doctor? Then maybe they could have another baby.

But, no. That was impossible. He was a brain surgeon in a busy practice. She'd heard the pride and satisfaction in his voice when he discussed his career. He loved it; she couldn't expect him to give it up.

"So funny seeing him," David mused. "He looked good. Happy, healthy, relaxed."

"I guess that's the upside of no life-saving surgeries," she said softly, taking his hand.

He didn't answer, staring straight ahead, the wheels of his mighty brain moving...only she didn't know which direction.

After a minute, she gave his hand a squeeze. "Come on, now. Let's finish Christmas shopping. Let's find that art supply store for Bradley."

She tried to get back into the small-town Christmas spirit as they walked through the village, but all she could think about was how they each wanted something that they probably couldn't or shouldn't get.

Chapter Six

Noelle

THE RED BRICK home off Arbor Ridge Drive hadn't really changed that much in twenty-five years. As Noelle pulled into Henry and Patty Fleming's house to pick up Cassie and take her to the play rehearsal, she studied the home that had always been so welcoming and warm.

The pine trees were taller, the driveway had been resurfaced, and the stone wall along the bed of Jace's mother's prized rose bushes looked like it had been replaced. But all in all, the house looked a lot like it did way back in the summers when Noelle used to ride her bike to the bottom of the mountain to get her friend Jace for a day of fishing, hiking, or riding around until they were exhausted and hungry.

They were halcyon summer days, she thought as she pulled in and turned off the ignition to Aunt Elizabeth's SUV. Long, hot, blissful days of a treasured summer friendship. As she walked up to the door, she remembered the first time she'd met Jace, when they were eight or nine.

His father, an electrician, had come to the cabin to work on a broken outlet and he brought his son with him. Eve and Angie were wrapped up in playing with a dollhouse that Aunt Elizabeth had brought to the cabin that summer, but Noelle—always more of a tomboy than the other two—had been itching to get outside. Jace's father had spied some fishing rods in the garage, and Noelle's dad encouraged her to take Jace to the creek to fish.

That day, they'd caught a brook trout and a sunfish and made each other

laugh. It had been the most natural friendship, remarkably so, and when it had moved into the earliest stages of a crush a few years later, that had felt natural, too.

Once, her father had said Noelle and Jace were like two peas in a pod. It had been the first time she'd ever heard the expression and for the rest of her life, anytime someone used it, she thought of Jace.

Smiling at that, she tapped on the front door and waited, excited to see Henry and Patty again. She was also a little uncertain about what she'd find at the church for the children's play, but she tamped that down and broadened her smile when the door came open and a much older version of the woman she remembered stood in front of her.

"Noelle!" she exclaimed, pushing the glass storm door wide and extending her arms.

"Hi, Mrs. Fleming!" she replied into the hug.

"Oh, my heavens, you can call me Patty now." She leaned back and beamed at her, giving Noelle a jolt of recognition. Patty had changed, of course, with time giving her a network of lines on her face and plenty of gray in her hair. But her eyes were still bright and her smile as genuine as when "Jacie's little girlfriend" would show up with fishing rods and a lunch box.

"Patty," she said on a sigh, awash with nostalgia. "It's so nice to see you again."

She searched Noelle's face, shaking her head. "Well, I'll be. You were always a pretty girl, Noelle." She patted Noelle's cheek in a move that was both endearing and embarrassing, but Noelle just laughed. "Now you're just flat-out beautiful, just like Jace said."

She felt heat burn under Patty's soft touch. "You're sweet," she said, remembering that Patty Fleming was a talker who couldn't stand to let a second of silence fill a room. "It's good to be back on Copper Creek Mountain."

"We've missed you all," the older woman said, stepping back and gesturing her into the house. "Henry and I often drove up to the cabin to see if it was being taken care of. For years, it was like a revolving door of people, then there was a couple for a few seasons, and now Bitsy is back. And you! We've come full circle."

"It seems that way," she said, taking a quick look around a house that had been remodeled, but not recently. With lots of maple furniture, plaid sofa coverings, and houseplants, it felt as homey as ever. "I guess you know I've

come to steal your granddaughter.”

“Who was as stinky as a barn when Jace dropped her off,” she said. “I had her take a shower and dress for rehearsal. Thank you, honey, for stepping in to volunteer. What a sweet thing to do.”

“I hope I’m up to the task. It’s my first children’s Christmas play—first children’s anything, to be honest—but I do want to help while I’m here.”

“Can I get you something?” Patty pulled her toward the kitchen as if inviting her into her heart. “Henry is off running errands since we didn’t have to take Cassie to church today. I have a pot of coffee on. Would you like some? You’re plenty early for rehearsal.”

“Sure, thank you.”

As she poured and gathered a creamer and sugar, Patty chatted about the play, the changes in town, and how her whole life seemed to revolve around Cassie.

“Poor little thing growing up without a mommy,” she said as she put a cup in front of Noelle and joined her at the table. “But, honey, I guess you know all about that.” She put a hand on Noelle’s arm. “We were always so sad about that loss.”

“Thank you, Patty. It seems all our families have had losses. Jace has told me a lot about Jenny, and she sounds like a wonderful woman.”

“Oh, she was,” she said, a deep note of sorrow in her sigh. “Sometimes the Lord lets things happen that just don’t feel right, you know? And we have to carry on. He has, my Jace. But it hasn’t always been easy. Look how long you and your sisters stayed away.”

Yep, still a talker.

“We stopped the summer visits and Aunt Elizabeth always took us three somewhere amazing for Christmas,” Noelle said. “That’s why her invitation shocked us this year.”

“And her new boyfriend?” she asked, lifting a playful brow.

“Her *fiancé*,” Noelle corrected, raising her cup as though to toast the idea. “I was skeptical at first, because Aunt Elizabeth was very different before. I admit, the natural gray hair and blue jeans overalls threw me, and I wasn’t sure about Sonny McPherson when we arrived here a few weeks ago.”

“And now?”

Noelle laughed. “I’m a believer. Helping to plan the barn wedding, and I hope you’ll be there.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for anything in the world,” she said. “Sonny’s been our

friend forever and he's another one who's lost a spouse and deserves love more than anyone. Just like Jace does."

Noelle gave a smile and picked up her cup for another sip, not sure how to answer that.

"Not that we think you're...or that I'm...or he's..." Patty stammered, then laughed. "Oh, heck. Who am I kidding? I can't *not* say what I'm thinking. Yes, we think you're the girl for him and, yes, I'm hoping you'll stay, and of course he's head over heels at forty the way he was at fourteen."

Noelle lowered the cup and just stared at her.

"And Cassie loves you," she added like that extra slather of icing on the cake.

"So, no pressure or anything," Noelle managed, her heart hammering.

"No pressure," she insisted. "I just call it like I see it and what I see is..." She pressed her hands together. "Hope."

Noelle swallowed. "Patty, you know I think the world of Jace. And Cassie is an absolute angel—in real life as well as that play. But I live in New York. I have a job there and a life and...and...they need stability." With each word, she saw Patty's face fall ever so slightly, and it made Noelle's whole body ache. "I don't want you to get your hopes up," she finally finished.

"I understand," she said on an accepting sigh.

Noelle smiled at her, but then she heard footsteps flying down the hall.

"Miss Noelle! You're here!" Cassie bounded in with damp hair around her face and a fresh unicorn shirt and jeans. "I'm so glad you're coming!"

Without waiting for an invitation, she climbed on Noelle's lap and wrapped her slender arms around her neck in a hug.

As Noelle held her tiny body, she looked over the girl's shoulder to meet Patty's eyes, able to see a bittersweet mix of emotions in them.

"My hopes are where they should be," Patty said on a soft, soft whisper. "But hers?"

Noelle bit her lip and hugged Cassie tighter, closing her eyes. She couldn't do anything to hurt this child. And surely she was too young to even think about anything romantic between Jace and Noelle.

Before she could answer, Cassie whipped around to look at her grandmother. "Miss Noelle is a rich and famous artist in the big city New York, and she's going to make all the sets for our play at church!"

"Okay, first of all..." Noelle held up a hand, laughing. "I'm an art *dealer*, not an artist. I am not rich *or* famous. I'm happy to help out but I need your

artistic guidance.”

“Yep! We better get going!” Cassie scrambled off her lap and practically danced to where her pink jacket hung on a hook, grabbing it and shoving her feet into matching pink boots. “I have the most important part in the show, and I cannot be late!”

“Cassie,” Patty said with a gentle reprimand in her voice.

Cassie sighed with all the dramatic flair that was suitable for someone on her way to a play rehearsal. “I know, baby Jesus is the most important part. But he’s a doll—’cause they’re afraid a real baby would cry and ruin the play. And I’m an angel who flies!”

“You fly?” Noelle asked with a soft gasp.

“With a harness,” Patty said as she stood, smiling with nothing but love for her granddaughter. “You be a good girl today, Cass. Don’t run around telling everyone you have the most important part.”

“I won’t, Grandma.” She held up her hand for Noelle. “Ready? Steady? Let’s go, Freddie!”

Noelle blinked at her, the old rhyme taking her back twenty-five years or more, when she and Jace would finish fishing and he’d always say that. She could see the shadow of that boy in his young daughter’s eyes, and it touched her somewhere in an ancient place that she rarely visited.

“Let’s go, Freddie,” Noelle said with a soft laugh. “It was great to see you again, Patty. Say hello to Henry.”

“Of course.” As they walked to the front door, Patty snagged a booster seat for Cassie, then showed Noelle how to set it up in the back of the SUV. With that, and a quick hug, they took off for Creekside Community Church.

On the way, Cassie chatted endlessly, the same kind of talker her grandmother was, but Noelle kept replaying the conversation they’d just had in her head.

Patty Fleming, and probably her husband and maybe her son, had “hopes” that this relationship could somehow be more than a short friendship—with some kissing—over the holidays. Noelle really couldn’t do much except be honest and remind them that she was going back to New York in January.

But Cassie? She’d already lost her real mother. She couldn’t let the little girl be hurt when a pretend one disappeared.

Hopefully, she was too young to entertain any of those thoughts. And Noelle would be very careful not to plant any seeds in her head.

They pulled into the lot of the sweet country church nestled into the

mountains and parked in front of a smaller building marked “Children’s Ministry.” As they got out of the car and Noelle slid her bag over her shoulder, she automatically reached for Cassie’s hand, wondering if even that act was too...maternal.

Nah. There were cars around. She was seven. Anyone would take Cassie’s hand to cross the parking lot.

“Oh, Miss Noelle?” she said, looking up with something like trepidation in her eyes.

“Yes?”

“Don’t be mad at me, okay?”

She slowed her step as they reached the door. Was there more to the job than painting? Had she volunteered her to sell tickets? Were they late? “Why would I be mad at you, Cassie?”

“Because I told everyone at yesterday’s rehearsal that you’re my dad’s new girlfriend.”

Noelle felt her jaw drop just as Cassie yanked her hand free and ran to another little girl.

“Destiny!” she cried. “Let’s go in together.”

Noelle stayed frozen on the pavement, stunned but not terribly surprised. She just had to figure out how to navigate the next two hours. Deny? Play along? Or simply tell the truth.

Well, it *was* church.



CASSIE DISAPPEARED WITH HER FRIENDS, leaving Noelle to navigate the space set up for a children’s service. A few moms were scattered in the chairs and a woman in the front was deep in conversation with another woman at the piano, giving Noelle the impression that might be the play and music director.

Along one whole wall stood large blank canvases, some ladders, a few costumes, and an array of wood that looked like it might be a stable someday.

“Hey, there.” A petite blond woman with a round face and a big smile walked up to Noelle. “You must be the one we’ve all been waiting for. Especially Jace.”

Really? Already? She smiled. “Noelle Chambers. And you are?”

The other woman held out her hand. “Beth Robards, Sarah’s mother. We’re so excited you’re here! We’ve all been on pins and needles waiting for you to show up and make it all right again. It’s been forever and no one has needed you more.”

“Oh, I, um...” She smiled. “I have to be honest. I’m not Jace’s girlfriend. I’m really just friends with him, though I’ve known him forever, and, yes, we’ve been spending a lot of time together, but Cassie’s imagination is, you know, wild, and I don’t want anyone to think that it’s serious or long-term.”

Beth stared at her. “I meant we’re excited you’re painting the sets.”

“Oh! Oh.” She gave a nervous laugh, her face surely turning scarlet and not easing up until Beth laughed, too.

“I mean, we do know that kids can exaggerate and Jace mentioned to the director that you were an old childhood friend,” she said. “But we are happy you’re here, Noelle.”

“Thank you.” Noelle glanced around. “I have no idea where to start.”

“Let me help. I’ll introduce you to some of the other moms. That lady up there in blue? She’s Darlene Strasserman, our director. Takes it all very seriously, but does a great job. Next to her is the chorus director, Molly, who is great with the kids. Come and meet some of the volunteer moms and the intrepid dad or two.” She leaned in. “They might think you’re more than Jace’s friend or they might not. Do you want me to make it clear to all of them?”

“Let’s just...not make a thing out of it.”

Beth winked. “You got it.”

Grateful for the assist, Noelle followed her around the room, meeting several other kind and welcoming parents, who all explained their roles in the production, and who their kids were. A few of them seemed to be under the impression she was Jace’s girlfriend, and it felt more awkward than not to explain it to anyone, so she—and Beth, who was a doll—let it go.

While the director talked to the children and explained the day’s rehearsal schedule, Noelle and Beth sat side by side in some of the chairs.

“We don’t do the actual play here,” Beth explained. “That’ll be in the sanctuary of the church, but this space is for rehearsals and set design. The Christmas Eve play is a big deal at Creekside, and we’ve been doing it for almost twenty years now.”

“Cool,” Noelle said, looking at the kids. “Which one is your daughter?”

Beth pointed to a waif of a child, her delicate little face topped by a mountain of red curls, sitting cross-legged on the stage, gazing intently at the director. “That’s my Sarah. Shy as the day is long with a heart of gold and an IQ that would scare you.”

“Oh.” Noelle pressed her hand to her chest as she smiled at the darling child. “What an angel.”

“Sadly, she’s not.”

Noelle turned to her. “She doesn’t look like she would even know how to misbehave.”

“She doesn’t,” Sarah said. “The sadness is because she’s not the angel. That’s Cassie’s part.”

“There can’t be more than one?” Noelle asked.

“Nope, although if you ask me, doesn’t the Bible say there was a ‘host’ of angels that night? Darlene’s a bit of a control freak and thinks she’s the Steven Spielberg of kids’ church plays. One angel and one only, and she’s got a lot of lines.”

“I’ve heard her recite them,” Noelle said, frowning as she looked at wee Sarah. “So many lines that they could be split into two, don’t you think?”

“If I were *that* mom and fought for it.” She gave a soft laugh. “Sarah’s an introvert, like I was at her age, and I don’t like to upset the apple cart.”

“Do you want me to talk to her? Or even Cassie? I’m sure—”

“No, thank you. To be honest, I was relieved when she didn’t get cast, and not the least bit surprised. You can hardly hear her when she does speak and up there, hanging from a harness in front of a church full of people?” Beth shook her head. “I shudder to think about it. But Cassie is a ball of fire with a big voice and a beautiful delivery. Darlene cast correctly. She’ll project every line with flare and oodles of personality.”

Noelle didn’t doubt that, feeling a smidge of pride for no clear reason. “Well, what part did Sarah get? I’m sure she can find some fun in it.”

“Sheep Number Two,” Beth said, arching a brow.

“Oh. Yikes.”

Beth waved a hand and shrugged. “It’s completely fine. I’m worried, though. I’m afraid that when the time comes for the play, she’s not going to put on a sheep costume, and she’s not going to stand on the stage in front of the whole town. She swore she’d only do it if she could be the angel.”

Suddenly sad for dear, shy Sarah, Noelle turned to Beth again. “Are you sure we couldn’t work something out? Have her be the...quiet angel on the

ground? I don't know why—”

Beth held up a hand. “Thank you, but I do want her to learn the lesson that life doesn't always go the way you want it to. Sometimes you're the angel, sometimes you're Sheep Number Two.”

Noelle nodded, agreeing with the sentiment, and certain she would be *that* mom, trying to get her kid the part she wanted. “I hadn't thought about it that way,” she admitted. “I guess that's why I'm not a mom and you are.”

“Stick around with your, uh, ‘good friend,’ and maybe you can be.”

Noelle laughed. “I live in New York and work for Sotheby's,” she said, hoping that would be enough to explain why she'd never be Cassie's mother and Jace could only be a friend.

“People move.” At Noelle's look, she laughed. “Just sayin'.”

Noelle smiled, liking the woman and not really wanting to get into a big discussion about her career, her apartment, her life, and her dang independence that she clung to like a warm winter coat on a subzero day.

Then Beth leaned in and whispered, “But if you want my opinion?”

Noelle winced. “Do I?”

“You get Jace and Cassie? Girl, you won the lottery. That man is made of kindness. Plus, he does not hurt to look at.”

Noelle laughed. “That's...a fact.”

“Cassie is a dream child and, can I just ask, what's so great about New York, anyway?”

Noelle opened her mouth to respond, to say, “Everything!” but glanced over Beth's shoulder to catch a glimpse of Cassie singing “Silent Night” with the chorus.

That angel and her dad? Yeah. Winning lottery ticket.

“I've built my life in New York,” she finally said. “I've worked really hard to be the best in my business and...and...” Why else did she live there? “I enjoy my freedom.”

“Oh, okay. I get that,” she said, sounding a little like she was just agreeing to be nice. “But—”

Another woman came over, interrupting the conversation as she held out a file folder. “Noelle? These are the sketches for those three canvases. If you go over and talk to Andy Palermo? He'll help you get started.”

“Sure.” Noelle took the file and stood when the other woman walked away. “Great to talk to you, Beth. I better get to painting.”

Beth rose slowly, holding her gaze. “I hope I didn't come off too strong. I

just, you know, want the best for Jace and Cassie. They're really a big part of the Creekside community."

"You have nothing to worry about," Noelle assured her. With a smile, she set off to the other side of the room, stopping when Cassie came rushing over, her eyes wide.

"What's up, Cass?"

"The music director gave me a solo!"

"That's wonderful! What song is it?"

"'O Holy Night!'" She pressed her hand on her chest. "The stars are brightly shining!" She belted out the line so loud, several people turned to look.

"You've got quite a set of pipes," Noelle said on a laugh, then her face grew serious as an idea struck her. "Maybe...maybe you should share some of the glory. Could someone else be the angel, since you get a solo?"

Cassie looked horrified. "I can do both!" she said. "I'm that good at singing and acting."

Noelle let it go, because it was not her place to guide Cassie through life or step into the Christmas play and make changes. Plus, if Cassie was good enough to get the part and the solo, she should bask in the glory of her talent.

Right? Noelle would. But...what would a *good* mother do?

Well, it didn't matter, because she wasn't Cassie's mother. She couldn't forget that.

Chapter Seven

Angie

“WHAT DO YOU THINK?” Angie held up the wrapped box with a big gold ribbon for Eve to examine.

“Looks like a Rolex and it’s basically a notebook,” Eve said. “Mom would be proud.”

Angie chuckled, remembering how their mother had always put the least expensive gifts in the greatest packages, then fooled them with “the big one.”

The two sisters were keeping that tradition alive while they wrapped presents in the den. David was outside with the boys, Sonny had taken Brooke for a driving lesson, Aunt Elizabeth had gone into town for an errand, and Noelle was at...church.

At the thought, Angie looked up at Eve. “I might have been wrong about Noelle and Jace.”

“In what way?” Eve asked.

“Maybe there is more there than just a friendship. They have a history and chemistry and such a deep connection. It’s palpable when they’re in the room together.”

Eve sliced a sheet of red paper with her shears. “It wouldn’t take much to blossom into love and, wow, that would be an answered prayer. I hate that she’s alone in life, up there in New York, just being...”

“Loaded and independent,” Angie finished.

“Would you want that life?” Eve challenged.

“I’m not Noelle,” she replied. “But the life I have? I don’t know. I sure wish it could be like this all the time.”

“Christmas and family and fun?” Eve asked. “That would be great.”

“Also, Brooke is so...nice,” Angie said. “She’s present and interested and fun to be with again. I’m scared to death that will change when we go back to California.”

“Then don’t.”

She gave her sister a “get real” look. “Easy to say, hard to do. I don’t have a job, we don’t have a home, and there is that small matter of her father.”

Eve lifted a shoulder, folding paper over a shirt box. “Crazier things have happened. I mean, look at Aunt Elizabeth, you know? Maybe some of that change is contagious. I’d move here in a heartbeat.”

Angie inched back. “What about David’s job?”

“Yeah, obviously there is that. And he’s going to be a partner soon, which will be even more and longer hours.”

“You know what I said to Noelle the day we got here and she holed up in our room on her laptop?” Angie asked, leaning in. “There’s more to life than money. You might need that advice, too, Eve, or David does.”

Eve studied her, thinking. “I don’t really care about the money,” she said. “I want my husband home. And if he were there, I’d love another baby, even a fourth boy. It terrifies me, but I’d love it.”

“Then you should—” She stopped when the phone she’d dropped on the carpet next to her flashed with an incoming call from Craig. Weirdly, her heart jumped. “Oh, boy,” she whispered. “It’s the cheater. I haven’t talked to him since I called and had a nice chat with the woman in his hotel room.”

“You better take his call, Ange,” Eve said, standing up. “I’ll go check on the boys and give you privacy.”

“Thanks.” With a deep breath, she swiped the screen. “Hey,” she answered softly.

“What the ever-loving hell is going on, Angie?” The vitriol in his voice was so strong, it lifted the hairs on the back of her neck. “Do you know our daughter is missing? Do you know that? Do you have any idea or are you too busy mountain climbing and stalking me on my business trips to ignore the fact that your daughter is nowhere to be found? What are you going to do about it?”

She let that breath out and almost laughed at what an arrogant jerk she’d

married. “She’s not missing, Craig. She is, as we speak, taking a driving lesson with her soon-to-be Uncle Sonny after baking cookies and playing in the snow with her cousins.”

Dead silence lasted a beat too long. “*What?*” he finally fired. “You brought her out there and didn’t tell me?”

Now she was confused. “She flew herself out here and she texted you the night she arrived.”

“She did not. Want me to send you screenshots of my texts with her? I haven’t heard from her in...a week. There were a bunch of texts, then nothing. I thought...” She could practically feel him squirm as she imagined him flipping through his text history.

“See?” she said. “She texted you when she got here.”

“No, she didn’t. Look.”

A few seconds later, the screenshot came in and it was clear he was telling the truth; Brooke had not sent a text. Angie closed her eyes and bit back a groan. Had she lied?

“She told me she’d text you and I’ve been waiting for you to call and talk to me about it.”

“Why didn’t *you* call *me*?” he demanded. “How come I had to find out when that Vance kid showed up looking for something of his she had, and I thought she was with his family in Tahoe?”

“She wasn’t even going to go to Tahoe until Christmas Eve.” Did he not pay attention to anything they said?

“Whatever,” he scoffed. “Can you imagine how embarrassed I was? His father’s a big deal in the Valley and I looked like an idiot.”

She almost laughed at that. Really? *That* was his concern?

“I don’t know, Craig. Can you imagine how embarrassed I was when I called your hotel room and your mistress answered the phone because you were *in the shower*?” She ground out the words. “Forgive me for not calling so I didn’t have to endure that again.”

He was silent for a long beat of time. “That was just, you know, dumb.”

She choked. “That’s one way to describe it. But don’t forget disgusting, wrong, pathetic, horrible, wrong, and unforgivable. Did I mention *wrong*?”

“Look, Ange, it was a spur-of-the-moment madness thing. Stuff happens in the heat of the business battle, you know? It doesn’t mean a thing. Why don’t you two just come home and we’ll work it out?”

She drew back and gave the phone a look of horror. “Um, no. We’re

having a fine time and a lovely holiday. We're staying right here until... until..."

"Until you cool off? Fine. Cool off and get home. You don't want this any more than I do."

"Are you serious?" She heard her voice rise with disbelief. "You think you can just...do that? Be unfaithful and cheat on me and then tell me I don't want to be apart from you? I don't care if I never see you again, Craig. You disgust me."

She flinched as she said the words, trying not to internalize the fact that she was saying them to the man she swore to love until death do they part. But he'd vowed to be faithful, and it sure sounded like that meant nothing to him.

"Okay, fine. Let me talk to Brooke."

"I just told you, she's not here."

"Right. Let me talk to her, Angie."

"I'm not lying!" she shot back. "You're the liar in this relationship, not me."

"You're a fool if you think you can do this," he said, his voice tight and low. "You can't just... You can't do this."

"Do what?" Her stomach tightened, because she knew he couldn't even say the words. He could sleep with another woman, but he wasn't man enough to say "divorce."

"You can't keep my daughter away from me," he said. "That's illegal. It's kidnapping, Angie. I'll call the cops and get her home."

"You don't even know why she's here," she fired back. "You don't know what that idiot Vance with the important father wanted her to do."

To his credit, that silenced Craig, but bile rose in Angie's throat, and not just because of his threats. Because this was what had happened to their marriage and family. This. They were both mean and ugly and...lost. And Brooke, poor young Brooke, was caught in the middle.

Maybe he was right. Maybe she should go home and work it out. If for no other reason than Brooke shouldn't have to suffer through her parents' painful divorce when she'd done nothing wrong but be born to them.

"So, come home and tell me," he said, his voice a little softer. "We can still have Christmas."

Her heart turned over in her chest and tears sprung to her eyes. "I'll talk to Brooke," she whispered. "And then I'll decide. But I have to talk to

Brooke.”

“Please don’t act like you and Brooke are so buddy-buddy all of a sudden, Ange. That girl can’t stand either one of us.”

She shook her head, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing the words were making her cry. So, she stabbed the phone to end the call, then tossed it back on the floor, letting the tears fall.

A few minutes later, Eve came back and kneeled down next to her, wrapping her arms around Angie’s shoulders, not even asking her anything. She didn’t have to. They were sisters, together since conception, and Eve knew that all she needed right now was a shoulder and a tissue. Eve offered both.

“Brooke’s back,” Eve finally whispered. “She’s a little upset.”

“Her father’s been texting her and just found out she flew herself across country. She’s probably read some really nasty messages from him.”

Eve gasped softly. “He didn’t know?”

“I thought he did.”

With a soft moan of sympathy for how bad this situation was, Eve rubbed her back. “I told her you were wrapping presents in here and needed to keep the door closed. Want me to tell her you’re still busy and need some time alone?”

Angie leaned back and blew out a breath, searching her sister’s blue eyes. “I have to talk to her,” she said. “I’m going to take a walk with her and...I don’t know what’s going to happen. But she’s in the middle of this and I have to tread lightly or she’s the one who’ll get stomped on.”

Eve nodded. “You do what you have to do.”

The problem was, Angie had no idea what that was.



BEFORE SHE FACED BROOKE, Angie took a few moments in the bathroom to rinse her face. With water pouring down her cheeks, she stared into the mirror with one simple question: *How had it all gone so wrong?*

Tears stung as she remembered her wedding day and the way she’d gazed lovingly into the eyes of the man she truly and deeply believed would love and protect her for the rest of her life.

Sure, there had been a couple of red flags. A temper here and there, a tendency to get a little plowed when there was whiskey available. Even a few moments of mistrust when she caught him deleting text messages that had given her a bad, bad vibe.

She should have known. Of course she should have known. But she was young—barely twenty-three when she met Craig—and she'd been charmed. He was an avid listener, the most persuasive man she'd ever met, and he was driven to succeed so that he could shower her with everything he claimed she deserved.

Instead, he showered...with another woman.

Wiping her face, she walked into the great room, relieved to hear the sweet sound of Brooke's laughter. So she wasn't that upset about Craig's texts.

"It was her first hairpin turn and she nailed it," Sonny's happy voice greeted her as she stepped into the kitchen where they'd gathered after the driving lesson.

"Hey," Angie plastered on a big smile as she joined them. "How was the drive?"

"She totaled my truck," Sonny said, matter of fact, shaking his head with horror. "Poor thing's a goner."

"No, I did not!" Brooke rolled her eyes and laughed. "I did awesome, Mom. Uncle Sonny let me drive on the Blue Ridge Parkway! In that totally bomb truck that I love."

"The Parkway?" Angie's eyes widened. "That is not for the faint of heart."

Sonny shrugged. "It's a road and she did great."

"That's awesome, sweetie." Angie took a moment to study her daughter, trying to see how upset she was, but she seemed okay. "I need a wrapping break," she said. "Take a walk with me?"

Brooke's cheeks, already flushed, deepened as if she knew this was not a run-of-the-mill walk in the woods. She gave a quick nod. "Sure. But hang on a sec, Mom."

She pulled out her phone and tapped. "Look what I posted on TikTok." She angled the screen to show a short video of herself behind the wheel. "Uncle Sonny took it and look how many likes it got." She turned to him and pointed at the screen. "Well done, big guy!"

"Are we going viral?" he asked, his bushy brows lifting with easy humor.

Brooke laughed again and shrugged. “You may yet be a social media sensation,” she joked, picking up her jacket from the back of the chair. “Kay, Mom. I guess I have to pay for the driving lesson one way or another.”

That glimmer of “old” Brooke gave Angie a little shot of fear. Had a few texts from her father erased happy, laughing, easygoing Asheville Brooke and replaced her with sullen, snarky, ice-cold Menlo Park Brooke?

It was time to find out.

Angie got her own jacket and beckoned her daughter with a quick wave toward the door in the sunroom that led to the backyard. “This way,” she said.

With a sigh that deepened Angie’s worry, Brooke followed her, the two of them trotting down from the deck to the frozen, partially snow-covered grass. The boys and David were in the front, so she opted for the trail into the woods.

They didn’t say a word for a few minutes, just marched through the sun-dappled forest, surrounded by pines and bare winter trees.

“Go ahead,” Brooke finally said. “Put me out of my misery. Punishment for lying about texting Dad? Phone gone for two days? It’s not like you can ground me here or tell me I’m not allowed to make cookies.”

Angie threw her a look. “Just tell me why you didn’t send a text like you said you had, and lied to me. I don’t understand it, Brooke.”

“Neither do I,” she said glumly.

“You’re going to have to do better than that,” Angie shot back. “With all his flaws, which are many, he is still your father and had a right to know you’d left California and flown across the country.”

“He could have just looked at his AmEx bill and he would have seen the American Airlines ticket.”

True, but still. “It was your responsibility.”

“You didn’t tell him either, Mom.”

Angie blasted her with a look. “You told me you’d text him.”

“Okay, okay. I didn’t because...” She slowed her step and looked up at a puffy white cloud overhead. “I guess, if I dig deep for the truth? I wanted to see how long it would take him to realize I was gone.”

“So it was a test?”

“Yep. And he failed. Hard.” Brooke threw her hands up defensively, her eyes darkening with disappointment. “It’s been days and days. And how did he finally figure it out?”

“Vance—”

“I know. He texted me a heads-up that he saw Dad.”

“You’re speaking to him?” Angie asked, surprised.

“Teenagers’ code of honor. You might hate each other but if parents are about to blow, a warning is the decent thing to do.”

“So now Vance is decent?” Angie choked the question.

“No, he’s garbage on my shoe, because the only reason he texted was to tell me not to tell Dad about the society stuff. Apparently his father knows Dad, or they run in the same high-tech circles or something. I don’t know.” She stabbed her hand into her thick hair, drawing it back to look at Angie. “I kind of thought Dad didn’t love me, but I guess this proves it.”

“First of all, he does love you. He’s just terrible at showing it. Second, is that really what you’re doing? Testing your father? Were you testing me when you showed up here? Trying to see if I’d haul you right back to Menlo Park?”

She blinked, her eyes misty. “No, Mom. I don’t have to test you. No matter how awful I am—and I admit I’ve been pretty awful—you’re there for me. Your love is...unconditional.”

Angie’s heart rolled around, and she reached for Brooke. “Well, if you wanted to deflect the punishment, that’d be a good way to do it.”

“I’m keeping it real, Mom. I know you. I trust you. But Dad?” She shook her head. “I wish I could trust him. I want to love him, and I want him to love me, but every day it becomes clear that he doesn’t.”

“Oh.” Angie whimpered. “I could have said that same thing. Word for word. It’s exactly how I feel. I wish I could trust him and love him, and that he loved me, but...”

Brooke just nodded, gently pulling away to perch on a tree stump in the sun, silent and glum. She looked up and scooted over, making a sliver of room for Angie.

“He wants us to come home,” Angie said. “He wants to, um, work it out.”

Brooke stared ahead, huffing out a breath, silent for a long time.

“I told him I’d talk to you,” Angie finally said.

“Why? I mean, you guys are the adults. You make the decision and I’ll do what I’m told.” She smiled slyly and leaned into Angie’s shoulder. “Yeah, I know. That’d be a nice change.”

“Honey, everything about you has been a nice change,” Angie said softly. “I don’t know if it’s what you’ve been through, or the family, or the

mountains, or just a change of scenery, but you've been wonderful since you got here and I'm...I'm scared."

"That I'll go back to being the Wicked Witch of the West?"

"Kind of, yeah."

Brooke gave a low, easy laugh and put her arm around Angie. "I don't think I will, Mom. And, truth? I like it here. I'm happy. I feel good." She looked down, burrowing the toe of her sneaker in dirt. "The earth is good here, and so are the people. But Dad..."

"Is in California. He's your father and my husband." Angie gave a tight smile. "And he wants us to come home."

"What do *you* want?" Brooke asked.

Angie felt her eyes flicker in surprise—she so rarely got asked that question. "I want this holiday with you and my sisters and our new and growing family. I don't want to deal with him, but I have to, eventually."

"And what does 'deal with him' mean?" Brooke asked.

"I don't know. Give him another chance, but..." She flinched. "I'm not sure I can."

"So let him come to you," Brooke said. "Let him beg and grovel and prove he deserves us."

Angie turned and studied her, shocked by the maturity of that response, and the wisdom. Also, the impossibility.

"He's not going to come to us. He'll fly us home First Class and make promises he may or may not keep. Then he might throw money at you and an apology at me, but Dad is not a groveling guy."

Brooke shrugged. "Then who needs him? Let's stay here and make a new home in the mountains."

Angie gasped noisily. "What? Brooke! I can't—"

"Why the heck not?"

"I can't take you three thousand miles from your dad."

"People do it. You need a good lawyer."

Her jaw loosened. "I can't believe you'd even suggest that."

"Why? Listen, Mom. I hate that school, those kids, and that rotten-to-the-core town full of people who only care about money." She lifted a brow. "I'm Cookie Brookie now, North Carolina kid. What else can't you believe?"

"That you're so awesome."

Brooke laughed. "Believe it."

Angie hugged her, squeezing hard and adding a kiss on her silky hair.

“Is that a yes, Mom? Operation Ditch Dad?”

“No. You’re talking about a monumental decision that isn’t made sitting on a tree stump. There are massive legal ramifications, financial implications, and emotional repercussions. And what if Dad *does* show up and grovel? Doesn’t he deserve a second chance?”

Even as Angie asked the question, she knew the answer was no. He didn’t deserve anything.

Brooke shrugged. “I admit a good grovel would give me enough satisfaction that I might say yes, but you’re right. It won’t happen. In the meantime, let’s just stay.”

“For now,” Angie added.

“For the whole holiday,” Brooke said. “Cause in my entire life, I never did anything as fun as drive that truck. In fact...” She stood. “Don’t you need to run an errand or something? Uncle Sonny said I could drive it anytime. And anytime is *now*.”

Angie looked up at her, marveling at her youth and resilience in the face of this emotional onslaught. She could learn a lot from Brooke, she thought as she stared at her beautiful daughter. And that was the biggest surprise of all.

Chapter Eight

Eve

SITTING atop the saddled back of a horse named Rosie, Eve took a deep breath of pine-infused air and drank in the beauty of a sunset ride with her aunt.

“Marvelous idea, Aunt Elizabeth.” She threw her a look. “I guess it is just easier to say ‘Bitsy,’ isn’t it?”

Elizabeth laughed. “I was so fussy about my name all those years and the many, many iterations of it. I’ve been called Liz and Lizzie and Beth and Liza and whatever. I hated them all. Then Sonny McPherson pronounces me ‘Bitsy’—which might have been ‘Betsy,’ with his Southern accent—and what do you know? It sticks.”

“It fits the new Elizabeth Whitaker.”

“Who’ll soon be Bitsy McPherson,” Elizabeth said, practically singing the name with joy. As their horses trotted on, she glanced at Eve. “You look pretty confident up there, dear.”

“I’m following your lead,” she said. “When did you get so good at this?”

Once again, she trilled out a laugh, as happy as a woman could be. “From the very first moment Sonny and I started spending time together, he was determined to get me on a horse. I was so against it. I thought, me? On a horse? In these shoes?”

Eve smiled, picturing Elizabeth Whitaker in her high heels but now seeing Bitsy in her beat-up hiking boots.

“And what do you know?” she continued. “I fell in love with riding like I fell in love with that man.”

Eve toyed with the reins in her hand, bouncing lightly as Rosie gracefully made her way along the trail.

The sun was just beginning to set over the mountains, turning the famous blue tones to an achingly beautiful shade of gold. The temperatures were dropping, too, but Eve was wrapped in a warm puffer jacket with a knit hat and gloves, so she felt nothing but invigorated.

“I can’t believe how good it feels to be in nature,” she mused. “All I ever see is the inside of a house and van, driving from sports practice to play rehearsal to instrument lesson. The world is beautiful and I’m missing it!”

“I know that feeling all too well, Evie girl.” Elizabeth brushed some silver strands out of her face and sighed wistfully. “Always...chasing. The next thing, whatever it was going to be. A trip, a deal, an adventure. When I got here a year ago, everything shifted. Even in the most beautiful places on Earth, my mind was never still. Here, *I* am still. My strivings have ceased.”

Eve suspected that was a Bible quote, but she didn’t ask. Instead, she was inwardly focused, wondering how to feel that way. “I wish I could say the same.”

Aunt Elizabeth turned to her with her brow furrowed in concern. “Eve, you have a beautiful and fulfilling life with a wonderful family. You are so blessed!”

“I know I am, and I feel the blessings every single day. But sometimes I get overwhelmed with it all, and David is always so busy and now he’s on this baby thing and—”

“This what?” Elizabeth yanked her reins with dramatic flair and snapped her head around to stare at Eve with her jaw slack.

“Whoops.” She gave a soft laugh. “Only Angie and Noelle know. And, well, David, of course, since it was his idea.”

Barely letting the horse move, Elizabeth studied her, her expression impossible to read.

“Do you think it’s the craziest thing I ever considered?” Eve asked.

“I think...you were born to be a mother. I’ve never seen anyone—with the possible exception of your own mother—who was more suited to the task. Maybe too suited.”

Eve smiled, knowing exactly what she meant. “I have a hard time...” She lifted her hands and gave the reins a shake. “Letting go of these.”

“How do you feel about another baby?” Elizabeth asked.

Sighing, Eve felt her lips pull in a smile. “In my heart or my head?”

“As if you need to wonder which I’m more interested in.”

“Right. My heart feels like it would be thrilling, fulfilling, joyous, and perfect. So, obviously, the emotional answer is yes, please. But let’s be real.” She took a moment to remember what was stopping her. “There are some monumental cons, starting with my age and David’s life.”

“You’re not too old.”

“Not technically,” Eve agreed. “I wouldn’t mind being able to snap my fingers and have a baby. And while that happened, David would miraculously be home more.”

Her aunt nodded, letting some time pass as they turned a bend on the path and paused, looking up a steep hill toward the sheep and llama pen. There, they could see Sonny, David, and the boys examining the fence. Well, two boys. Sawyer was running around with Lucky, perilously close to a thickly wooded area.

“Are those the woods where the lost sheep are going?” Eve asked, suddenly imagining Sawyer there in the dark. “That might not—”

“Eve.” Elizabeth pulled her horse, Jasper, closer and reached across the space to touch Eve’s arm. “Relax.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“No, it isn’t,” Elizabeth said. “I had to learn.”

“But he’s so young and way, way too reckless.”

“Honey, can I tell you something you might not realize?”

Eve turned to her and nodded, curious at the note in her aunt’s voice.

“You might not remember this,” Elizabeth said. “Not that you don’t remember life before you were fifteen, but the profound and shocking change in your world when your parents died might have made those earlier years a little blurry.”

Eve didn’t respond, waiting to see where she was going with this.

“But, of the three of you triplets, you were the most adventurous when you were young. The most, believe it or not, like Sawyer.”

Was she? Maybe Elizabeth was right—she couldn’t really remember her personality as a child.

“Everything changed that night twenty-five years ago,” Elizabeth continued. “You became obsessed with having control over your environment almost immediately. I saw it happen during those three years I

had the privilege of raising you girls. You wanted everything neat. You needed to know where every belonging was. You became freakishly punctual. You couldn't stand a change in schedule. Your room was like someone in the military lived there."

"I wasn't always that way?"

"Close your eyes and picture your toy box when you were, oh, nine or so. Can you?"

She tried, and saw...a mess.

"Now your closet. Same age."

Eve laughed. "Okay, point made."

"Not yet." Elizabeth leaned closer. "Having control became a security blanket for you. But maybe it's getting warm under that blanket. Maybe you could throw it off and trust God or the process."

She sighed. "You sound an awful lot like David."

"Because we both love you and want to see you happy."

"I'm not sure I know how to let go of that control. It might be something that developed after Mom and Dad died, but it only deepened when I had children. Won't one more make it worse?"

"It could make it better," Elizabeth countered. "And maybe you could change a few things. Give James more responsibility—he's craving it. Let Bradley make a mistake now and then; he might need that. Maybe you could consider not homeschooling them."

She made a face. "I don't love our school district..."

"Then move."

"But neurosurgeons can't just up and move and find a new job. It's a huge process and he's with one of the top groups in the state, and he's on track to become a partner with that group. He's making a lot of money and —"

Elizabeth choked at that. "Root of all evil."

Sawyer's high-pitched squeal of happiness broke into their conversation, making them turn to see him racing Lucky out of the woods. David stood with his hand on James's shoulder, giving that boy the dad time he craved. Bradley was in the pen with Sonny, nose to nose with a llama, looking, well, fearless.

Taking it all in, Eve's heart folded. "This is what I want," she whispered, reaching for Aunt Elizabeth's gloved hand. "Time just being a family. But I can't force David to want it, too."

“No, you can’t. But I love a God who has a way with miracles, and His plan is always surprising and good.”

Eve just smiled, sending up a silent prayer to that God, but deep inside, knowing that this moment of bliss was temporary, and her life wasn’t going to change that much. So she decided to enjoy the moment instead of aching for that change.



AFTER A LONG AND magnificent ride all over the property, Eve felt rejuvenated and lighthearted. She and Aunt Elizabeth guided their horses, Rosie and Jasper, back to the stables on the west end of the property, and Elizabeth showed Eve how to secure them for the night.

“Thank you for a wonderful time, Miss Rosie.” Eve leaned forward and kissed the gentle creature on the front of her nose. “And you, Aunt Elizabeth, horsewoman.”

She laughed, reading her phone. “Sonny said he and David went off to run an errand and the boys are shepherding.”

Eve’s eyes widened. “Alone?”

Elizabeth responded with nothing but a raised eyebrow.

Eve bit her lip. “Okay, but can I just go check on them? For peace of mind?”

“Of course. It’s a beautiful night and I love to hike that hill. Keeps you young, you know?”

They made their way to the plateau at the top of the hill, but it was already so dark, she could barely see the boys’ silhouettes. Two of them, actually, which made her heart hitch.

“Hey, boys!” She waved her arm in the air to get their attention. “Where’s Sawyer?”

Bradley pointed behind him to a huge, sprawling oak tree. “Climbing that tree.”

“Of course he is,” she said dryly.

Eve squinted to see Sawyer a few limbs up in the oak tree. He looked secure enough, but the sight always made her a bit nervous.

“All right, but it’s time to head home,” she told them.

“Hold on, Mom!” James whined back. “We have a hypothesis about the missing sheep, but we need to stay a bit longer to make sure our theory checks out.”

“It’s almost dark, James. You guys can come back here tomorrow and test all the sheep theories.”

“But, Mom,” Bradley insisted, “there’s a small break in the fence over there, and even though it doesn’t look big enough for the sheep to walk through, we think they’ve found some way to push the wood piece out of the way. Wouldn’t it be awesome if we solved Uncle Sonny’s problem for him? We have to wait and watch!”

James came closer, tightening his jacket and blowing into his hands. “We won’t know until we see them push the plank for ourselves.”

“I’m on lookout duty!” Sawyer called, nothing but a voice in the growing darkness.

Eve chewed her lip, knowing it was impossible not to completely adore the way the boys had put their hearts and souls into this project, and cared deeply about Sonny and his farm animals.

“Let ’em stay for a little while.” Elizabeth nudged her. “They’ve been so diligent, and clearly they know what they’re doing. I’ll be here at the house to wait for Sonny, and then we’ll come back and get them and bring them to the cabin. They won’t be out here too long, and they could find the problem.”

“But...I thought we were...” Her arguments faded away. “Okay, but Sawyer needs to come down. No tree climbing at night.”

“Sawyer!” Bradley shouted toward the tree. “Come on down!”

“Hold on!” he called. “If I just get a little higher...”

Her gut flaring with maternal instinct, Eve rushed closer toward the tree, just able to see the white stripe of Sawyer’s jacket. “Honey, you need to—”

He cried out just as a tree branch snapped and that white stripe went straight down about seven feet.

“Sawyer!” She launched forward as she screamed, hearing Lucky bark frantically as she ran full speed to the tree, adrenaline pumping as she prepared herself for a possible ER trip.

James, Bradley, and Elizabeth were close behind her.

“Sawyer, baby.” Eve rushed to him, crouching to the ground instantly, her hands shaking. “Are you okay?”

Sawyer sniffled, seemingly a bit in shock from the fall. But he sat up right away, his eyes wide and his arms and legs all seemingly unbroken.

Eve moaned with relief, holding the dog back with one hand and clutching her son with the other.

“It hurts,” he grunted, gripping his knee with both hands, and she could see a huge tear in his jeans and an equally sizeable cut on his exposed knee.

“Did you hit your head?” Eve asked anxiously, far more concerned about a head injury than a skinned knee.

“No.” Sawyer shook his head, his curls bouncing around his face as he visibly worked not to cry. “I’m fine. I’m...ouch.” He dropped his head. “My knee hurts, Mommy.”

“Oh, buddy.” Eve held him for a bit as the adrenaline dumped and she dove into Mom Mode. “Let’s look at that knee.”

The front of Sawyer’s knee looked pretty scraped up, bleeding but nothing he didn’t endure on a regular basis. No stitches needed, not broken, and he could stand on it.

“Maybe I’ll call David...” She held Sawyer as Elizabeth and Bradley did their own examination.

“Mom, I got it.” James seemed to appear out of nowhere, holding up a first aid kit. “I’ll take care of it.”

Eve stepped back, a bit speechless. “Oh, wow. James. Where did you...”

“Uncle Sonny keeps one in the barn,” he explained calmly, sitting down on the grass next to his little brother and popping open the latches of the plastic kit. “I already washed my hands in the sink out there. I can handle it. Really.”

Eve drew back, clinging to Lucky’s collar to keep him back as she glanced at Aunt Elizabeth—and got a “told you so” look in return.

As Eve watched, James cleaned Sawyer’s scrape with an antiseptic wipe, patted it with hydrogen peroxide, and bandaged it up with a huge square Band-Aid.

“Just like Dr. Dad,” Bradley joked as he observed the whole process.

James *was* like his dad. He leaned over his brother with gentleness, keeping Sawyer calm and even making him laugh when it hurt.

Tears welled in her eyes as she watched her oldest boy care for her youngest, mesmerized by his mature and steady capability.

“There you go, Soy Sauce.” James stood up and patted Sawyer’s head. “Good as new.”

Sawyer smiled, wiped his tears, and hopped right up. “I’m ready to get back to work, boys! We’ve got sheeps to save!”

“Can we stay, Mom?” James asked. “Just for a little bit?”

“Please, Mom?” Bradley asked. “It’s really fun out here. I’m not scared at all.”

“I swear I won’t climb anything,” Sawyer promised, crossing his heart.

She let out a sigh—and a lot of control. “Okay. One more hour, then you come home with Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Sonny.”

The boys high-fived and hugged her and she left Elizabeth at the farmhouse with Sonny already on his way. It was a small relinquishment of control, but it felt good.

The whole drive home, she thought about the idea of having another baby. A newborn seemed daunting and wildly overwhelming, but James was growing up rapidly before her eyes.

Maybe...just maybe...she could actually do it.

Chapter Nine

Noelle

“I UNDERSTAND, LUCINDA.” Even as Noelle spoke the words into her phone, she felt her stomach drop with disappointment.

“We’re not saying you won’t get the promotion,” her boss continued in her clipped New York tone. “But the board isn’t going to make final decisions until the next meeting in mid-January. You understand, with the holidays and such.”

She understood all right. Lucinda was punishing her for not coming back for the auction.

“I think a lot will depend on your success with the estate sale,” Lucinda continued. “How are you doing on the inventory? Nearly finished?”

Ugh. She’d barely started. Instead, she was up to her elbows in painting Christmas play backdrops during the day, and hanging out with Jace and Cassie and her family in the evenings.

“Because I haven’t seen an update,” Lucinda pressed. “Have you hit any snags?”

“Nope, no snags. It’s a big estate and lots to inventory and price. I’m done with the jewelry, though.” Well, she was half done. And hadn’t begun to dive into the art, clothing, furniture, antique books, or the rare collection of Tiffany lamps. “I’m on it, though, Lucinda. No worries.”

“I never worry about you, Noelle. Well...” She gave a mirthless laugh. “I didn’t before you disappeared to the country for Christmas.”

“It’s a very important time for my family,” she said, wondering if somewhere in that bony chest there beat a real heart. Should she tell Lucinda that she hadn’t been back in this cabin since her parents died twenty-five years ago? Should she tell her that her sister was in a rocky marriage and her daughter had just shown up? Should she tell her that her aunt, her most beloved aunt who was like a mother to her, was getting married on New Year’s Eve and—

“Enough chitchat for me,” Lucinda said as if she could read Noelle’s meandering thoughts. “I have a meeting with the luxury art department.”

“Oh?” Noelle inched back. “I didn’t see that on my company calendar.”

“I didn’t bother to include you, since I knew you’d have to join by Zoom and you know I despise that technology. Plus, you really need to spend time on that estate sale. Better go now. Bye!”

Noelle didn’t bother with a response, because she knew Lucinda was freezing her out as punishment. It would pass. She’d be home on New Year’s Day and somehow she’d pull off the estate sale by calling in favors.

She sighed, pressing her fingers into her temples as she forced her eyes to read the computer screen open in front of her, but it was a blur of at least two hundred books from the estate sale in tiny thumbnail images that she needed to organize and label with a starting bid.

It wasn’t like she hadn’t tried to work hard this morning. She’d made herself stay in the den after getting coffee, closing up the bed she’d been sleeping in, and turning this room into the office it was meant to be. But focus was elusive when she could hear her sisters’ laughter and the dog bark—Lucky was here, so Sonny must be, too—and she ached to join the fun.

Work used to be all the fun she needed, Noelle mused as she clicked through a classics collection. How much was a hundred-year-old copy of *The Iliad* worth? She supposed it depended on whether or not *The Odyssey* was available, too, so she could sell it as a set. With a sigh, she started to click to Sotheby’s proprietary pricing site, but her fingers seemed frozen on the keyboard.

She didn’t *want* to work.

Suddenly, she felt like a little kid playing hooky from school—she simply didn’t want to do this. Where was old Noelle? The one who’d pick up the phone, call a friend at the New York Public Library in the antiques division and have this book sold before that estate sale opened? That Noelle was...*on vacation*.

And it was costing her at work. Was that fair? It didn't matter, it was a fact, she decided as she finally typed "classic literature" in the search bar.

But she was saved by the sudden vibration of a text message, and the name of Hannah McPherson, Sonny's younger daughter.

"Oh, Hannah," she crooned, beyond grateful for the distraction from the darling Southern schoolteacher who was a few years younger than Noelle and as precious as a lamb. She was also slightly obsessed with Noelle's New York life, since Hannah rarely left the Copper Creek area and seemed to think that life in the big city was all glam, all the time.

Despite their differences in lifestyle, Noelle had really clicked with the other woman and eagerly opened her message.

Hannah McPherson: *Hey you! Any chance you want to go shopping? And I don't mean Christmas shopping. I'm ready to tackle the boutiques but I need your wonderful fashion sense to keep me from being a "before" picture. Sound like fun? I'll buy lunch!*

Did it sound like fun? It sounded like a governor's reprieve from the hell that was this estate sale. It sounded like an afternoon in the adorable town of Asheville, laughing with a woman who didn't know how hilarious she was, as far away from this computer as humanly possible.

It also *didn't* sound like doing the inventory list for the estate sale.

Noelle sighed, setting the phone down and shaking her head, not sure how to let Hannah down.

She couldn't go. She shouldn't go. She wouldn't go.

Instead, she stared at the laptop screen with a list of possible prices for a century-old copy of *The Iliad* and realized the price would depend on six different factors that she'd have to research and...and...and... Oh, man! She didn't want to work. It made no sense, but it was true.

She picked up the phone and typed one word back to Hannah.

Absolutely!



"THANK you so much for doing this." Hannah's smile lit up her freckled face and deep brown eyes as she climbed out of the driver's seat and zipped up her jacket. "I am just a lost cause when it comes to cute clothes, and every time I

see you, you just look so darn put together. Like that scarf just casually thrown around your neck like a dang runway model. I'm jealous!"

Noelle laughed, closing the passenger-side door of Hannah's hatchback and fluffing the designer scarf she'd snagged at Barney's right before she left New York. "Not sure if I'd go that far, but you're so beautiful and vibrant, Hannah, you can carry off any look."

Hannah insisted on paying the meter, so while she did, Noelle looked around the streets of downtown Asheville, a town that blended funky and cosmopolitan with a mix of boutiques, bars, gift shops, and galleries.

Normally, the art gallery would call to Noelle first, but not today. It wasn't where she wanted to be. Instead, she happily let Hannah lead her into a small clothing store on the corner with the perfect name of Charmed.

"I love this place," she whispered. "I just never know where to start, get overwhelmed, buy a necklace, and leave."

Noelle paused in the doorway and took in the display of cool leather jackets, a table of comfy sweaters, and racks of stylish tops and dresses. "Really? I couldn't get out of here without my credit card melting."

"It's not too expensive," Hannah said.

Noelle snagged a tag on a butter-soft leather jacket with a lambswool collar and gasped at the price.

"Or maybe it is," Hannah added.

"It's *not*," Noelle said. "This would be three times this much in New York. Seriously? I'll take one in every color."

Hannah laughed. "Things are likely cheaper down here than in the big city."

"But not bad quality at all."

"So, where do I start?" Hannah asked, stepping back to show Noelle her outfit, which was simply faded jeans and an olive-green down jacket. "Tops and bottoms? Some cool dresses? Maybe ditch the North Face jacket?"

"There's nothing wrong with how you dress, Hannah. I'm sure you have much better taste than you're giving yourself credit for."

"No, *you* have taste." She arched a brow and pointed at Noelle's feet, which were in low-heeled, white leather booties she'd picked out at Bergdorf Goodman after a particularly hefty month of commissions. "How cute are they?"

"Oh, these are...you know..." Noelle waved a dismissive hand.

"Freaking fabulous is what they are!" Hannah laughed, nudging her

playfully. “Now, I’m on a teacher’s salary here, so we have to work around that. But I want your taste and your input.”

“I’m happy to give it.” Noelle smiled, turning around to get her bearings and greet the shop owner. “This is way more fun than working, trust me.”

“Oh, good!” Hannah unzipped her jacket and shimmied out of it. “Let’s get to work.”

Laughing, Noelle decided to just treat her like any client, finding things that made her eyes light up and stayed within a reasonable budget. “Let’s start with a basic casual wardrobe—tailored jeans, a few tops that could work for day or night, and the right accessories. Then we’ll find some dresses for work and...”

“Church,” Hannah supplied. “I don’t go out to clubs much. Keith hates that, so we’re more of a brewery couple. If we’re even a couple.” She made a face. “Maybe that conversation is for my emotional makeover.”

“We’ll stick with the wardrobe today,” Noelle said, picking up a cute pair of high-rise jeans. “But we can talk over lunch.”

The shop owner assigned them a dressing room and took the items that Noelle plucked from tables and racks and before long, Hannah was modeling her first outfit.

“Oh, I love it!” she exclaimed when she stepped out.

But Noelle angled her head. “Those jeans are hiding your adorable figure. Hang on, I saw another pair.”

More jeans, a couple of tops, the perfect belt and, yes, a casual scarf, and then they had their first outfit.

Dresses were just as easy, since Hannah liked everything and had a lovely figure that looked good in most styles.

They finished with the leather jacket that Noelle simply adored, packed up their bags, and headed to a place called Hazel Twenty. This one was even better, with an array of country-girl ankle-length skirts that Noelle didn’t wear but Hannah absolutely rocked.

“I’d never tried anything like this,” she cooed as she spun in front of a mirror and accepted the cropped sweater that Noelle offered for the next outfit.

After three boutiques and the makings of a major wardrobe upgrade, Hannah suggested they toss the bags in the car and grab coffee.

“The red coffee bus is right down there.”

“Coffee *bus*?” Noelle asked, not sure if she’d heard right.

“Yep. The Big Red Bus is the best coffee in Western North Carolina, and a local landmark.”

Next stop was, yes, a giant red bus, which was actually a repurposed double-decker bus parked outside of a restaurant in the heart of downtown. The lower level was a coffee shop with a few seats inside and on the top deck with outdoor seating warmed by heat lamps.

“Now this,” Noelle pronounced, “is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Welcome to Asheville, weird and wonderful.” Hannah treated them to cappuccinos, and they found a table outside in the sun, which had warmed up the winter day.

“I love it,” Noelle said as she blew on her hot coffee.

“Please. It’s not Rockefeller Center.”

“Which is exactly why I love it.” Noelle leaned back and pinned her gaze on Hannah. “Life up there is not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Stop. Your life is beyond cool. You live in a high-rise in Manhattan. You work at stinkin’ Sotheby’s. You shop in Bergdorf and probably limo around the place. I’ve never even been to New York.”

“Never?” Noelle drew back.

Hannah shook her head. “Keith doesn’t like to travel too much. I haven’t really had a friend who wanted to go. Caro’s wrapped up in life on the farm and, well, it just hasn’t happened. But now I know you.”

“You can come and stay with me anytime,” Noelle said. “But don’t be sad when you see I have a one-bedroom apartment and all I can offer is a pullout couch.”

“I’d love that. Keith’s idea of a vacation is a weekend fishing trip.”

Noelle angled her head, remembering happy hours of fishing with Jace. “That sounds fun to me.” She shrugged. “I guess the grass really is greener.” After taking a sip, she sensed it was the right time to get into that emotional makeover Hannah had mentioned.

“How are things with Keith?” Noelle asked.

“Oh, you know...” Then she laughed. “I guess if you did, you wouldn’t have asked.”

“Only if you want to talk about him.”

She gave a tight smile. “I can give you the party line, what I tell everyone.”

“Which is?”

“He’s not into commitments and I don’t really want to get married and

blah blah *blah*.”

Noelle leaned closer, hoping for the *not* party line. “Do you live with him?”

She shook her head. “He wanted to, but...you know...cows and milk and all. My dad just wouldn’t like it and I respect him and his faith too much.”

“So you’re holding out for...?”

“Right? What else is there if you don’t get married or live together? Limbo.” Hannah slumped in her seat. “That’s where I am with Keith Kelly. The uncommitted state of limbo. We love each other too much to break up but not quite enough to...” She swallowed visibly. “To have that moment Bitsy and my dad had the other night right down the street from where we are now.”

Noelle thought about the sweet and romantic proposal they’d all witnessed. “Oh, you do want to marry him,” she said softly.

“I want *him* to want to marry me,” Hannah replied. “I know that’s dumb, but it’s what I want. Until he does, I feel like I’m not good enough.”

“Stop.” Noelle took her hand. “You’re beautiful inside and out, funny and smart, and you teach children, which makes you a saint.”

Her eyes filled at the compliments. “Thank you, Noelle. You’re sweet and I like you so much. From the minute I met you, I felt a kinship. Well, I guess we are about to be kin. Stepcousins or something now? My dad is marrying your aunt.”

Noelle squeezed her hand. “We’ll just call ourselves sisters.”

“Oh.” She whimpered the word. “Now I *am* going to cry.”

“Hannah, I’m no expert in love and romance, but my gut says you should be honest with Keith and tell him you want marriage. If he doesn’t, no matter how much that hurts, you should be free to find the right man.”

“That’s pretty wise for someone who seems to be quite happily single.”

“I am,” Noelle said, but even as she uttered the words, they sounded hollow. “This month in Asheville has me wishing I had family around more, though,” she added quickly. “So you can believe I’ll be back more often.”

“That’ll make Jace happy,” Hannah added with a sly smile. “Or am I not allowed to go there with my new friend?”

Noelle tipped her head. “I like that we’re friends.”

“You and me or you and Jace?”

Pointing her finger, Noelle made a face. “Good one. You and me,” she clarified. “As far as Jace, yes, of course we’re friends.”

“Friends who kiss,” Hannah teased. “You know, not every eye was on my dad and Bitsy at the tree lighting. Lots of people saw you kiss that night, and maybe now and again when you thought no one was looking.”

“We’ve been seeing each other a lot—well, as much as you can squeeze into a few weeks and surrounded by family.” Noelle looked down at her cappuccino and dragged the stirrer through the melted whipped cream. “I guess this is where I say it’s complicated, but you’ve been honest with me, so I will be with you.”

“Not complicated?” Hannah guessed.

“Could be, and will be, when I leave. But now? It’s simple.” She let out a sigh. “Everything about this place is simple. And I know that’s not what you love about it, or maybe you’re just used to it, but this town and that mountain and, yes, that man who I’ve known and adored for most of my life? It’s all so blissfully...simple.”

Hannah studied her for a long moment, quiet and thinking.

“I haven’t seen him this happy in four years,” Hannah finally said.

“Really?” Noelle pressed a hand to her chest, holding back a mix of emotions. Pride that she could give a man who’d lost so much some happiness. And joy that it was happening at the holidays. And fear because this had to end.

And sadness for the very same reason.

“Where do you think it’s going?” Hannah asked.

“It’s going to end,” Noelle answered.

“No chance of long-distance?”

“I don’t think that would be good for Cassie.”

“Oh.” Hannah pressed her fingers to her lips. “You care about Cassie.”

“Of course I do. Package deal.”

“That’s so...wow.” Her eyes grew misty. “It’s sweet and perfect and... and...”

“It could break three hearts when it ends,” Noelle finished glumly.

“Well, there’s an easy answer to that,” Hannah said. “Move here, marry Jace, be Cassie’s mom, and live the simple life in Asheville.”

She snorted. “Nothing easy about that answer,” she said.

“Give me one good reason why not.”

She stared at Hannah, ready to pull up a dozen good reasons. But not one of them—her career, her apartment, her friends, her life, her whole stinkin’ world—sounded very...good right then. What on Earth had happened to her

priorities?

“I have a better idea,” Noelle said, finishing off her coffee and gathering her bag. “Let’s hit a few more boutiques and see if we can find us both something spectacular to wear for Christmas.”

As she stood, Hannah looked up at her with a knowing glint in her eyes. But being the true—if new—friend she was, all she did was grab her purse and gesture for Noelle to lead the way to the next store.

Chapter Ten

Angie

BREAKFAST in the sunny kitchen had become one of the highlights of the day for Angie. Whoever got up first—most likely Eve—started the coffee and as each of the current cabin residents arrived, the table would fill, the bacon would sizzle, and the chatter about the day’s activities began.

Brooke was the last to arrive today, with tousled hair and sleepy eyes.

“Want some coffee?” Angie lifted a fresh pot and smiled at her daughter.

“Sure.” Brooke lifted a shoulder and grabbed a mug out of the cabinet above them. “Dad said it will stunt my growth, so pour it on.”

“Just to defy Dad?” Angie asked.

“I’m tall enough,” she said as Angie filled two mugs. “What are we doing today?”

“Anything you want,” Angie said, sneaking another look at Brooke and fighting the urge to pinch herself, because she seemed so...normal.

But then, Angie felt that way, too. The two of them were shedding the heavy gloom that hung over their California life. Gloom by the name of Craig, who hadn’t called or texted since their last tense conversation.

“One week until Christmas Eve!” Sawyer declared loudly as he finished his breakfast, dumped his plate in the sink, and rushed off to join Bradley, who’d taken Lucky outside.

James stayed, helping himself to more pancakes. He sat next to Aunt Elizabeth, who lingered over coffee. Noelle leaned against the counter,

clicking through her phone, while Eve and David, who'd just come in from a walk, were whipping up a fresh batch of scrambled eggs.

"One week?" Eve said under her breath, looking at her husband. "Dang. I still haven't gotten my hands on the new PlayStation. It's sold out everywhere, and it's all the boys want."

Noelle lowered her phone. "You've checked everywhere?"

"Every Best Buy, Target, Walmart, and Game Stop within a fifty-mile radius." She shook her head. "I'm at a loss."

"C'mon, you can do it, Mom," James said between bites. "I mean, uh, Santa."

Eve rolled her eyes, knowing that the gift wouldn't be a surprise, but if it wasn't under the tree? Major disappointment for three boys she loved.

"I can set up notifications on my socials," Brooke suggested. "Whenever there's a big drop for the PlayStation and they come into stock somewhere, I'll get notified. I can tell you as soon as it happens, and you can get to the store if it's not too far."

"I really appreciate that, Brooke. I know Caroline was looking for one, too, for Joshua. Here are some eggs for you two," Eve added, beckoning Angie and Brooke closer to the stove.

With full plates, they headed to the table, adding a few pancakes when they got there.

"So." Aunt Elizabeth clasped her hands as they gathered around the table. "What is everyone doing on this beautiful winter day? Someone is helping me plan my wedding reception, I hope." She winked. "Because we have exactly two weeks, my friends."

"David and I are all yours," Eve said. "The boys want to go to the farm today."

David nodded. "I found a rental company in Asheville that has all the tables and chairs in stock, so I'm going to lock that in."

"Wonderful!" Elizabeth grinned, her joy radiating from her smile. "Noelle, are you working today?"

Noelle gave a half smile as she joined them. "For a while, but I'm heading over to the church later with Cassie. I can wedding plan with you before that."

"Caroline and Hannah said they could come over," Elizabeth told them. "We could work on finalizing the invitations and some of the details."

"Ooh, fun," Eve said. "Count me in on that."

“I will!” Elizabeth agreed. “And the Messina ladies? What are your plans?”

Brooke and Angie exchanged a look. “What are we doing today, Mom? Wedding planning? Biltmore stuff? Christmas shopping?”

“Whatever you want,” Angie said, smiling at her.

“Aunt Elizabeth,” James said, leaning back in his chair, finally full—at least for the next hour or two.

“Yes, honey?”

“When you and Uncle Sonny get married, are you going to live on the farm?”

It was a good question, actually, that no one had really given much thought to through the whirlwind of the engagement and wedding planning all smack dab in the middle of Christmas.

Elizabeth nodded, brushing a gray lock behind her ear. “Yes, I will be living on the farm with my new husband and all of our animals. It will be wonderful.”

“But who will live here?” James asked.

“I guess we need to discuss that.” Elizabeth pressed her lips together and glanced at all three Chambers sisters. “It raises the question of what to do with this cabin. I could, of course, continue renting it out as I have been, but I’d love to share the landlord responsibilities with you.”

“Of course,” Eve said quickly. “Is it a lot of work?”

“It’s a lot of phone calls and decisions,” Elizabeth said. “And not wildly profitable.”

“I guess it pays the rent,” David said.

“There’s no rent,” Elizabeth told them. “No mortgage. Some taxes, some utilities, but we own it free and clear. I mean, I suppose it’s in my name or your mother’s. Maybe still in my parents’ name, I honestly don’t know.”

“Thanks to the Winchester family,” Brooke said, sitting up. “I still can’t believe my great-great-grandmother saved a baby’s life at Biltmore House and got this place in return.”

“They had to build the house, but they got the land,” Angie said, suddenly wondering just how that unfolded a hundred years ago. Did Angelica and Garland Benson have to pay for the house to be built? There was that one line in the letter that Mrs. Winchester had written...something about *building* and *stipulations*.

“We have to keep it in the family,” Eve said. “I can’t believe how much

I've missed it. I mean, I want to spend every Christmas here now."

Angie looked around the table and at the beautiful home, filled with nostalgia and joy when she drank in the crackling fireplace, wood-paneled ceiling, and the rustic décor.

"You really don't know whose name it's in, Aunt Elizabeth?"

She made an apologetic face. "I have no idea, dear. I just get a bill from the tax collector and pay it every year."

"You should fix that," David said. "Smooth out the legalities and all."

Angie nodded, looking around again. Did it matter whose name it was in? She supposed it should be in one or all of theirs, but...

What would it be like to live here all the time, she suddenly wondered. Just the thought gave her a thrill. Here, in this cabin, where she had roots and family and connections, in a place that felt like home instead of a cold glass box with an even colder husband.

"I agree," Elizabeth said. "And I've been remiss in thinking about these things. What should I do to put it in all of your names?"

Angie blinked at her, her mind racing as the fantasy of living here started to really take hold of her imagination. "We'll share it?" she asked to clarify.

"Of course you will," Elizabeth said with a laugh. "It'll be all of yours, equally."

"I love that," Noelle cooed. "If we don't want to rent it to outsiders, we can make a schedule for who comes here when. And, of course, we can gather for the holidays and summers."

"Oh, and the fall." Elizabeth shut her eyes and pressed her hands to her chest with dramatic flair. "You just have never seen anything so beautiful as these mountains in October."

"We should iron out the ownership details, then," Angie said.

"I guess I could find the deed somewhere," Elizabeth said, wrinkling her nose. "After Christmas and my wedding. It could be anywhere in this house, but I have to say I've never seen it."

"Can you just *declare* that this place is ours?" Eve asked. "File a quitclaim or something?"

Elizabeth groaned, clearly out of her comfort zone. "I'm sure Sonny can help you."

"You know what?" Angie said, putting down her fork as the sudden urge to finalize this took hold. "You have enough on your plate, Aunt Elizabeth. Why don't Brooke and I make a quick visit to the County Clerk of Courts? I

can find out what's on file. You don't have to find the deed. It's probably in a drawer in some Buncombe County office. We'll find it or get the ball rolling."

"The County Clerk of Courts?" Brooke made a face.

"You can drive us there," Angie reminded her. "In Uncle Sonny's truck."

Instantly, she nodded and seemed happy again. Would she be happy if Angie whispered her idea in Brooke's ear? Would she even consider living in this house or would it all be too rural for her, no matter how much she claimed to hate Menlo Park?

Angie couldn't wait to find out.



BROOKE EASED onto the highway with the grace and poise of an experienced driver, sitting tall in Sonny's 1950 Chevy like she owned the thing. She didn't talk much while driving, and Angie kept her instructions to a minimum, but wouldn't allow music.

So the inside of the truck was quiet, leaving Angie to her thoughts.

And her thoughts were...tempting, sweet, and bordered on being a fantasy. Because leaving California and making that cabin her home? No fantasy could be more thrilling, enticing, or impossible.

"Am I close to the exit?" Brooke asked, pulling Angie from her dream. "I'd know if you'd let me look at the GPS."

"You're not looking at a phone." But Angie was looking at hers. "Next exit on the right, Patton Avenue."

"Got it." Brooke nodded, easing off the gas as she gently merged onto the exit ramp that led toward downtown Asheville. "How am I doing?"

"You're doing..." Angie laughed lightly, realizing she was far less tense with sixteen-year-old Brooke behind the wheel than she ever thought she would be. "Amazing, Brooke." In more ways than one.

"Sweet!"

"You know, I never pegged you as a pickup truck kind of girl, though," Angie teased. "So that's a surprise."

"I know, me either. I'm totally shocked. Vance had a Porsche that he let me drive a couple of times, which was honestly not nearly as much fun as

this.”

Angie rolled her eyes at the name of Brooke’s ex, then eyed her daughter, knowing that her fantasy lived and died with Brooke. If she got over her knee-jerk reaction of hating all her friends and school and town, then they’d go back to California. They had to. But if she were really falling in love with Asheville?

Then there was hope.

“I always thought I wanted a Porsche, too,” Brooke continued. “Or, you know, like a zippy sports car. But this truck? It’s so vintage and cute. No one I know has anything like it. I want to get a truck like this one day.”

Angie smiled. “Maybe we could find you something similar, but I’m pretty sure this is one of a kind. It’s been in Sonny’s family for a few generations, and he’s had a lot of work put into it to keep it up to date but still with vintage authenticity.”

“That’s what’s so cool about it!” Brooke exclaimed. “We should ask Sonny if there are any others like it. But I want candy apple red, just like this truck.”

“Well, let’s cross the truck bridge when we get there, okay? First you need to parallel park in downtown Asheville.”

“Parallel park.” Brooke swallowed. “Uncle Sonny taught me this. Line up, swing in, get straight, and pray. I can do it.”

And she could. When the formula worked—no prayer but they held their breath—and they were snug in a spot, both of them looked at each other and high-fived.

“Dang, girl!” Angie hooted. “You know, your Aunt Noelle still can’t do that.”

“Really?” Brooke laughed. “I’ll be sure to mention that to her later. So, shopping, coffee, or...”

Angie tipped her head and held up the phone with a new address at the top. “The Buncombe County Clerk of Courts.”

“The fun never stops,” Brooke deadpanned.

“It won’t once we have the deed to the cabin,” Angie said, taking a slow breath, unsure how Brooke would react. Yes, she claimed to be a “North Carolina kid” in their last big talk, but was she serious?

“Yeah, Christmas in the mountains every year,” Brooke said as she came around the front of the truck.

“And maybe summers,” Angie added.

“Summers would be nice.” She pointed to the parking meter. “You have your credit card?”

Angie opened her purse. “And fall and spring,” she whispered, but not so softly that Brooke didn’t hear it, because she gasped.

“Are you serious, Mom? We could—”

Angie used her credit card to point in Brooke’s face and underscore her words. “Yes. No. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Very decisive of you.”

“I told you, honey, there’s a lot to consider, including the fact that Dad and I haven’t even discussed divorce, let alone who has custody and alimony and...” She dropped her head back and groaned. “So much stuff. But if we had the cabin...”

“We’d have a place to live.”

“In the middle of a mountain outside a small town with a really tiny high school.” She looked hard at Brooke. “Could you handle that after a private school in Silicon Valley with friends who drive Porsches?”

“An academy in hell with enemies who risk their lives for the next thrill, you mean.”

Angie winced. “I should have kept a closer eye on you.”

“As if I’d let you,” Brooke fired back, then looked around. “You wouldn’t have to if we lived in a place like this.”

“Brooke, please. You’d outgrow this place in a week.”

Brooke slowed her step, still taking in the town. “I don’t agree,” she said. “I actually don’t hate it at all. Drag me to Asheville for good and I might be happy.”

Seriously? Angie wasn’t sure what to make of the comment—Brooke could be capricious and change her mind with the next drop in temperatures. But, no matter what, Angie was awash with affection and hope, and she had to hug her girl.

“Gosh, I love you so much, Brooke.”

“Enough to give me that card, let me go shopping, and spare me the nightmare of the county clerk?”

“No,” Angie said. “Not that much.”

Laughing, they made their way to Pack Square to a stately stone building that towered over the others in the area. It took a few minutes, but they eventually found the records department and a kind woman named Marion, who talked a lot but had worked there for years.

“I can look that right up for you, ma’am, if you want to give me a few minutes.”

Brooke settled into one of the uncomfortable leather chairs, pulling her phone out while Angie stared out the window at an unusually cloudy sky, thinking about her future. On one hand, it was as bleak as that sky. But on the other?

She had hope. It started with finding a newspaper, going to Biltmore House, discovering the past. Then Brooke showed up and helped her face the present. Now? With the thread of a possibility of living here, in the cabin, with Brooke? What a glorious future.

For the first time in a long, long time, she actually felt optimistic about her life and that she might be able to make a go of it with just Brooke. Maybe she could get a job at Biltmore House! Maybe she could take classes and be trained as a curator. She’d spend time with Aunt Elizabeth and Sonny and they could—

“Mrs. Messina?” Marion came back with a frown on her face. “Could I speak with you for a moment?”

“Of course.” Angie walked back to the window and leaned closer. “Any luck?”

“No,” she said simply. “There is no deed for that property on file or even on the microfiche.”

Angie frowned. “Well, my aunt, who lives there, pays taxes.”

“Yes, there’s a tax roll, but the name of the owner was removed decades ago, and it got sent to Resident,” Marion said. “Since it’s been paid on time every year, no one has ever looked into it.”

“How do I prove this property is owned by my family?”

“Oh, that’s simple, but will take time,” she said. “You’ll need to hire an attorney—nothin’ fancy, mind you. There are a few you can hire in town for this type of thing. They’ll file a title search with the state and then you’ll get the title, which proves whose name the property is in. From there, you can come back with that, fill out some paperwork, and we’ll create you a brand-new deed.”

“Oh, okay.” Angie winced at the amount of work. “Kind of complicated but I guess we don’t have a choice.”

“It won’t be difficult. Unless you find the homeowner’s copy of the deed. Lots of folks keep that in a strong box or safe. Maybe a safe deposit box in town.”

Lots of folks who weren't Aunt Elizabeth, who didn't give much thought to things like titles and deeds. Plus, the deed could have been in their parents' belongings, most of which were long gone now.

"I guess we can manage that, or look around the house."

"You should. The deed trumps the title, you know. And with land and a house this old? You don't know what a title will say, since the original was issued more than a hundred years ago. For starters, get that title search going."

She thanked the woman, wrote down a few names of lawyers in the area, and left feeling more frustrated than uplifted.

"Why are there always so many roadblocks?" she mused as she and Brooke stood side by side in the elevator back to the first floor.

Brooke pulled out her phone, reading a notification. "Not for Aunt Eve," she said.

"What do you mean?"

She angled the screen. "PlayStation 5s just dropped at Jenson's Toys, which is twenty-six miles from Asheville. That counts in her fifty-mile radius. Let me text her."

"She'll be happy."

She sent the text and tucked the phone away, turning her dark gaze to Angie. "And, for the record, I don't see roadblocks, Mom, just a few little bumps that we're going to climb over and dominate."

As the elevator doors opened, she reached for Brooke's hand, clinging to her and that beautiful youthful optimism. She had hope, and she had Brooke, and she could do anything.

"And now, my darling girl." She tugged her daughter closer and surprised her with a kiss on the cheek. "We get some coffee and shop 'til we drop."

"Well, Merry Christmas to us!"

Chapter Eleven

Eve

EVE STARED at her phone and let out a soft gasp, stealing the attention of the ladies around the kitchen table as they created the list of invitees for the wedding.

“Everything okay?” Elizabeth asked.

“More than okay,” she said as she clicked on the link in Brooke’s text. “Santa just landed. Well, the PlayStation 5 console did—eight of them, to be precise—and I need to get to a place called Jenson’s Toys in Hendersonville and snag one.” Eve tipped her head. “I’m sorry I have to leave. I don’t want to go alone, but I’ll get David—”

“I’ll go,” Caroline said quickly. “I know exactly where that store is, and I need that same console. They won’t sell you two.” She added a look to Elizabeth. “Can you spare us?”

“Of course! Go, be elves. Hannah and I have it and Sonny said he’s on his way here and that’s the man we really need for this list.”

Before they could talk about it much more, Eve was up, had her jacket on, and slung her purse over her shoulder. “Let’s roll, Caro!”

They were on their way in no time, weaving through heavy traffic on the highway, but Eve refused to let it deter her.

“I can call and see if they’ll hold two,” Caro said, sounding just as low-key tense as Eve felt, taking out her phone. “Gosh, the things we do, huh?”

“For kids?” Eve laughed. “Yeah, we do. But the look on their faces on

Christmas morning? Isn't it worth it?"

Caro nodded as she dialed. "Hundred percent, sister. Oh, hello. I'm calling to see if you'll hold two of the Play—" She slammed her mouth closed and listened. "Okay, well, we'll be there in..." She squinted, trying to look past the truck in front of them. "As soon as humanly possible. Yes, I understand. I'll pray, of course I will."

She tapped off the call and dropped her head back. "Why don't they just make more of these things?"

"Or fewer boys," Eve joked, then flashed a look. "Says the mother of three of those creatures."

Chuckling, Caro let out a sigh of resignation. "Oh, well. We'll do what we can and, yeah, pray. Do you love having more than one boy? Any part of you wished for a girl?"

Eve smiled and not just because the slow truck in front of her took the exit and freed up her lane. "Of course, part of me would love a girl, but that wasn't in the plan, as your father would say."

"*Would* love? Present tense? Are you thinking about more?" Caro sounded shocked.

Eve opted to keep it vague. "Never say never, you know."

"Oh, I know," Caro gushed. "I'm thirty-eight, but..." She bit her lip and looked out the window, almost as if she didn't want to talk about it, either. So Eve dug for a change of subject.

"Nate's a great guy. How did you two meet?"

"In high school, but we didn't ever date. You know I told you I was eighteen when my mother passed, but she was sick almost all the way through my high school years," Caro told her. "I didn't date much, but if I had? It would have been Nate. I always had my eye on him."

"Then when did you get together?"

"Oh, I guess I was twenty-two. I only went to community college because I felt so responsible to help with Hannah after Mom died. Not that she was a baby, but she had to get through high school."

"Wow," Eve said, glancing at her. "So much like us."

"Very much," Caro agreed. "That's what drew me to Elizabeth right away. She told me the whole story of how she put her life on hold for her three fifteen-year-old nieces when your parents were killed. It truly changes everything, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," Eve agreed sadly. "But we had her. You didn't have anyone."

“I had Dad,” she said. “And then Nate came home from college where he studied agriculture and immediately started working our farm. And that, as they say, was the end of that.” She laughed. “I cornered him in the barn, kissed him till he couldn’t breathe, and had a ring within a year.”

Eve cracked up at the story, made even funnier by Caro’s Southern lilt. “That’s awesome.”

“And how about you and David?”

“We met on a blind date right before he started medical school,” she said, smiling at the memory. “It was the closest thing to love at first sight I ever knew.”

“Really? Well, he is handsome.”

“Even more so then. He had a little more hair.” She winked at Caro. “But the same rock-steady values and deeply good heart. I kind of knew within a few months that this was forever.”

“Were you working?”

“I was dabbling in the finance industry, but honestly? I wanted to be a mom. Don’t judge!”

She snorted. “The woman who just ditched planning her own father’s wedding to drive to Hendersonville for a PlayStation? I’m going to judge being a mom?”

“True. Well, it was so important to me to have kids. We waited a little because he had such a long education and residency and specialist, but then we got to work making babies. And I’ve loved it every moment since then.”

Caro gave a contented sigh, shifting in her seat. “Yeah. It’s great.”

They talked some more about motherhood and their lives, which, though different—one a doctor’s wife, one a farmer’s wife—had so much in common. They talked about homeschooling versus traditional school, the challenges of mothering a boy in today’s world, and shared a lot of laughs about sports, video games, and other activities that mystified them.

By the time Eve pulled off at their exit, she knew that if she and Caro lived in the same town, they’d be great friends. And speaking of towns, she stared at the green road sign that said Hendersonville, remembering this was where Dr. Robinson’s practice was located.

Wouldn’t it be lovely to be married to a doctor who had a small-town practice like that? Surely there’d be more time for family.

“So, what’s this little town like?” she asked.

“H’ville is amazing,” Caro said. “A little more rural on the outskirts than

Asheville, but there's definitely something magical about the place. And some real upscale houses peppered in with the farms and town."

Off the highway, they drove down a country route and immediately Eve could see small developments tucked into the farmland, many of the houses new and lovely.

"People have discovered Hendersonville," Caro told her. "It's close enough to Asheville for a daily commute, and just look at the view."

Eve could barely look anywhere else. The whole spread of country was surrounded by a vista of rolling blue mountains, giving the area a majestic feel.

"I love this place," Eve admitted on a sigh.

"We're going right into town to get to Jenson's," Caro said. "Turn here, and take Main Street. Yes, Main Street. Hendersonville is like a trip into the 1950s but in a good way. They have all these little festivals—apples in the fall, an Easter parade in the spring, and the schools down here are great. The high school has an amazing sports program and academically? It's one of the best in the state."

Longing and a little envy washed over her as she took it all in, thinking about Dr. Robinson's casual comment that he was looking for the right doctor to take over his practice. And how David had scoffed at the idea when she teased about it.

But before she could think too much about it, Caro leaned forward, her eyes gleaming from the thrill of the PlayStation chase, not the charm of a small town.

"Grab the first spot you find. Jenson's is around the corner, and we can hoof it. Let's pray there are two left!"



AS THEY "HOOFED" it, Eve grew more enchanted. A café here, a bookstore there, everything made even cuter with Christmas decorations everywhere.

But Caro wasn't in a sightseeing mood as she strode toward their destination and the small storefront with a sign that said "Toys Aren't Just for Kids" in the window.

They practically raced into the store, the bells on the front door jingling

as they swung it open and ran to the cashier's desk.

"Hello, ladies." The older man working there had a warm smile and a thick drawl. "You seem to be in a mighty hurry. Everything all right?"

"We're looking for the new PlayStation console," Eve said breathlessly. "We heard you got a few in stock, and we need to buy them."

"My goodness, this is a serious mission." The man shook his head and gave a jolly laugh. "You must have been the lady who called wantin' my wife to hold two of them."

"She said she couldn't," Caro told him.

"Well, she likes to be tough like that, but I put two of them in the back on the off-chance that you were drivin' a good way."

"From Asheville," Eve told him.

"Oh, the big city."

"You have them?" Caro's voice rose. "God is good, my friend!"

Eve agreed but all she could think was if he thought Asheville was the big city, then Hendersonville must be...*heaven*.

Caro turned to her, giddy with success. "We did it! We did the things we do for our boys!"

The man reappeared from the back room holding two big white boxes with sleek labeling and a futuristic-looking video game machine on the front of the packaging.

"Christmas is saved, I take it?" He chuckled.

Eve pressed her hands onto the counter. "You have no idea."

"And that's all you need?"

Eve looked around, not surprised that the family-owned shop looked homier and more inviting than any big-box toy store. Books, puzzles, games, even some cute clothes beckoned her.

"We're here," she said. "I'd love to look around."

"Take your time. We don't close until five, ladies."

With a smile, they both started to peruse the shop, and before long, Eve found herself picking up a few *Star Wars* books she'd never seen before, plus a copy of *Lord of the Rings* that James had been wanting to read. That led her into a whole section of figurines and action toys, but as she looked at them, she realized Caro was nowhere to be found.

Abandoning the section, she wandered across the store and discovered the "pink" section, as her boys called it. A row of baby dolls, tea sets, dance costumes, and fat stuffed animals with a big sign that said, "Squishmallows

Are Here!”

She found Caro standing next to a handmade dollhouse, holding something in her hand, looking off into the distance.

“Does Josh like dollhouses?” she asked, fully prepared for whatever the answer might be.

Caro gave a soft laugh. “No.”

“Do you?”

“Not particularly, but...” She put down a tiny figurine and took a few steps closer to the next aisle, which was all baby toys—bouncy chairs and mobiles and cloth books made more for chewing than reading.

“Oh,” Eve whispered as she spied a tiny pink unicorn rocking chair. “Look at that.”

“Yeah.” Caro put her hand on the shiny single horn. “Precious, isn’t it?”

“Kind of makes you want a girl, doesn’t it?” Eve mused, her heart tightening at how very much she did want that girl.

Caro looked up, shocking Eve with the tears in her eyes.

“Are you okay?” Eve asked.

She nodded quickly, then fanned her eyes as if to stave off the tears. “I just get so emotional.”

“Oh, Caro. You want another baby?” Eve came closer, taking her hand, ready to confide that she was thinking about it, too.

“I’d better,” she said with a weird laugh. “Because I’m having one. I mean, I think I am.”

“What?”

“Shh!” She grabbed Eve’s hand and pulled her closer. “I just found out yesterday!”

“No!” Eve searched her face, a jolt of joy tightening her chest. “Oh, my gosh! Congratulations! How do you feel? Have you told anyone? What did Nate say?”

She shook her head, blinking back tears. “No one knows. You’re actually the first person I’ve told—not Nate or Hannah or anyone! I wanted to give him the news as a present on Christmas. You know, wrap the pregnancy test like a gift and give it to him that morning before we get up.”

Eve covered her mouth with two hands, her own eyes filling with tears. “That’s amazing. Oh, my gosh!” She threw her arms around Caroline and squeezed. “I’m so happy for you!”

As they separated, Caro wiped a tear. “Thank you. I’m...beyond happy.

We gave up trying years ago and figured Josh was it for us. But God had a different idea. You just never know, do you?"

"No, you don't." Eve looked at her through misty eyes, still holding her hand. "I can't believe I'm the first to know."

"Right? I'll never keep this in for a week."

"Your secret is safe with me," Eve promised. "I won't even tell my sisters."

"Oh, oh!" Once again, Caro hugged her, and Eve could feel the other woman was trembling with joy. "I'm so thrilled. And, I'm not going to lie, I'm dreaming of a girl."

"So am I," Eve whispered, thinking she was speaking so low that Caro wouldn't hear. But she jerked backwards with wide eyes.

"You mean...for me."

Eve angled her head. "I'd love to do it again," she said. "David and I are talking about it, but it seems...unlikely."

"I wish you would," Caro said. "Then we could be old moms with new babies together."

"Only if I moved here." She sighed wistfully. "And I really don't hate that idea at all."

"Hey." Caro pointed at her. "Miracles happen. I'm living proof."

Eve sighed. "Well, we did get PlayStations, so if that's not a miracle, I don't know what is."

Caro laughed and put her arm around Eve. "Let's pay and head home. I just want to talk about babies in the car!"

They did, all the way home, and that did nothing to cool Eve's baby fever.

Chapter Twelve

Noelle

JUST AS NOELLE tucked herself in front of the fire for morning coffee, conversation stopped at a knock on the door.

“You are all so comfy,” Brooke said, pushing up. “Let me get it.” But as she opened the door, all they heard was the sound of a departing car.

“Who is it?” Aunt Elizabeth asked, wiping her hands on a dishtowel as she came out of the kitchen.

“It’s...a card.” Brooke bent over and picked something up, bringing it inside with a look of confusion. “And the back of a truck hauling butt out of here.” She glanced at the envelope. “It’s for Aunt Noelle.”

“Me?” She sat up and set her coffee on the end table. “That’s weird. With an address?”

“Nope. Just ‘Noelle.’” Brooke handed the envelope to her, and they all watched as she opened it and pulled out a card with a snowflake on it. She flipped it open and read the handwritten words out loud.

“‘Noelle, let me snow you a perfect day in North Carolina. Love, Jace,’” she read aloud.

What? She re-read it—yep, *snow* you...and *love*.

“It’s a date card!” Brooke nearly jumped up and down. “Like on *The Bachelor!* A date card.”

All of them looked at her, none more confused than Noelle.

“What is a date card?” she asked.

“Don’t you guys watch *The Bachelor* and *Bachelorette*?” She looked from one to the other, stunned.

“I got four men at home,” Eve said. “That show would never darken our family room door.”

“I’ve never seen it,” Elizabeth said.

“I’ve caught a few episodes.” Angie shrugged. “But not as many as Brooke.”

“I don’t watch much TV,” Noelle admitted, studying the card again.

Brooke let out an exasperated grunt. “Well, this, Aunt Noelle, is an invitation to what’s known as ‘a one-on-one.’ A date, and usually a good one. Probably all day and into the night.” She pointed to the back of the card. “Turn it over; it looks like he wrote more.”

“Oh, good, because ‘snow you a perfect day’ has me confused. He either can’t write, can’t spell, or has something up his sleeve.” She flipped the card and read another message. “I hope you’re ready for an entire day of winter fun and a romantic evening together. Wear something comfortable and warm, and bring a fancy dress for dinner. I’ll be there at 9:30 AM.” She looked up, her eyes growing wide. “That early? What time is it?”

“You have an hour,” Brooke said excitedly. “And we’ll help you get ready. This is fun!”

“This is cheesy,” Angie said, then leaned into her youngest sister. “And we’re all pea-green with envy.”

Elizabeth came over and took the card, squinting at it without her reading glasses. “This is so sweet, I could cry. That boy has it bad. This is the same way Sonny courted me.” She grinned. “Relentlessly.”

Noelle looked up at her and swallowed. “Really?”

“Oh, don’t be afraid, honey.” She tapped her head with the card. “Have the time of your life, enjoy the attention, and then...”

“And then get on a plane and leave him,” Noelle finished.

Elizabeth lifted a shoulder and glanced at the others, who were all weirdly quiet with funny looks on their faces.

“Come on, Aunt Noelle!” Brooke reached for her. “You might not even get a rose at the end of it all. You don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I’m letting you lead the charge, Brooke. Help me get ready. The rest of you can sit down here and plan a life I’m never going to have.”

She blew them a sassy kiss and headed off with her niece, who really

seemed to know what's what.

And one hour later—on the dot—the doorbell rang and Jace cruised in wearing a thick knit sweater and jeans, smiling like he'd won the lottery.

"I know, the card was cringe," he said when Noelle greeted him. "I had a roommate in vet school who was obsessed with the show and...yeah, I watched."

As the whole group laughed, he angled his head, totally confident and unfazed by the teasing. "Hey, I learned how to plan a date. Which I have... with you." He took Noelle's hand and tugged her toward the door. "Bye, y'all!"

The chorus of goodbyes was cut off when he closed the door and led her to his truck, helping her up into the passenger seat and putting her small bag with the requested change of clothes in the back.

As she waited for him to come around and get behind the wheel, her phone dinged from her purse, announcing a call from Lucinda Butler.

Pulling out her cell, she stared at the name, her finger literally itching to answer. But Jace climbed in, looking so country and cute she darn near leaned over and kissed him.

"Ready for our date?"

"I believe it's called a one-on-one in *The Bachelor* vernacular," she said, making him laugh. "And, yes, I'm ready."

With that, she sent the call to voicemail, turned off her phone, and dropped it to the bottom of her bag, where it would stay until this day—and night—were over.

Sorry, Lucinda. But, as Angie liked to say, there's more to life than money. And today, life was a dream date with a man who'd had her heart for as long as she could remember.

They chatted about the weather, the season, Cassie, his current vet cases, just everything and nothing as she settled in and got insanely comfortable while he drove for what seemed like a long time.

"Where exactly are we going?" Noelle asked when she realized they were deep into the mountains and a solid hour outside of proper Asheville. "Headed north, it seems, but where?"

"Man, you hate surprises," he joked. "How's a guy ever going to sweep you off your feet?"

"Is that what you're doing?" she asked with a mix of anticipation and fear in her chest.

“I guess we’ll know when those feet stop touching the ground.” He winked again and a whole new cascade of chills swooped down her spine.

“Well, I followed your instructions.” She patted the tops of her jeans. “I dressed comfortably and packed a change of clothes for a nice dinner. Which, evidently, will be happening in another state, since we haven’t stopped driving. Can you just tell me where we’re going?”

Jace laughed, shaking his head with amusement. “Just go with the flow, Noelle.”

Noelle lifted her chin and stifled a smile. “I like certainty, what can I say.”

“You want to know what’s certain? You’re a major hit at the church play.”

She cracked up, and not just at the sly change of subject. “Now, those are words I can honestly say I never expected to hear in my lifetime.”

“I’m serious. I saw a lot of the parents at church this past weekend and they’re all just raving about your painting and how good you are with Cassie and how pretty you are. Lots of comments about that.”

She rolled her eyes but couldn’t deny the compliment warmed her. “They’re all so sweet, those ladies. Not judgmental, not exclusive, not... competitive.” She thought of her co-workers who were all of the above. “I especially like Beth Robards.”

“Oh, yeah, she’s nice. Her husband’s my dentist and he’s great.”

“Her daughter’s a doll,” she added. “But so shy.”

“Little Sarah? Yes, she’s scared of her own shadow, but very sweet.”

She marveled at how he knew everyone, and had something kind to say about each person. “Beth told me Sarah wanted to be the angel so badly, but the role has a lot of lines and she just can’t project. I mean, she can barely talk and when she does, I have to get very close to hear her.”

“If there’s anything Cassie can do, it’s project,” he said.

“I asked the director if there was another part for an angel, maybe one with no lines, but no luck. There’s only one angel and she’s taken, wearing a harness, and singing a solo. It’s going to be Cassie’s shining moment.”

“You asked? For Sarah?” He seemed surprised by that.

“Very casually because Beth wants to be sure that Sarah learns some of the harder lessons in life. I just adore her and all she does in her sheep outfit is stare up at Cassie in awe. I’ve encouraged Cassie to be friends with her, too, maybe help bring her out of her shell.”

“Aw, Noelle.” He gave her a look of warm admiration.

“What?” She laughed at the note of wonder in his voice. “Wouldn’t you do the same if you were there?”

“Yes, but I’m her father. I just…” He smiled and reached for her hand. “Thank you. I guess it comes as no surprise that the only person who likes you more than I do is my daughter.”

“The feeling is mutual,” she assured him. “Cassie’s just a very special little girl.”

He beamed with pride. “Well, she’s a lot like her mom, but she’s also… one of a kind. I’m so glad you got to know her and even happier she got to know you. Oh. Here we are.”

She followed his gaze to the sign that read, “Sugar Mountain.”

“We’re going skiing?” she said, sitting straighter in surprise. “Because, well, you better put this rookie on the bunny slope. Plus, I’m in jeans.”

“I brought snow pants for both of us. And you’re going to love this. No black diamond slopes, I promise. We’re not even skiing.”

With that, he laced his fingers through hers and no matter what they were going to do, he had her smiling like a loon the whole way up the mountain.

Once they arrived at the resort, Noelle stayed a captive audience, following Jace, donning a pair of puffy pants that made her look like the Michelin Man, and zipped up her down jacket, ready for anything.

“So, as I said, no skis.” Jace held out his hand, and she couldn’t help but notice he managed to pull off the winter look pretty effortlessly, with black ski pants, a gray jacket and heavy snow boots, completed with a knit beanie.

“Then what are we doing?”

“Follow me.”

“That seems to be the theme of the day.” Noelle clung to his hand, walking with him through the main lodge, which was decorated for the holidays, and packed with skiers and snowboarders enjoying the fresh powder and beautiful winter day.

Instead of the ski lifts, Jace led Noelle to a different part of the resort, and soon she spotted a huge slope with deep snow grooves and flying inner-tubes sliding down at breakneck speed.

“Oh my gosh.” Noelle laughed, tilting her head back and looping her arm through his. “We’re going snow tubing!”

Jace tightened his beanie. “Heck, yeah, we are. That’s activity number one, anyway.”

“I love it!” Noelle smiled. “I haven’t done anything like this since I was a little kid, maybe Cassie’s age. This is amazing.”

“I’m glad you think so. I asked Cassie for ideas for today’s date, and she came up with all of it.” Jace shook his head. “She and my mother, to be honest, cooked up the whole thing. Even helped me get us online tickets.” He elbowed her. “They’re rootin’ for you, Noelle.”

Noelle couldn’t ignore how deeply that warmed her heart. “Well…” She held his arm tightly against her as they rode up a people-mover to the top of the gentle slope. “So far, everyone’s winning.”

They trudged over a snowy path to grab one of the large rubber inner tubes that fit two people. Jace helped Noelle get situated on it, then climbed in behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist.

“You ready?”

She looked down at the fairly steep hill of snow, her heart rate jumping. “Yes!”

With a forceful push, he sent them onto the track and flying down the hill, a shriek escaping her lips as the thrill of the ride shot adrenaline through her whole body. Or maybe that was the way he held her so tightly against him, the sound of his laughter and hoots in her ears, the pressure of his body adding to the unbridled exhilaration of the ride.

Noelle screamed as her hair flew back in the wind and the tube caught a surprising amount of speed and they slipped wildly from side to side, barely able to hold on.

As soon as the snow tube slowed to a stop, Noelle felt flushed and giddy, whipping her head around to meet Jace’s gaze.

She kissed him spontaneously and then smiled widely. “That might have been the most fun I’ve ever had.”

He inched back. “Oh, honey, we can do better.”

The words practically melted her in his arms. “All right. Again, please!”

And they did, tubing down the mountain four times, breathless and exhilarated. Noelle laughed so much that her abs were sore and her cheeks hurt, and everything inside her felt light and happy.

“Okay,” she said to Jace after the last run as they made their way back to the lodge for something warm to drink. “I haven’t felt that free in a long time. Tell Cassie she gets an A-plus for that activity recommendation.”

“She’ll be thrilled to hear that. Plus, the day is just getting started.”

Noelle placed her hand in his. “I’m following along for the ride, Jace

Fleming.”

For a moment, they stood and looked at each other. “Yeah?” He smiled and lowered his head, giving her a soft kiss on the lips. “I may never let you leave.”

Her heart turned and tightened at the words. She was not at all ready to think about what that meant. She *had* to leave. But...not today. Not now. Not this blissful moment in snow and sunshine. She wasn't going anywhere.

After a coffee break, he surprised her with an hour of ice skating, which meant they could hold hands, glide side by side, and talk. As if the last of any walls left between them fell away, they slid back twenty-five years to that Christmas week when they last saw each other.

“It feels small to tell you I cried,” he admitted softly. “I knew you were crying, too, for a whole different reason. And I was so sad about your parents, but just as sad about losing you. My mom told me you might never come back, and she wasn't wrong.”

“Well, you know all too well what grief is like,” she said. “I'm sure you were in that dark tunnel yourself for a long time after Jenny died.”

He nodded, his lips pressed together as he looked forward. “I was, and it was hard. But you don't stay sad with Cassie Fleming in your life.” He shot her a look. “Truth? She doesn't even remember her mother. Of course, I tell her about Jenny, and we have pictures and videos, but that grief didn't really touch her as a two-year-old. And that was a blessing, because I didn't have to help my daughter navigate the pain. Instead, she did it for me. Jenny knew that would be the case, and she died at peace. Now, I am, too.”

She tightened her grip on his hand, a wave of sympathy rolling through her. “And when did you start dating again?”

He gave a funny look. “Um...what day did you get into town?”

“No. Surely you've gone out with...” But her voice faded at the look in his eyes. “No one? Ever?”

“I don't date,” he said simply.

“What do you call this?”

He skated a little bit ahead, turned with the poise of an ice hockey player, and held her hands, skating backwards. “Best day I've had in years.”

She sighed as she held his hands, vaguely aware of the gently falling snowflakes and white lights and achingly romantic surroundings. Was that why she was feeling something so deep and real for this man?

No, this wasn't the atmosphere. This was...oh, no. This was real.

“Why’d you do this?” she whispered, hearing the crack in her voice.

He didn’t answer for a second, but used the tip of his skate to slow them down and guide them to the side of the rink.

“Noelle,” he finally said. “I like you. I’ve always liked you. And I guess I feel like we got robbed of dates like this. You were going to tell me if you’d be my girlfriend that day at the creek. Remember?”

She nodded. She’d been thinking about him all that night, playing *Scrabble* with Aunt Elizabeth and her sisters, almost ready to share with them that Jace had asked her to be his girlfriend. And that was when a sheriff’s deputy knocked on the door and life as she knew it came to a crashing halt.

“I never answered you,” she said.

He leaned in. “Tell me over dinner.”

“Jace, I can’t—”

He quieted her with a kiss. “Humor me, okay?”

She smiled against his lips. “Okay.”

As he deepened the kiss, she tried not to think about reality, about New York, about her life. Not now.

But she couldn’t help wondering if she’d ever feel the same about that life after experiencing this one.

In locker rooms, Noelle freshened up and changed for the “evening portion” of their dream date. Wearing a maroon sweater dress, she slipped on some jewelry, dressier boots, and stepped into the main lodge to meet Jace, excited for the next few hours.

He was waiting for her, wearing a dress shirt and dark slacks, holding both their jackets. His whole face lit up as he saw her.

“Wow. You look amazing.”

“Same.” She gestured toward his fancy clothes. “And I can’t wait to see what surprise you have in store.”

“It’s a good one,” he said, taking her arm. “A bit of a drive up the mountain, but—” He frowned and reached for his pocket and made a face. “That’s my emergency line. I really hope it isn’t one.”

“You can answer,” she encouraged him.

He glanced at the screen. “Oh, it’s Sonny. Hang on.” Putting the phone to his ear, he said, “What’s up?”

He was quiet for a long time, nodding, still holding her hand as he mouthed, “Athena.”

She inhaled a breath, thinking of the magnificent horse in Sonny’s stable

—pregnant and ready to deliver.

After a beat, he said, “Yeah, that’s normal, but...how high of a fever?”

“We should go back,” she whispered. “Athena needs you.”

He squeezed her hand and nodded. “Look, Sonny, I can be there in an hour. No, no, it’s fine. I want to help you deliver this foal and I don’t like that Athena’s running a fever. You got it, buddy. See you soon.” As he tapped the screen to end the call, his whole expression changed, and she knew he was about to apologize.

“Don’t,” she stopped him. “Let’s just go and help Athena.”

He nodded in agreement, not saying much on the way home as he pushed the truck with a lot more speed and determination than he had on the leisurely drive up here.



THE ROMANTIC, playful side of Jace faded during the drive, and disappeared completely when they rumbled into Red Bridge Farm more than an hour later. Jace paused long enough to get a bag from the back of the truck and while he did, Noelle changed into the winter boots she’d worn for snow tubing.

“Bitsy’s here,” he told her. “I’m sure she’ll drive you back to the cabin.”

She gave him a look. “Leave Athena? Leave you? Not a chance. I can’t help, obviously, but I’m here for moral support. Oh—unless you’d rather do this without me.”

He blew out a breath. “I don’t want to do anything without you,” he said. “But brace yourself, it could be a long night.”

She nestled into her down jacket. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He gave her a look of sheer gratitude, then hustled into the stables, which were very dimly lit. Athena stood in her stall with Sonny next to her and Aunt Elizabeth on the floor, watching.

“I think she’s going to be okay,” Sonny said without preamble. “She was trucking right along with contractions, then, wham. She got so lethargic and out of it, then the fever started.”

Aunt Elizabeth stood, her whole face strained from tension. She reached for Noelle and guided her out of the stall with a gentle arm.

“How sweet of you two to abandon your day for Athena,” she said on a whisper.

“Of course, please. Horse first.”

“Did you have fun?” she asked.

“It was glorious,” Noelle told her. “Sugar Mountain, but we didn’t make it to dinner, which is why I’m dressed up.” She glanced down at her dress, tights, and boots.

“I can take you back—”

“No, it’s fine. I have jeans in the truck I can change into.” She glanced over her shoulder to where Sonny and Jace were speaking in hushed tones. Both of them had hands on Athena. “Is she going to be okay?”

“Sonny’s concerned it’s not going smoothly, but I’m sure he feels better now that Jace is here. The foal is turned, but something is still not quite right.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Noelle asked.

“Pray with me. Would you?” Aunt Elizabeth took Noelle’s hands and lowered her head. “Heavenly Father, please bless Jace’s hands as he assists with this birth. Cover him with your love and guidance and help him bring this foal safely to start its life. Put Your mighty hands on Athena and ease her discomfort...”

Noelle closed her eyes and let the words wash over her, surprisingly at peace as Aunt Elizabeth prayed.

She’d never heard her aunt pray before, except quietly before a meal. Certainly not like this, as though she was on the phone with God, not in a horse stable.

As she finished, Noelle added a simple, “Amen,” and smiled at her aunt.

“Come on,” Elizabeth said. “You can change, and we’ll make some sandwiches and coffee. We can settle in for the long haul.”

The long haul got longer as Athena struggled for the next few hours, and things got dicey when she couldn’t stand still. She refused to lie down, but she couldn’t stand, either, and it was hard to watch her in obvious misery.

“Might be her hoofs,” Jace said, a sheen of perspiration on his forehead, his sleeves rolled up as he put his hand on the bottom of one of her large hooves. “Yep. They’re too hot.” He made a face and looked at Sonny. “Laminitis,” he said. “High carbs during pregnancy. She has been a little off.”

“Worse, lately,” Sonny said. “But I just thought she was anxious to foal.”

“She’s too sick to think about that foal,” Jace said.

Leaning against one of the wooden walls, Noelle crossed her arms and bit back a whimper of worry, refusing to ask if the horse—and her baby—would be okay. They had to be. Jace was so darn cool and confident.

Without any fuss, he tended to the horse, administered multiple syringes of medication, and did his best to ease her suffering.

When she took another trip to the house with Elizabeth to refill the coffee thermos, Noelle couldn’t help marveling at his work.

“He’s a great vet,” Elizabeth agreed. “I can’t tell you the number of large animals all over this area who owe their lives to Dr. Fleming. Farmers all over Buncombe County love the guy and would be lost without him. In some cases, he’s saved their livelihood in addition to an animal’s life.”

“That’s amazing,” Noelle said softly. “Watching him in action is just so...”

“Attractive?” Elizabeth asked with a sly smile.

“Well, duh. But that wasn’t what I was going to say. It’s...inspiring. Maybe a little intimidating. And extremely humbling. His job is so much more important than what I do.”

“Don’t compare,” Elizabeth said without a second’s hesitation. “Your job is very important to artists, gallery owners, and discerning collectors.”

“But no one’s life is saved.”

“You never know what art can do for a person,” she said. “But I won’t argue that Jace is a terrific vet and a great guy.”

“He is,” she said on a sigh. “And I have to tell you, Aunt Elizabeth, I’m really falling for him...again.”

She smiled as they crossed the snowy path back to the stables. “Don’t make me pray for a second wedding in two weeks.”

“That prayer wouldn’t be answered,” Noelle said. “But I really, really like him.”

“And it’s obvious the feeling is mutual. Now, let’s see how our men are doing.”

When they walked into stable, it was clear everything had changed. They’d turned the lights up to blinding brightness, Athena was on the ground snorting and whinnying, and Jace was crouched over her, talking softly.

Sonny stopped them from coming in, taking both their hands. “It’s happening,” he said, squeezing. “Just pray that foal comes out clean.”

They waited a few more minutes, listing to Jace’s voice and the horse and

then he gave a soft hoot.

“And...we...have...a filly!” Jace called out, making them all let out a soft cheer.

Instantly, they went to the stall, just in time to see a small horse wobbling on baby legs around Athena.

“Well done, Mama,” Jace crooned at the horse on the ground.

Sonny and Elizabeth went right to the foal, fussing over her, but Noelle just stood stone still and took in the miracle of birth and life and...and love.

Because as she gazed at the man on the ground, dipping his head to wipe sweat with his forearm and not the gloves he wore, her whole body suddenly felt as unstable as that young filly’s legs.

Jace looked at her, a slow smile of success pulling.

“So much for your dream date,” he joked.

She took a few steps closer, falling to her knees next to him. Without thinking, she put her hands on his shoulders, pulled him closer, and kissed him.

As they separated, he lifted a brow. “What was that for?”

“Sweeping me off my feet.”

He laughed softly and kissed her again. “Come to think of it, mine aren’t exactly touching the ground right now, either.”

Chapter Thirteen

Angie

THE PRIVATE BILTMORE House Christmas tour was everything Angie had hoped it would be for the whole family. Owen, one of the volunteers who'd become Angie's friend, guided their group through the massive mansion and gave them countless more details than most guests got from the audio tour—which Angie had heard so many times, she could have given the tour herself.

They strolled from one breathtaking room and Christmas display to another, marveling at the scope, the details, the luxury, and the sheer glory of America's largest home.

After Owen finished, he left them in the servants' quarters on the bottom floor, which included the kitchen, pantries, and a dining area a fraction of the size of the banquet hall upstairs.

Other tourists might not be impressed, but this family was descended from a Biltmore House parlor maid and a footman, so this part of the house had a special meaning. They lingered there after the tour ended, all of them—even Eve's boys—peppering Angie with questions about the house, the Vanderbilt family, and, of course, Angelica and Garland Benson.

“So was that their bedroom?” Bradley asked, pointing into the small, staged room that represented an example of what the staff quarters were like.

“Actually, no,” Angie told him. “Your great-great-grandparents lived on the fourth floor, and that's where the exhibit about them will be opening next year.”

“The one you’re helping with, Aunt Angie?” James asked.

“Exactly. I’d take you up there but it’s staff only.” She proudly touched the name pin she wore on her chest. “Which, la-de-da, I am. Sorry.” She glanced at Brooke, who was probably cringing on the inside at her mother’s pride. “I can’t help it, I’m excited.”

“It’s cool, Mom,” Brooke assured her. “This whole place is so wild; I can’t believe we are related to people who lived here.”

“Not the rich people,” James clarified.

“But the ones who made this place run,” Angie said. “And your great-great-grandmother saved the life of a baby named Claudia Winchester and you know what she did, right?”

James nodded. “Invented the Nintendo 64?” He fist-bumped Bradley. “Yes!”

“Well, one of her grandsons was part of the team that invented it, but Claudia was also a spy in World War II and a speechwriter for a president!”

James and Bradley exchanged a look. “Nintendo guy was better,” James said.

“So were the decorations upstairs,” Sawyer said, looking around the quarters. “I never knew you could have so many Christmas trees in one house!”

Everyone laughed at that and talked about what they should do now that the tour was over.

“There’s a gift shop,” Angie said. “And a toy store, Christmas shop, and hot chocolate.”

That got a round of approval from the gang, and they all headed back out to the gorgeous grounds and walked over to what was once an elaborate stable but now housed quaint stores and eateries.

“Holy cow, Ange.” Eve wrapped an arm around Angie’s shoulders and gave a squeeze as they threaded the crowds. “This place is absolutely incredible. And you know so much!”

Angie waved off the compliment. “Apparently, I’m a massive history nerd. I found this stuff all so fascinating because of our roots and connection to it all.”

“I loved every minute.” Noelle added, joining them as the three sisters walked side by side. “Thank you for that, Ange.”

“Now *that* was a Christmas display,” Aunt Elizabeth said from behind them, stepping away from Uncle Sonny to join her nieces. “If you girls ever

wondered for one second what I want the barn to feel like on the wedding night...that was it!"

"Might be a tad more understated," Eve joked.

"Not much," Noelle added. "I've ordered the decorations and they'll be here the day after Christmas. Expect a Christmas explosion!"

As they entered the courtyard, they turned and saw all the possible destinations, with varying appeal. After some discussion, Brooke took the boys to the confectionary with a promised stop in the toy store. David headed off to the bookstore, and Sonny and Elizabeth wanted to peruse the Christmas shop.

"That leaves us on hot chocolate duty," Angie said to her sisters. "Let's hit the café, get the drinks, and text everyone to meet us."

Still on a cloud from the tour, Angie guided Eve and Noelle to the café, found a large table, and soon they were sipping warm drinks and basking in the glow of Christmas perfection.

"And to think you two almost didn't come for this month-long visit," Eve mused as they slipped out of their jackets and got comfortable.

"It seemed impossible back at Thanksgiving when the invitation arrived," Angie said. "I had no idea Brooke would love it so much or that Craig..." She held her hand up. "Let's not talk about Craig. Today is too wonderful. I just love showing this place off. I don't know why I feel like Biltmore House is my discovery, but I do."

Noelle nodded. "Your joy shines through when you're here, Ange. And I have to say, if you two hadn't pushed me, I might not have come to Asheville at all."

"And aren't you glad you did?" Eve asked in a playful singsong voice.

Noelle sighed. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I might have lost my job, but I've managed."

"You'll get it figured out when you get back," Eve assured her. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried about that," Noelle admitted. "The fact that I'm falling for the local vet? That has me awake at night."

Her sisters shared a look.

"And here we thought you were just sitting in a horse stall watching a horse be born last night until..." Angie leaned close to Eve to stage whisper, "What time did she come in this morning?"

Noelle rolled her eyes. "We literally helped a foal nurse until the sun

came up. But it was still the best date I ever had. If I weren't so tired, I'd be glowing like Angie."

"I'm just glowing because I love being here," Angie replied, gesturing vaguely to the surroundings. "And I'm going to leave my mark when I record the audio tour for our great-grandparents' exhibit. I'm pretty excited about doing that."

"It'll be hard for you to leave," Eve mused.

Angie took a deep breath and looked down at her hot chocolate. "Impossible, you mean." She took a sip and glanced from one sister to the next. "Brooke, of all people, threw out the idea of living here for good."

Noelle blinked at her. "You mean never go back to California? How could you do that?"

"I'm not sure I could," she said. "I mean, Craig would have a cow—"

"With his mistress," Noelle said dryly.

"Exactly. And Brooke's in school."

"She hates that school," Eve said. "And if she wants to stay, why don't you?"

"I kind of do, but it feels...impossible. I live with my husband in California." As they opened their mouths to point out what a terrible, cheating husband he was, she held up her hand to stop them. "He is Brooke's father and has a right to live at least in the same state. Obviously, I haven't talked to a lawyer but the chances of me just moving her across the country? I don't know. It feels like an impossible dream, but I keep dreaming it anyway."

"Kind of like David quitting his job as a brain surgeon to be a family doctor in a small rural community," Eve said dryly.

They both stared at her, nothing but confusion in their eyes.

"It's not a real thing," Eve said quickly. "We ran into this doctor in town who casually mentioned he was looking for someone to take over a family practice in Hendersonville. Which, of course, David would never consider. Then I saw that town and fell in love, so...never mind. Talk about impossible dreams."

"Like Jace and me," Noelle said glumly.

"Wait a second," Eve said, eyes growing wide. "Are we *all* dreaming about living here?"

"I wouldn't call it...dreaming," Angie said. "More like considering."

"Mine's a fantasy," Noelle added.

Eve bit her lip. “Fantasy? Dream? Considering? What’s the difference? We all three are thinking about it in one way or another.”

Angie leaned back. “I’m not going to lie. If Brooke is serious and I can find a way to end my marriage and not be bound by law for her to live in the same state? I’d move into that cabin so fast, you’d laugh. I mean, assuming that would be okay with you two.”

“Of course!” Eve and Noelle said in perfect unison.

“We’ll visit a lot,” Eve added.

“Or just drive up from Hendersonville,” Noelle muttered.

“Stop!” Eve dropped her head back and fake cried. “Don’t make me want it more.”

“Does David know how much you want this?” Noelle asked.

“I didn’t even know until I saw the town. And I won’t ask him, because he’ll feel compelled to make me happy.”

Angie leaned forward. “And the problem with that is...?”

She lifted a shoulder. “He has a thriving career in Charlotte, and I don’t want him to give that up. I just want him home more.”

For a long moment, they were quiet, the reality of what they’d just discussed—the possibility of life changes for all three of them—settling over the table. Angie turned and looked out the window, catching sight of Aunt Elizabeth and Sonny walking out to the courtyard, arm in arm, gazing at each other.

“And there, my sisters, is the queen of upending your life, shocking the world, and following her heart.”

Eve and Noelle followed her gaze, each letting out a sigh of happiness.

“She’s fearless,” Noelle said. “It’s one of the things I’ve always loved about her. Absolutely unafraid of change and upheaval. I wish I could be more like that.”

“And she’s true to herself,” Angie added. “She knows what she wants and goes for it, without stopping or letting roadblocks get in her way.”

“And she gives control to a higher power,” Eve mused. “And credits Him for all her happiness.”

After a beat, they all turned to each other.

“Maybe that’s the real reason she sent that invitation,” Eve said, reaching a hand to both her sisters. “To get us to see life in a new way, the way she has, to put our priorities in order.”

“And kick down the roadblocks,” Angie suggested.

“And stare change in the face and laugh at it,” Noelle finished.

Silent, they held each other’s hands and didn’t say anything else. Then, when their families came in, laughing and showing off their purchases, the Chambers sisters were connected by one more thing: they all wanted a new life in this magical place.

They just didn’t know if they could actually have it.

Chapter Fourteen

Eve

IN KEEPING with a nearly forty-year-old tradition started by their mother, the Chambers triplets celebrated their birthday on what was known as “Christmas Eve Eve.” When Eve was a very little girl, she thought they called it that because she was the oldest and technically had a birthday of December 24th, born at 11:58, moments before her sisters.

This year, they decided to celebrate Christmas Eve Eve a few days early, since that was the night everyone was available. Aunt Elizabeth invited a houseful of friends and family, including Sonny, Caro and Nate with little Josh, Hannah and Keith—who hadn’t shown yet, and dinner was over—as well as Jace and Cassie.

There was the traditional small gift exchange, the usual jokes about being Christmas babies, and a raised glass of Dad’s favorite eggnog in memory of the parents they deeply loved and missed.

Eve was feeling relaxed and happy as the gathering broke into smaller groups for games and conversation. The boys went upstairs to play on the Switch while Angie, Brooke, Hannah, and Aunt Elizabeth were in the sunroom chatting about the wedding. Sonny and Nate had gone to get the ladder for the angel placement.

But Eve was right where she wanted to be—in front of the fire with her head on David’s shoulder—gazing at what Sawyer had pronounced the best tree ever.

He wasn't wrong. But the real beauty to Eve were the ornaments, which were indeed a celebration of her childhood. They'd added more this year, too. Angie's contribution was from Biltmore House, Noelle found a rocking horse—in honor of the foal she'd seen being born—and Eve had gifted her boys with various ornaments that represented this past year.

Now her gaze lingered over the old ones, like a picture of three girls on their first day of kindergarten glued onto a foam snowman, clearly created by a five-year-old.

Eve smiled at the nostalgic memory, and could hear her mother's voice echoing through her head. *Now this one...this one is my favorite.* Which was what she'd said about every ornament the girls made as kids.

Her heart tumbled around at the memory.

"If we had a girl," she whispered to David, "I'd want to name her Jacqueline after my mother."

He turned, one brow up. "You're thinking about it?"

Only constantly, she thought. "Just, you know, now and again."

"Same," he said. "You know the final decision is yours, Evie."

She smiled and nodded. "Thank you for that. It is my old body that has to carry a baby for nine months."

"You're not too old, and I say that both as a doctor and a man who knows just how much strength and energy you have."

"I'm...pushing it," she said, just as she heard Caro's laughter. "Want to know a secret?" She leaned closer to whisper, "Caroline is pregnant. It was a total surprise. She's waiting until Christmas to tell Nate, but I doubt she'll be able to keep it a secret that long. I mean, she's bursting at the seams."

David blinked back with shock, processing the news. "She's... pregnant?"

"Yes. Very early on still, but yes."

"And she's your age?"

"She's thirty-eight but will be thirty-nine when it's born," she said. "They'd given up on conceiving another child. She says she feels good. Of course, she's only six weeks along."

"No drugs, no fertility, no temperature or cycle tracking?" He nodded and lifted his glass mug of eggnog. "Here's to it."

"David." She sighed his name.

Her looked down at her, the longing in his expression as plain as what she saw in James's eyes when they saw a commercial for the PlayStation he

coveted.

Before she could respond, Sonny and Nate came in with the ladder and the room filled for what Elizabeth called the Birthmas tradition.

This was a new one for Eve's boys, who came hustling in like it was something exciting, with Sawyer already begging to climb the ladder and do the honors.

"It's for a birthday girl," Elizabeth told him. "Every year, we alternated who put the angel up."

"Birth order," Eve announced. "And if I remember correctly, Noelle did it last, so..."

"It's your turn, *Mamacita*," James said.

Eve eyed the ladder, so not interested in getting up there and doing a balancing act after a spiked eggnog and a half. "I don't know," she said.

"I'll do it, Mommy!" Sawyer jumped in front of her, prayer hands held up. "Please, please, please."

"It's very high, honey."

"I know!" His eyes twinkled with glee. "Like I'm flying!"

She and David shared a look and a laugh.

"I think that's what Mom's worried about," he said. "You can't fly."

"Someday I'm going to be a fighter pilot!" he announced, cracking up the group. "You can't stop me, Mom."

Her heart dropped at the words. Is that what Sawyer thought she was doing? Stopping his...fun? When all she wanted was for him to be safe? Was she stifling his joy? Was she overprotective and too controlling?

Yes to all of the above, but everyone could improve, including her.

Very slowly, she stood and didn't say a word as she picked up the tree topper angel, the same one she and her sisters had placed on a tree for many, many years. Her nose was chipped and her hair faded, but she wore a glimmery gold gown and had feather wings and...oh, everything about this decoration brought tears to Eve's eyes.

Holding it, she looked at Angie, then Noelle, who were both as emotional.

Then she held it out to Sawyer. "Okay, you are my stand-in. But *stand* is the operative word, little man. No jumping, tilting, balancing, or flying."

He just gave her the sweetest smile, quiet for once, as he took the angel with the appropriate amount of reverence.

"Thanks, Mommy," he whispered, the look in his eyes telling her exactly

what he felt: gratitude for being trusted. “But can you hold it while I climb?”

She nodded and stepped back, watching with everyone while he climbed the ladder with the utmost care.

David took her hand and gave a squeeze, the tiny gesture silently telling her he understood everything that just unfolded.

Sonny stayed under the ladder, both arms ready to catch Sawyer, and they all sort of held their breath, as they knew sudden outbursts might startle him off balance.

He climbed effortlessly nearly to the top and Eve reached up to hand him the angel. He took it with one hand, holding the ladder with the other.

“I just stick her there?” he asked without looking down, as if he realized he had no idea what he was doing. Which was so like Sawyer, she had to laugh along with everyone else.

“That’s all,” David said, coming closer in case it took two men to catch a falling Sawyer.

“Just...like...” He grimaced as he reached his little arm and got the big dress over the top branch. “That!”

They cheered softly, no one letting out any real noise until Sawyer had safely scampered down, looking truly proud of himself for nailing it.

Eve relaxed, as proud of herself as of Sawyer, and from the way David hugged her and kissed the top of her head, he was proud, too.

Letting go wasn’t easy, but she could do it.



A FEW HOURS LATER, the glow of the evening—and nog—hadn’t yet worn off as David and Eve dressed for bed. In the bathroom, he finished brushing his teeth, then gestured her to the sink so she could do the same.

“You’re up, Evie,” he said. “Can I use your laptop really quick? I left mine downstairs and I need to check if an email came in with a post-op report for a patient.”

“It’s on the nightstand.” Leaning over the sink to start to wash her face, when she stood, remembering she might have a password protection on.

“Oh, honey?” She stepped out. “The password is—”

He looked up from the open computer on the bed, confusion on his face.

“Did you get stuck on that screen?”

“Eve? What is this?”

“What’s what?” She came closer, patting her wet face with a cloth as he turned the screen, and showed her the last website she’d visited.

Zillow. With about thirty tabs open, every single one a house in Hendersonville that Eve adored.

“Oh. Yeah.” She gave a self-conscious laugh. “I told you how much I loved the town when I went down there and...yeah. It’s pretty affordable.”

He just stared at her. “How...why...when...”

“Total pipe dream, honey. I thought about your friend Terrance Robinson saying he was looking for a replacement—”

“Me? Seriously? I’d give up *neurosurgery* to be a family doctor?” he asked on a choke of disbelief.

“No! That makes no sense, but I was curious about the cost of houses down there. Nothing more, I promise.”

He glanced at the screen, letting out a breath. “Five bedrooms?”

“In case we have four kids, speaking of things that make no sense,” she said with a wry smile. “Oh! That one in Mills River? Gorgeous. I mean, the whole town is just...perfection.”

Silent, he clicked through a few images, his expression troubled. “I didn’t realize you were seriously...”

“No, nothing is serious,” she assured him, setting down the cloth to sit next to him on the bed. “Everyone looks on Zillow for fun. Don’t you?”

“No. I love our house. We built it.”

“I love it, too. I love our life and our family and you.” She reached for him. “I don’t want you to think I’m not happy, David. It’s just that we talked about that baby and this was...I don’t know. A way to make the impossible seem possible.”

He thought about that for a moment, then clicked to the next house. “Nice view.”

“It’s mostly farmland down there, with these little developments, maybe six or seven houses, and a good acre of land. And the town is just precious, only about a half-hour away. I was...” She studied his face and sighed at the conflict she saw there. She knew he’d want to make her happy, even if it meant a sacrifice for him. But this was too much of a sacrifice.

“Honey, they’re just fantasies,” she insisted. “Fun. Not real.”

His shoulders sank. “But I want to give you your fantasies. You know

making you happy is what makes me happy.”

She nodded. “Exactly what I would expect you to say, which is why I didn’t make a big deal about how much I loved Hendersonville or mention looking at houses. I don’t want you to give up your dreams for me. That making your spouse happy thing works both ways, you know.”

For a long time, he didn’t say anything, looking at the screen, then her, his great mind no doubt weighing and wondering and figuring things out.

“Why don’t you come to bed?” he finally said, his voice soft and kind. “I’ll just check that email.”

Not sure where that left them, she nodded, finished her face and hair routine, then brushed her teeth and used the bathroom. By the time she walked back into the bedroom, the room was dark but for the computer screen lighting up David’s face as he lay in bed.

“Still on email?” she asked as she slipped under the covers next to him.

He angled the screen to show her the brick house he was studying. She blinked in surprise, then smiled at him.

“I liked that one, too,” she said. “But the kitchen’s a little dated.”

“But there’s a man cave basement.” He lifted a brow. “And you’ve got four men who like to cave.”

She laughed. “Are you seriously looking or just fooling around?”

He leaned over and kissed her. “Looking now. The fooling around part comes later.”

“Oh? Well, Merry Birthmas to me.” She nestled in closer while he zipped through several more houses, checked out Google Images of Hendersonville, and even clicked on Dr. Robinson’s Family Practice website.

Eve was buzzing with enough excitement that when he finally turned out the lights and kissed her, she was as in love with this man as she’d ever been in her life. It made no difference where they lived, how many kids they had, or what his job was. She loved every inch of him, heart and soul. And that was all that mattered.

Chapter Fifteen

Noelle

DOWNTOWN ASHEVILLE WAS HUMMING with festive shoppers two days before Christmas. Noelle joined arms with Aunt Elizabeth, laughing and talking as they walked behind Angie and Eve for one last pass over their lists.

“Just like old times, huh?” Noelle asked, leaning into her. “The three of us with you on a holiday adventure.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Good trips, weren’t they? Paris was my favorite.”

“I liked the time we went to Greece,” Noelle cooed. “Santorini was a dream.”

Angie and Eve turned and joined in, all of them sharing the memories of trips the four of them had taken from the time they were sixteen until well into their twenties. After that, the Birthmas trips had fizzled out as their adult lives became busy, husbands entered the picture, and children were born.

“Sometimes I’m sorry I took all those Christmases away from you,” Elizabeth said wistfully.

The comment brought the other three to a complete standstill. “Sorry?” they all replied like a unified chorus.

“For giving us the greatest vacations ever?” Noelle scoffed.

“Why are you sorry?” Angie asked.

Elizabeth shrugged. “You should have had traditional Christmases.”

“We had plenty of those,” Eve assured her.

“We didn’t want to come back here,” Angie added. “Those trips were

amazing.”

“Anyway, define ‘traditional,’” Noelle chimed in. “You did what you thought we needed at the time, and we love you for it.”

“And you did that again this year,” Eve said. “How did you know we all needed to finally get back to Asheville and the family cabin?”

“It was Sonny who talked me into it,” she admitted. “At Thanksgiving dinner at his house, he helped me realize that twenty-five years of mourning and escaping was enough. Your mother would love that we’re all here.”

They agreed with a group hug. “How far is that double-decker coffee bus?” Noelle asked. “I’m dying for a latte.”

“Not far,” Elizabeth said. “Just around the corner. Let’s go.”

As they walked, they chatted about the favorite gifts they had for others, and Noelle had to admit hers were the pink sparkly Crocs she got for Cassie.

“I was thinking about something for Jace,” she said to Elizabeth. “But I’m not sure what I could buy him.”

“That.” Elizabeth brought them all to a stop and pointed to a store window—no, not a store, Noelle realized. It was one of many boutique art galleries that peppered the streets of Asheville, which was a haven for artists. Noelle had noticed several of them and almost dragged the group in, but visiting an art gallery felt like work.

“That painting?” Noelle asked, not sure why Elizabeth thought Jace would love the abstract oil, though she did see the true talent in the work.

Elizabeth smiled, gesturing toward the red and white sign in the window.

Gallery for lease or sale. See owner or call for information.

Noelle drew back, blinking. “I should buy him...an art gallery?”

“She’s dense,” Angie teased, elbowing her. “Buy it—or lease it—for yourself.”

“Exactly,” Elizabeth said. “And honestly, if you want a not-so-silent partner to run the place, help you find artists, and sell, well...” She gave a sassy shrug. “I know a little about that business.”

What? Noelle tried to form the word, but she could only exhale air.

“It’s a thought,” Elizabeth said. “Just another option for your life.”

“Well, that...that...that...” she stammered, then shook her head. “Would be a big fat heck of an option.”

Her aunt nudged her along. “Let’s get the lattes, my dearest darlings. And a seat on the top deck near a heat lamp.”

Noelle took one more look over her shoulder at Spruce Studio Art, which

was small—a single exhibit room and likely an office in the back—but a few of the pieces in the window were gorgeous.

She tried not to think about it as they ordered at the red double-decker landmark and got precisely the table Elizabeth wanted upstairs, heat lamp and all.

Eve clicked through the shopping list, comparing hers with Angie's.

"I'm done," Angie said. "With that jacket for Brooke, I finished my list for a grand and glorious Christmas morning that should go well into the afternoon."

"The way Mom liked it," Noelle said, smiling.

"I'm not done," Eve said. "The kids are, but David? I don't know what to get him."

"What does he want most in the world?" Elizabeth asked.

"A baby," Eve answered without a second's hesitation.

Elizabeth cocked a brow. "I say if God wants you to have another baby, he'll make sure you get one."

"Well, he'd have to take me off birth control first, but..." Eve began with a sigh. "I admit I stared at the pill and almost didn't take it today."

"That's not how He works," Elizabeth said. "He'll tell you His will if you listen. To people, to His word, to your heart. The right path will be clear. Is it?"

Eve shrugged. "As far as the people, it depends on who I listen to. For the word, I admit I haven't read the Bible recently."

"His word will find a way to you."

Noelle leaned in. "But you *did* take the pill, right?"

Eve nodded. "I did, but if David would agree to...something else, then I wouldn't."

"Agree to what?" Elizabeth asked.

"The family practice in Hendersonville?" Noelle's eyes widened. "He'd consider it?"

The sisters filled Aunt Elizabeth in on the doctor Eve and David had run into, but the whole time, Eve shook her head as if the very idea were preposterous.

Elizabeth's eyes grew wide. "Could you *all* live here?" She whispered the question, as if saying it too loud might make the very possibility disappear like smoke.

"I think that's the latte talking," Noelle joked.

“But what if it weren’t?” Angie asked. “Could love and a different perspective on life make you leave Sotheby’s, Noelle?”

She considered the question—really, really thought about it. “I don’t know,” she finally admitted. “Would you really relocate here and divorce Craig?”

“In a heartbeat,” Angie said.

All of them turned to Eve, who held up two hands. “If David would...I’m totally in.”

For a long moment, none of them said a word as their wheels turned, their hearts softened, and they thought about the monumental changes they were discussing. Just then, a group of costumed carolers passed by the bus, singing in the streets.

That stopped their conversation as they smiled and listened, peeking over the railing to see the Dickensian outfits and listen to a gorgeous rendition of “O Holy Night.”

“Cassie is singing that in the play tomorrow night,” Noelle said. “Which reminds me...” She checked her watch. “I am helping out at the church in less than two hours.”

As the carolers reached a crescendo, a man’s voice echoed over the final note. “In the words of Isaiah,” he called out, silencing everything around them. “‘For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given...’”

As he continued reciting the rest of the famous scripture, they all looked at Eve and watched her whole expression change.

Elizabeth just smiled. “He does manage to find a way for you to hear His word, doesn’t He?”

“Oh!” Eve put her hand over her mouth, her eyes filling. “Did you hear... was that a...message?”

“Only if you really want another boy,” Angie teased as they stood and gathered their empty cups.

But Noelle thought it was a message, and sure would like one of her own.

On the way back to the car, they passed the art gallery. When no one was looking, she sneaked out her phone and took a picture of the sign, capturing the number. Just in case the path was suddenly clear to her, too.



“OH, THAT’S BEAUTIFUL, NOELLE!” Beth slipped a friendly arm around Noelle and gazed at the finished backdrop that would light up at the very end of the play. “I know you were struggling with what to put on that canvas.”

Noelle smiled at her friend, then stepped back to see the full impact of what she’d done tonight. While the dress rehearsal was going on in the church and her backdrops were being moved with each changed scene, she had discovered one more blank canvas.

And after her morning in town, she’d been inspired.

“You like it?” Noelle asked, admiring the words across a night sky.

“‘For unto us a child is born,’” Beth read. “Nothing better than Isaiah 9 for the curtain call.”

“Thanks, Beth. I thought we could have all the cast sign it after the play in silver Sharpie, then we could give it to Darlene as a thank-you gift for directing.”

Beth gasped softly. “Wonderful idea! Oh, Noelle. You’ve been a great addition to this play. I’m so glad you decided to volunteer.”

“Me, too,” she said. “And can I say how nervous I am for tomorrow night’s performance? I don’t want Cassie to miss a line...or my backdrops to fall over and hit the cast on the head.”

“You don’t have to worry about either of those things happening. Cassie never misses a beat and, wow, can that kid sing. Every time she hits the high note on ‘O Holy Night,’ I get chills. And she does it hanging from a harness!”

Noelle beamed as if Cassie were her own daughter. “She really does nail the part. How’s Sarah doing with her sheep role? She never misses a...*baaa*.”

Beth laughed at that. “She’s fine. Still threatening not to go out on stage, but I think she’ll be fine.”

“I still wish Darlene had let us make your sweet girl an angel. She didn’t have to fly, sing, or speak, but it would have made her so happy to wear the wings.”

“You’re kind, Noelle, but that’s not going to happen. Oh.” She looked over Noelle’s shoulder and gave a sly smile. “Here comes Cassie’s handsome father.”

Noelle turned, her heart instantly lighter at the sight of Jace strolling in, his flannel shirt and jeans somehow managing to be her favorite look ever on a man. How did he do that?

“Daddy!”

From the other side of the church, Cassie ran toward him, her angel wings

flapping until she leaped into his arms. He scooped her up and held her high in the air effortlessly, the picture of the perfect dad.

“There’s my angel, wings and all. Where’s your halo?”

“I left it on the stage.”

“Hey, you.” Noelle came closer, wiping her hands on the paint-covered smock she wore.

“Hey. How’s it going?” Jace stared at her for a long beat, his smile even brighter and then, as if he realized how long their eye contact had lasted, he quickly glanced around the sanctuary that had been turned into a small theater. “It looks amazing in here.”

“It’s coming along well,” Noelle agreed.

He walked toward one of the backdrops. Lowering his daughter to the floor, he gestured toward the night sky painting. “That’s good, Noelle.”

“Oh, thanks.” She laughed, waving off the compliment. “I was worried I got carried away with the stars but I’m happy with how it turned out.”

“No, you can’t have too many stars the night our Savior was born.” Jace winked. “Thank you so much for doing this, seriously.”

“She’s been fantastic!” Beth joined them, giving Jace a friendly hug. “You better hold onto this one, Jace Fleming, because we’ve already adopted her as one of our own and we’re not too keen on saying goodbye.”

Jace gave Noelle an adoring glance, making her cheeks warm. “I knew she’d be an asset.”

“Oh, she is.” Beth grinned, reaching her arms out to give Noelle a hug. “I’ll see you tomorrow. We can help the girls dress backstage, but after that? Nothing for us to do but sit in the audience and pray there’s not a meltdown.”

Noelle hugged her back. “Don’t worry. Sarah will be the greatest sheep ever.”

With a few more goodbyes and a moment to help Cassie put her costume and wings away, they all walked to Jace’s truck.

“Eve dropped me off, so can I bum a ride?” Noelle asked.

“I was hoping you’d ask.”

Cassie danced around, her eyes sparkling with a secret. “Tonight, Daddy? Now? Can we do it now?”

Noelle looked from one to the other, curious about the conversation.

“Right now?” he asked.

“In the truck. Please? I can’t stand it anymore.”

“Stand what?” Noelle asked as they reached his oversized truck.

“Cassie and I have a Christmas tradition that every year, the day before Christmas Eve, we get to give one present and open one present.”

“That’s sweet and so early! I love that.”

“Good! ’Cause I picked my present for you, Miss Noelle!” Cassie announced. “I have your present in the car.”

“Me? Mine?” She put her hand on her chest, surprised. “But your present is at the cabin.”

“That’s okay,” she exclaimed. “It’s not an exchange like that. You get to open one and give one. I am giving you the one I picked for you.”

“Cassie, you’re so kind.”

She pranced a little more. “I can’t wait for you to open it!”

Noelle beamed at her. “Look at you, embracing the spirit of Christmas.” She added a spontaneous hug, utterly enchanted with this darling little creature. “When you love giving a gift more than getting one? That’s very grown up and wonderful, Cassie.”

Suddenly, she felt Jace’s gaze on her as he stood next to the truck door, keys in hand. He had a strange look on his face—a mix of astonishment and admiration.

“Right?” she added, not sure how to interpret his expression.

“So right,” he said. “And it’s kind of you to teach her.”

She smiled, not sure how to respond as he unlocked the door and Cassie scrambled up and into the back, emerging in a few seconds with a giftbox wrapped...well, not exactly perfectly. But the reindeer paper and giant green ribbon had obviously been taped and tied with love...and very small hands.

For some reason, that folded her heart in half.

“Oh, Cass. Thank you so much.”

She handed it over with great flair, clearly excited. “I hope you like it, Miss Noelle.”

“I’m sure I’ll love it.” She took the box and glanced at Jace, who didn’t look so sure at all.

“This was all her,” he said. “Picked it out and paid for it with her own allowance she gets from doing chores.”

“Oh!” Noelle squeezed the box, tears stinging behind her lids. “Cassie Fleming, you are the sweetest thing.”

“Open it!” She danced some more while Jace opened the passenger door wider, and Noelle leaned against it.

“Now? Here?”

“Yes!” Cassie clapped her little hands in front of her face. “Please!”

Laughing, Noelle gently opened the crooked ribbon, then turned the box over to slide her fingernail under what had to be half a roll of tape holding the paper. The gift had Cassie’s over-the-top personality all over it, which just brought more tears to Noelle’s eyes.

As she pulled the paper off the box, she looked at Cassie, biting her lip to keep from crying.

“I adore you, you know that?” Noelle whispered.

“I love you, too, Miss Noelle! Now open it!”

The words of love hit her hard and she covered her emotion by lifting the top of the box. Immediately, Jace stepped closer to hold the bottom of the shirt-sized box and help her. When their fingers grazed, she sucked in a soft breath, stealing a look at him.

His gray-blue eyes were intense, pinned on her and full of...well, that same kind of love she felt for—and from—Cassie.

She lifted the tissue and saw...denim.

“Jeans?” she guessed.

“Just look!” Cassie said, coming closer to help, too.

“Overalls!” Noelle exclaimed as she pulled the garment out and saw what it was. Classic denim, shapeless, ugly, perfect overalls.

“For when you work with me on the animals,” Cassie said. “Do you like them?”

For a moment, Noelle couldn’t speak. She just clutched the denim and brought it to her chest, blinking back tears as she crouched down to get face to face with Cassie.

“I love them,” she whispered, wrapping one arm around her for a hug. “And I love you.”

As they embraced, she looked up just in time to see Jace wipe a tear.

Chapter Sixteen

Angie

“WHERE IS EVERYONE?” Brooke asked as she meandered into the sunroom where Angie was finishing coffee.

“Boys are shepherding, Eve and David are at the farm moving things in the barn with Aunt Bitsy and Uncle Sonny, and Noelle went to help clean up goat poop.” She looked up and made a funny face. “File all of that under things I never thought I’d say.”

Brooke snorted a laugh. “That’s it?”

“No, no. You’re going to church tonight to see a play.” She winced. “Another thing I never thought I’d say. Are you going to kill me for agreeing to go? Or...” She held up half a cookie. “For eating a Cookie Brookie creation?”

“The cookies are made to be eaten and”—she dropped on the sofa—“I’d kill you if I couldn’t go and missed that little bird flying in her harness and singing.”

Angie pointed at her with the cookie. “Who are you and where is my teenage daughter who never looks up from her phone and kind of hates me?”

“Oh.” Brooke groaned and dropped her head back as her whole face melted into sadness. “I’m so sorry, Mom.”

“No. No, don’t be.” Angie put the cookie down and went to sit next to Brooke. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“I shouldn’t have been a teenage nightmare.”

“Honey.” She wrapped an arm around Brooke’s narrow shoulders and squeezed. “All is forgiven and forgotten. That’s the magic of the Asheville Christmas cabin.”

Brooke sighed into her, pushing back a lock of hair to hold Angie’s gaze. “It really is magic.”

“It is.”

“I never want to go home.”

“You have to. But I get the—”

“Mom, I’m serious.” She sat back and gave Angie a hard look that did nothing to detract from her natural beauty. “I know you’re going to give me some fat list of adult reasons why we can’t stay here, like financial or legal or logistics or...whatever. But I just think those things are like red lights on the road, you know? Sorry for the driving analogy, it’s on my mind.”

“You can’t go through red lights.”

“But they change to green,” she said. “We just have to wait for them to change.”

“We could wait...until you’re in college.”

“Why? Because you think Dad won’t let you go? Or me?” She gave a mirthless laugh. “Please. He can’t stand either one of us.”

“That’s exactly what he said about you,” Angie whispered softly, remembering that conversation she’d had with Craig.

“Well, now that we know we don’t have some kind of perfect, happy little family, the light’s green.”

Angie studied her, feeling her whole heart get warm the way it used to when Brooke was little. From the time she was a baby, Angie would stare at her daughter and have what she thought of as a “happy ache”—so in love with the creature that it hurt.

It felt that way now.

“You know, sometimes I feel like I didn’t lose a husband in all this, but gained a daughter.”

Brooke smiled. “Yeah. I’ve missed you, Mom. And I really am sorry about being such a grade-A pain in the butt.”

“It’s fine.”

Brooke shrugged. “I’m not blaming Dad for the way I acted, honestly, but there was something...dark in that house. It was cold.”

“Concrete floors and counters,” Angie pointed out. “And this is warm wood and toasty fires.”

“Seriously. But it was more than that, Mom. Dad and you—mostly Dad—just left a heavy feeling in the air.”

Angie let out a soft moan. “You poor baby. I shouldn’t have let you live in a house like that.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Brooke insisted. “But if I hadn’t lived there—if I hadn’t felt the ice and saw how much Dad drank and known he was checked out of our family, I don’t think I would have appreciated this place so much. When you see the love and hear people laughing and get that bone-deep sense of caring about whether or not Sawyer saw a real bear, you get an idea of what a family should be. You really...hey.” She frowned and leaned in. “You’re crying.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Angie scoffed, wiping her nose. “My little girl’s all grown up.”

Brooke smiled and put her hand on Angie’s leg. “We should move here.”

“I know, I know. But...what about your life in California? I know you had issues at school, but I think a kid who—”

“I hate it there. The people, the vibe, the money, the fakeness. I hate it.”

Angie blinked at her, surprised not just by the words but the vehemence and certainty behind them.

“Then we’ll leave,” Angie said simply. “I will not let you—” A hard knock on the door stopped her. “Oh, boy. Ten bucks says it’s another neighbor with Christmas bread, a bottle of cider, and a homemade ornament.”

Brooke laughed and pushed up. “Well, when in a small town...”

“Aunt Elizabeth packed up small tins of cookies and put them in the pantry just for this very occasion,” Angie said. “You answer the door and I’ll get one.”

While she walked into the kitchen and through the antique pantry doors, Angie couldn’t wipe the smile from her face.

Yep, there certainly was magic in this place. And she was feeling it. Stay here with Brooke? Maybe get a job at Biltmore, live right in this cabin, and start over? It was a dream, that’s what it was. It was—

“What are you doing here?” Brooke’s voice filled with a low-key tone of panic made Angie whip around.

“Well, Merry Christmas to you, too, you little runaway. Where’s Mom?”

Angie stood stone still, the sound of her husband’s cold greeting making her whole body feel numb and boneless and lost.

Craig is here.

So much for dreams.



IT TOOK Angie a solid five minutes to get over the shock of seeing her husband standing in the cabin doorway.

Somehow, they managed stiff greetings and wary looks and an offer of coffee for...the guest. They made it to the kitchen table, where the three of them sat in awkward, stunned silence.

“So, you came,” Angie finally said. “No sales meeting in Cancun?”

“I backed out.” He lifted a mug and eyed her over the rim, silent.

Sitting next to her, Angie could feel a cocktail of emotions bubbling within Brooke. For one thing, the “new” Brooke disappeared within seconds of Craig’s arrival. The light in her eyes faded, and she kept her arms crossed, a thick lock of hair falling over her face to cover her expression.

With a sigh, Craig shoved a hand through his hair, looking back and forth between Angie and Brooke, taking a breath before he started what Angie suspected was a rehearsed speech.

“Look, let’s just get this out there. I know I messed up. I know I’ve been...absent. Busy at work. Really distracted.” When Brooke refused eye contact, he leveled his gaze on Angie. “But I’m here now, and I want to bring you guys home. Now. Today. On the next flight out.”

“Oh, sure,” Angie said on a dry laugh. “We’ll pack right up and follow you home, Craig. Is your mistress okay with that?”

Brooke just shuttered her eyes, silent.

“Angie, please. Have some dignity.”

She tipped her head and narrowed her eyes at him. “Really? You’re going to lecture me on *dignity*?”

“I’m taking you two home, where you belong.”

Brooke kept her gaze downcast, her lower lip trapped between her teeth. It was shocking how different she was from the girl on the sofa ten minutes ago. And Angie would do anything—absolutely anything—to get that girl back.

“I think we belong here,” Angie said, putting a hand on Brooke’s arm. “We’re not going anywhere.”

Craig took a slow and steady inhale, tension stretching across the whole room. “Listen, this whole thing is getting ridiculous and out of hand. We can work all of this out, take it one day at a time. We’ll be a family again.”

Brooke finally looked up through her hair, narrowing her dark eyes. “We never were a family, Dad.”

“Brooke, I—”

“No,” she spat the word, suddenly standing. “No, you can’t do this. You can’t wreck our lives because you want yours to look picture-perfect to other people. That’s all you care about, Dad!”

“That’s not true! I care about being a family.”

“Oh, *puh-lease*,” she sneered. “You care about what other people think. You care about looking rich, successful, and cool in that sickening world you travel in. I know, Dad. I know all about it now, and I hate it. And I hate those people. And I hate—”

“You are out of line, young lady!” he ground out, anger lifting him from his chair. “You are a child! *My child*. And if your mother doesn’t want to leave, I can’t do anything about it, but you—”

“I am not going anywhere,” Brooke shot back.

“Brooke, Brooke.” He shuddered, visibly shaking off his anger and forcing himself to stay calm.

Angie had seen this a million times, and it was usually followed by a trip to the bar, a shot of whiskey, and then he’d disappear into his office. But he had nowhere to run now.

“Dad, I’m going upstairs. There’s nothing left to say.”

“Brooke.” He reached for her hand, but she snapped away from his touch. “I’m sorry,” he said, his voice cracking.

Angie and Brooke just stared at him.

“I am,” he added. “I know I screwed up. I know I was wrong, and I want another chance. I am not traveling for a month, I ended...you know...my friendship. And I’m not drinking a thing.”

Angie drew back. They’d never really talked openly about how alcohol changed him, but...there it was, out in the open.

He dropped back into his chair with a dramatic sigh. “I don’t know what else to say, but I can’t throw this away.”

Angie swallowed, feeling all the hope and happiness she’d been holding just a little while ago slip right through her fingers. But wouldn’t this be

better? Could they reconcile? Could they—

“Well, I can,” Brooke said. “I’ve seen a better life and I want it.”

“With Vance’s family?” he asked. “Because I know those people—”

“Are you that dumb?” Brooke choked out.

“Brooke,” Angie groaned, her whole body knotted over this conversation. “You can’t talk to him that way.”

She whipped around to Angie, her eyes flashing. “You’re buying it? This is all it took? A modest, low-bar grovel that he doesn’t even mean?”

Angie stared at her, knowing she wasn’t wrong. But she was only sixteen. She didn’t know that people could...

No. Craig wasn’t going to change. But marriages and families shouldn’t break, she thought. Death could do that, but people shouldn’t. And that, she realized, was why she was holding so tight to this shred of a marriage.

“I just want to do the right thing,” she whispered.

With a grunt, Brooke held up both hands in surrender. “You do that, Mom. And I’ll do whatever I have to because...” She sliced Craig with a look. “I’m a child.”

With that, she walked out, marched into the den, and slammed the door.

For several heartbeats, they sat in silence, the only sound in the room a hiss and crackle of the fire.

“Now what?” he finally asked.

“I don’t know, Craig. I just don’t know.” One thing she did know—she was back at square one in life with a husband she didn’t trust and a daughter who wasn’t speaking to her.

“Well, I do know,” Craig said, finishing off his coffee. “You’ll come to your senses and so will she. It’s Christmas Eve, Angie, and we should be together. I’m at the Marriott near downtown and you have my cell. If there’s a heart beating in your chest, you’ll give us another chance, Ange. We deserve that much.”

She stayed silent, not trusting herself to launch into a litany of who deserved what in this broken marriage.

With a nod, he turned and walked out the front door, leaving her with the sound of tires crunching on the gravel as he drove away. Along with the sound of her heart breaking into a million pieces.

Chapter Seventeen

Eve

AS SONNY and David carried the next load of hay to clear the barn for the wedding reception, Eve climbed to the loft to get a few measurements.

“Your phone’s buzzing,” Aunt Elizabeth called from below.

“Can you see if it’s any of the boys from the pasture? They probably want me to bring food. I can’t believe they wanted to spend tonight out there, too. On Christmas Eve!”

Elizabeth laughed. “I think Sawyer is certain he’ll see Santa. Oh, it’s a text from Angie.”

“Everything okay?”

When Elizabeth didn’t answer, Eve leaned over the railing to look down.

“Craig is...here,” Elizabeth said softly.

“What?” Trying to wrap her head around that, Eve hustled down the ladder to read the text herself. “He’s here? In Asheville?”

Elizabeth handed her the phone and Eve read the text, which had also been sent to Noelle on their group chat.

Angie: *Craig came, groveled (not well), and left. Wants us to go home with him.*

“He just showed up?” Elizabeth asked, her brows sky high. “That takes a good bit of nerve, considering how he’s treated her and Brooke lately.”

“He must have tried to apologize,” Eve said. “My guess is that’s what ‘not well’ groveling is.”

She typed back a demand for details and begged Angie not to leave.

Elizabeth pressed a hand to her chest, squeezing her eyes shut sympathetically. “And poor Brooke. She was finally starting to be herself again, and I’m sure this has totally thrown her off, too.”

Noelle responded next with an immediate offer to leave Jace’s farm and head to the cabin for backup.

“We should go back, too,” Eve said. “She needs us.”

“Absolutely.” Elizabeth nodded with certainty. “Wedding planning can wait. I’ll tell Sonny and David.”

“Let me go gather up the boys.” Eve brushed some hay from her jeans. “They’ll want to stay but might be hungry. Hang on.”

Eve headed out and across the field, her heart heavy for Angie and Brooke. They’d both made such progress. Angie was leaning toward leaving the cheating rat and moving here. But Craig wouldn’t let her go without a fight.

As much as Eve was a cheerleader for romance and love and marriage, even she could see that Angie’s husband was toxic, and she’d hate to see her sister get dragged back into that mess.

“James, Bradley, Sawyer!” Eve shouted, waving an arm as she got closer to the fenced-in area where the farm animals roamed. “Shepherding duties are done early today. It’s Christmas Eve and the shepherds are hungry and are needed at the Nativity play in church in a few hours.”

Lucky ran around the pasture, barking, but James was on his hands and knees in front of a far section of the fence.

As she got closer, she spied Bradley sitting with a goat. Was he talking to the animal?

That made her smile as her gaze shifted to the other side, looking for head Number Three.

Which was not visible.

“Where’s Soy Sauce?” she called, using the boys’ favorite nickname for their little brother.

“He went...” James looked up and around. “I don’t know, but Mom, we finally found the break in the fence! We found it!”

“Now find Sawyer,” she said as a low-key tension pulled at her.

“He’s bear hunting,” Bradley called. “He came down from the tree—”

“That he wasn’t supposed to climb,” Eve finished as she reached the fence, frustration growing. “Guys, *where* is your brother?”

“And I think he went...” Bradley stood and looked one way, then the other, his gaze stopping at the thick pine woods. “He wouldn’t go in the woods, would he?” Bradley’s voice registered a little fear and a lot of disbelief.

“Of course he would,” James said, trotting over. “But he’ll be back. Mom, we solved Uncle Sonny’s problem! There’s the tiniest little tear...”

Eve just held up a hand and jogged toward the woods. Even though many of the trees were bare, the pines and undergrowth were thick enough to get lost in. And this was a mountain, so a steep drop was possible anywhere. She hadn’t gone deep enough into these woods to know the lay of the land, but Sawyer was *not* allowed back there.

“Sawyer!” she called as she marched closer.

Instantly, Lucky was next to her, barking.

“Where’s your little buddy, Luck?” she asked, putting her hand on the dog’s head and willing herself to stay calm. “Hey, Sawyer! Where are you?”

She called some more and in a few minutes, Elizabeth, Sonny, and David joined her.

“It’s okay,” David said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “He couldn’t have gotten far.”

“Maybe the bear has him,” Bradley said.

Sonny tsked. “If he’s with a black bear, they’re likely havin’ a grand ol’ time. We’ll find him. Bitsy, let’s get in the truck and run the perimeter and call Jace so he can bring his truck over, too. Y’all stay here, boys. Eve and David, why don’t you head in the woods—together. Don’t separate and don’t go too far.”

Eve swallowed hard as the reality of what they were doing hit her. “He’s...lost.”

“No. Come on.” David took her hand and, together, they started pushing branches and trekking through the woods with no path, footsteps, or clues to follow. How did he do this? How did he just...disappear?

Bubbling up from inside her, the first sob escaped.

“Honey, don’t worry,” David insisted, putting his arm around her. “He can’t have gotten far.”

“Maybe he’s hurt. Maybe he tumbled down a cliff. Maybe a bear did take him!”

“You’re being silly, honey, he—”

“Silly?” she shot back. “This is our son we’re talking about. Our reckless,

wild, thrill-seeking six-year-old and you want me to have another baby?”

Her voice rose, shrill with anger and frustration, enough to make David flinch.

“I’m sorry,” he said gently. “I know you’re upset. Come on.” He took a few more steps and called, “Sawyer! Where are you, bud?”

“But this is why I’m a control freak,” she continued, moving with purpose and fury. “When you watch your kids like a hawk, they don’t get lost bear hunting in the woods. Can I watch another one? I don’t know. I can barely handle the three I have.”

“You know I don’t agree,” David said softly, clearly keeping that calm demeanor that got him through brain surgery on a patient in the operating room. For some reason, that just riled Eve more.

He stopped, turned, and considered the options. “We need to figure out...” He turned again. “Wait. Did we go this way yet?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

Eve attempted to find a shred of composure as David guided her through the thick brush. They used a compass on David’s phone, called until their throats were raw, and eventually regrouped at the sheep pen, where they made their way back to the farm on the off-chance he was there.

No luck.

Noelle and Jace joined them, and instantly, her sister gave Eve a loving hug.

“It’s going to be okay,” she whispered.

Eve merely closed her eyes, too tense, miserable, and scared for platitudes.

At that moment, Sonny’s red truck pulled back up the gravel road toward them. He and Elizabeth climbed out...with no Sawyer.

Eve felt her heart drop once again.

Sonny and Aunt Elizabeth made their way to the others, worried looks on their faces as they shook their heads with defeat.

Bradley sobbed, stealing all of their attention.

“It’s my fault,” he wailed as Eve went to comfort him.

“It’s mine,” James said. “I promised you I’d watch him, Mom.”

“It’s Sawyer’s fault,” David said, taking control of the moment. “He isn’t a toddler, and he knows the rules. He broke them.”

Sonny huffed out a breath. “I don’t like this much time passing. Why don’t we go ahead and call in the fire department and get some local

searchers? They have experience with this kind of thing.”

This kind of thing? Eve let out a soft groan. A thing like *a lost child*.

“I’ll call.” As Sonny pulled out his phone, Lucky bounded over and Eve realized she hadn’t seen him for a long time. He shoved his nose in Sonny’s leg, his tail whipping from side to side as he let out a staccato bark, no doubt picking up the panic that had them all on edge.

Eve turned to David, desperate to do something. “I’m going to check the other part of the woods, up that hill—”

“Wait here one second, Eve.” Sonny lifted a finger, barely able to get a word in over Lucky’s incessant barking. Now the dog was jumping up on his two hind legs. “Lucky is trying to tell me something.”

She stifled a moan of frustration and gave David a pleading look, the need for help in “this type of thing” nearly rocking her. “We should...”

But now all eyes were on Lucky, who was demanding their attention.

“Does he know where Sawyer is?” Eve asked as the realization dawned on her.

“He might.” Sonny leaned over and looked in the dog’s eyes. “Take me, boy!”

Instantly, Lucky jettied forward, turning his head around to make sure Sonny was following.

They all were. As a pack, they ran into the woods, but when it got so thick they were stopped, Lucky kept going. Sonny did his best to keep up while Eve scooped up Bradley and clung to him while they watched and waited.

An old terror gripped her, the fear of the unknown, the moment that deputy walked in the cabin door and asked for...her parents’ next of kin.

She could never endure anything like that again. Never. And one of her kids?

Never, *ever*.

They waited as a group for what felt like forever, hearing the barking grow distant and Sonny’s sharp commands to the dog. David stood with one hand on James’s shoulder and an arm around Eve, who let tears fall.

Suddenly, they heard Sonny holler, “I see him!” and David launched into the woods, running through the foliage, branches, and trees to disappear out of sight.

Elizabeth and Noelle added their arms to Eve’s around the boys, no one speaking while they waited and waited and—

Lucky shot out first, a familiar red knit cap in his mouth, running straight to present it to Bradley like a gift.

Before Eve could respond, David shouted, “He’s fine! I have Sawyer! He’s fine!”

Eve nearly collapsed as she lowered Bradley to the ground, her head light and spinning from the fear. Swiping at a tear, she looked up to see David emerging from the trees, carrying Sawyer.

“Mommy! Mommy!” he called, squirming in David’s arms and reaching for her.

She ran to him, adrenaline dumping like a waterfall as she took him from David’s arms and squeezed so hard, he yelped.

“Why did you do that?” she demanded.

“I got lost, but...” He blinked back tears. “I was really brave and scared and I’m really sorry, I’ll never do that again and I was looking for a bear and...” His string of nonsense collapsed into a sob.

With a moan, she hugged him tight, burying her face in his hair, hurting with love and relief and more love.

“Lucky found me,” he managed to say as they eased him to the ground to check for bruises, scrapes, or any injuries. “Lucky is a hero!”

The dog came closer, rolling on the ground for a well-deserved belly rub while everyone talked and cheered and shared relieved looks.

As they walked back to the car, David reached for Eve, tugging her closer.

“I’m sorry we argued,” he whispered. “You’re right. Control is a good thing.”

She slowed her step and looked up at him. “A little control. But he learned a lesson he might never have learned if I’d breathed down his neck.”

David nodded, but emotion was etched on his face. “I was really scared,” he admitted.

“Me, too.”

As they hugged, Eve drew back and looked into his eyes.

“I don’t know about a baby, honey,” she whispered. “But I sure would like a dog.”

He laughed and kissed her lightly. “Yeah. Good call.”

Chapter Eighteen

Angie

THE FACT WAS, Angie and Brooke never really talked to each other after Craig left. When the family came home, they had to share the drama of Sawyer's latest escapade, and then Noelle and Eve cornered Angie for every detail about Craig.

Brooke stayed upstairs, came out to eat with everyone, then disappeared into the bathroom to get ready for the play.

Angie used a different shower and changed in their room, using a small mirror on the bed to put on some makeup while she waited for Brooke. They couldn't go to the play with this situation hanging over their heads.

And the whole time—every minute—Craig's apology played over and over in her mind. Was it sincere? Was there a chance for them? Could this marriage and family be saved?

"Hey." Brooke walked into the room in a black suede skirt, tights, and a red knit sweater, all purchased since she'd arrived in Asheville. Angie had called the shopping trips "early Christmas presents" but the fact was, Brooke had essentially run away from California with very little in her bag.

Brooke pressed her lips together and slipped her feet into some chunky black boots. "Mom."

"Daughter."

"What are we going to do?" Her voice cracked just enough to do the same thing to Angie's heart.

Angie closed her mascara tube and studied her daughter. “I don’t know, Brooke. I mean...he’s horrible—”

“Horrible,” Brooke repeated emphatically. “Please don’t say ‘but.’”

Angie cocked her head because there was no other word she could use. “But...” She dragged it out. “He’s trying.”

“Trying to make me run away for good,” Brooke shot back, sounding painfully like the smart aleck she’d been for the better part of the last few months.

“He’s trying to save this family.”

Brooke grunted and fell back on her bed. “I knew it! I knew all he had to do was snivel an apology and you’d fall for it.”

“Brooke, I’m not falling for anything. I have almost two decades invested in this man, and he is my husband. Marriage is serious. I made vows and—”

“So did he and he broke them.”

She inhaled and nodded. “Yes, he did.”

“And you’re ready to forgive him?” Brooke choked a laugh of disbelief.

“I’m not ready to wipe my hands of nearly twenty years of marriage and start over. I’m...I’m very scared to do that,” she admitted on a whisper.

Brooke sat up slowly, searching Angie’s face. “What are you afraid of?”

She thought about that for a moment, then nodded. “Of doing life alone,” she finally said.

“Mom, you have me.”

“And you’ll go to college in two years and have a life of your own, as hard as it is for you to believe that. But I’ll be alone. Poor, lonely Angel Chambers, divorced and sad.”

Brooke stared at her, fighting a smile.

“Is that funny to you?” Angie asked.

“No, it’s not funny, it’s...” She squished up her face. “Have you seen yourself in that mirror you’re holding?”

She lifted the mirror and glanced, then shrugged. “Just me.”

“Just a gorgeous forty-year-old woman.”

“Not forty until tomorrow.”

“Your skin glows, Mom. Your eyes are bright green like emeralds and when you smile, the whole room lights up.”

“Emeralds?” She had to laugh, but Brooke was serious.

“You have a banging body, a great personality, and you’re hilarious.”

“Brooke, stop, I—”

“He made you forget *all* of that.”

She blinked at her daughter as the truth smacked her in the face.

“I know,” Brooke continued, “because he stole all of my confidence, too. He made me feel like if I didn’t somehow worm my way in with the cool, rich kids and do their stupid society things, then I didn’t deserve to be his daughter. Forget grades or...accomplishments. He valued who *I could be friends with!* Me! His teenage daughter. He used me so he could meet Vance’s father. I mean, just let that sink in.”

Angie cringed at the thought. Yes, Craig had encouraged Brooke’s relationship with that boy, but was it because Vance’s father was a tech CEO? Was Craig that shallow? He’d use his daughter like that?

“I’m so sorry, honey.”

She shrugged. “It’s fine. I’m smart and I figured it out. I just...” She huffed out a breath. “I need you to do the same thing, Mom. I mean, if you want to stay married and live in California, I can’t do anything about that. But I love it here.”

Brooke walked to the window and leaned her head against the pane, staring out at the mountains that surrounded the property.

“Brooke,” Angie said softly, pushing off the bed. “When I was your age, both my parents were killed.”

She winced at that, but didn’t turn.

“That obviously affected all of us, and changed our lives forever in so many ways,” Angie continued, as her life and decisions really made sense to her. “But one of the things losing my parents did was make me terrified of letting go. Also of being alone.”

“You weren’t alone,” Brooke said. “You had two sisters and your aunt.”

“But I didn’t have my parents, the rock and foundation of my life. My whole world cracked, and sometimes I felt like I was falling through that crack into an abyss. I really don’t want you to feel that way if Dad and I get divorced.”

“And that’s what’s stopping you?”

“One of many things.”

Brooke sighed. “Okay. That’s fair. But you and Dad aren’t anything like what I’ve picked up about Jackie and Jim Chambers. You had a great childhood and I basically hate my father, am horrified by my friends, and would do anything to live in another life.” She held her hands out, gesturing to her surroundings. “This life, here in Asheville with trees and cookies and

church plays and real family. Real, true family.”

“They are real and true,” Angie agreed.

“Aunt Bitsy and Uncle Sonny? As real as can be. And Eve lives nearby—maybe closer, if she can convince Uncle David to move here. Yes, I pick up everything you guys say. And if you don’t think Aunt Noelle is headed down the aisle with the flannel-wearing vet and his cute-as-Christmas kid? Well, you haven’t seen a romance movie and I have. Those two are going to live right here on this mountain and I want to be here for it.”

Angie felt her jaw drop and her eyes grow wide. Chills blossomed up her arms and heat burned in her chest.

Brooke was right. Her little girl was wiser than most adults and seriously able to teach a thing or two.

“Do you mean that?” Angie asked on a whisper.

“What part? About how pretty you are? How much I love it here? Or Aunt Noelle?”

She laughed. “All of it.”

Brooke reached out, her dark eyes brimming with tears. “You’re beautiful, Mom, and somewhere out there is a man who is worthy of you. Maybe it will take until you’re Aunt Bitsy’s age, but you’ll find him. And, yes, I love it here. And Aunt Noelle? Please. Her New York days are numbered.”

The chills finally died down and Angie nodded slowly. “Okay, Brooke. You’re right.”

“I am?”

“You are.” Angie eased her away, suddenly feeling solid and ready and so, so strong. “Now, you go to the play without me.”

“What? No! What are you going to do?”

She smiled and reached for her purse. “I’m going to end my lousy marriage and start my new life. I’ll meet you at the church in time for the first scene.”

“Yes!” Brooke threw her arms around Angie and squeezed. Then she drew back and narrowed her eyes. “You better not chicken out!”

“I won’t.”

At least, she hoped she wouldn’t.



AFTER ANGIE TEXTED Craig from the lobby of the Marriott, she walked past a huge mirror and stopped to look at herself, examining what Craig would see when he came out of those elevator doors.

A sad, beaten, closed-off forty-year-old with a failed marriage?

No, that wasn't who she saw at all. Angel Chambers Messina was...what had Brooke said?

Your skin glows, your eyes are bright, and when you smile, the whole room lights up.

Wow, it had been a long time since she felt glowing, bright, or light. But since she'd gotten to Asheville, it was fair to say she'd been all those things. Even more so when Brooke arrived as a changed girl.

Right now, she felt electrified, helped by the fact that she was dressed up and had makeup on.

Just then, the elevator doors opened and Craig appeared, looking as arrogant ever.

"It's about time," he said, looking past her. "Where's Brooke?"

"You'll never change, will you?"

He opened his mouth to disagree, then closed it, huffing out a breath. "All right, let me start over. To what do I owe the honor of your visit, Ange?"

She glanced around and walked toward a small grouping of chairs where they could have some privacy.

"Craig, we're not going back to California," she said as she dropped to the edge of a chair. "Brooke and I are staying here permanently. I'm filing for divorce and full custody. I hope we can avoid a protracted legal battle."

He stared, then fell into the chair across from her. "You're going to make this difficult, aren't you."

"No, I'm going to make it easy. I want a divorce."

Disgust darkened his face. "Angie, please. This drama girl stuff has gone way too far. Look, I'm sorry for everything. I want to work it out. I want to go back to normal."

Angie crossed her arms and inched away from him. "I'm not going back to normal *or* California, and neither is Brooke."

"Yes, you are," he muttered, glancing from side to side as if someone

might overhear the conversation. “You and Brooke are my wife and daughter, and I work unimaginably hard to give you both the perfect life and unlimited credit cards and everything you want in the whole world. Don’t be ungrateful.”

“Everything I want?” Angie had to laugh. “How about being faithful, Craig? You couldn’t give me that.”

“Don’t make a scene.”

“Don’t make an issue,” she shot back. “I’m done and so is Brooke.”

“Angie!” He leaned closer, the first real look of fear in his eyes. “You made your point. I promise I’ll change. I swear, I am sorry for everything I did. It’s been a mid-life crisis, you know? I’m...I’m lost. That’s why the women. And the drinking. And the desperation to get up the ladder. This happens to men, Angie, and you promised to stay with me!”

Women, plural. Not a woman. She let her eyes close as the words just rolled over her, having no impact whatsoever.

Whoa. That was liberating.

Everything about this was liberating. She was free! With the thought, she rose to her feet, anxious to leave.

“So, see you in court?” she asked, just as sassy as she could be.

He looked up at her, his eyes filling. “Please don’t, Ange. Please.” He stood and blinked, a tear dribbling down his cheek. “I love you so much. And Brooke. I can’t live without you two. Please, don’t do this, Ange. I’ll do anything.”

“Anything? Call a lawyer.” She gave him a tight smile, tucked her purse on her shoulder and sauntered across the lobby.

Just as she reached the doors, a bellman jumped to attention, pulling the heavy glass door open for her and giving her a warm smile of admiration.

“Let me get that door for you, beautiful lady.”

She beamed right back. “Thank you, sir.”

He winked at her as she walked out into the cold air, shaking off her nerves, her fears, and a long, bad marriage.

Chapter Nineteen

Noelle

NOELLE DECIDED to borrow David's sedan and drive to Creekside Community Church early, in case they needed an extra pair of hands. As she pulled into the parking lot, her phone rang with a call from Lucinda Butler.

Everything in her screamed: *ignore, ignore, and ignore some more!* But a tiny voice managed to be louder with a reminder that Lucinda was her boss and the woman who held Noelle's future and income in her hands. Anyway, it was Christmas Eve. Surely she was simply calling with holiday greetings and hopes for a wonderful new year. *Right?*

On a sigh, Noelle tapped the screen and kept her voice light. "On Christmas Eve, Lucinda? You should be home by the tree, three egg-nogs into the holiday."

"I wish. Actually, I'm off to London."

"Oh?" She sat up straighter. "What's happening there?"

"Chaos, it seems, but that's not why I'm calling. Well, indirectly it is. What are the chances of you being back here for New Year's Eve?"

Zero to none, she thought, her heart already falling. "My aunt is getting married on New Year's Eve, Lucinda. I can't miss it."

The response was four heartbeats of dead silence. Then, "Your aunt? She has to be old."

What difference did that make? "It's her first marriage," Noelle said, purposely not sharing Elizabeth's age. "And she was like a mother to me."

Again, more silence. “Well, that’s a darn shame,” Lucinda said.

“Why?”

“Because Nigel Davidson up and quit yesterday—he went to Christie’s, that traitor—and it’s thrown the whole company into a tizzy.”

Nigel Davidson was the head of the London office and held the job that Noelle had dreamed about since she came on board with Sotheby’s. Did that mean his job was available? Not that she was in line for it, but still...

“For the moment, the only option is for me to step into his role,” Lucinda announced. “I leave tonight and don’t even want to think about what the airports will be like on Christmas Eve.”

“Okay.” Noelle drew the word out, not ready to think about what Lucinda in London meant for her long-term future. “But what does that have to do with New Year’s Eve?”

“Someone has to be at Colin Van Zant’s party!” she exclaimed, sounding as if Noelle was dense and dumb for not realizing that.

“Well, that someone can’t be me,” Noelle said. “My aunt is getting married and I’m not going to leave Asheville.”

Lucinda responded with a deep, frustrated sigh. “Do I have to spell it out for you, Noelle?”

“No, because I—”

“Your promotion to Senior Director is on the line. And if you don’t go to this party and make Colin feel like he is the very most important client that Sotheby’s ever had—because he is—then you can kiss it goodbye.”

Just then, a small girl in a pink jacket came running toward the car, her wild hair flying, a partially toothless smile on full display.

“Miss Noelle! Miss Noelle!”

She gazed out the window at the waif, and the tall, handsome man with a heart-stopping smile right behind her.

“I’m not able to go, Lucinda,” she said softly.

“Let me be perfectly clear, Noelle Chambers.” It sounded like she spoke through gritted teeth, but Noelle ignored every word.

Because Jace strolled toward her in black slacks, a white shirt, and a red tie under a wool dress coat and all she wanted to do was run to him and—

“I’ve got two other candidates, Noelle, and—”

“So send them.”

Lucinda sucked in a breath. “Then you can kiss that promotion goodbye.”

But the only thing she wanted to kiss was that gorgeous man five feet

away from her.

“Miss Noelle!”

And that little angel.

“Noelle, did you even hear me?”

“I did, Lucinda,” she said, snapping off her seatbelt. “And I’m very sorry you feel that way, but I’m late for a church play and I won’t be there on New Year’s Eve. Best of luck in London.”

“Noelle! You are gambling with your career! Why are you doing this? I’m about to hand you *everything you ever wanted*.”

But was she? Or was everything she ever wanted standing right in front of her?

“Miss Noelle! We have to get our costumes on!”

“And I have to go, Lucinda,” she said quickly. “Merry Christmas!”

With that, she smashed her finger onto the screen to end the call. She might have just ended her career, too, but honestly? She didn’t care. Right then, she didn’t care about anything but Jace and Cassie and the Nativity play at Creekside Community Church.

An hour later, Noelle finished dabbing some silver sparkly eyeshadow on Cassie’s eyelids, leaning back to look at the dear little face with a dusting of makeup. Without really talking about it, Noelle had assumed the role as Cassie’s “mom” to help her get ready for the play. They’d thoroughly enjoyed the last hour with the other girls and mothers in the upstairs classroom designated for the girls’ dressing room.

“You were born to glitter, angel girl,” she teased, tapping Cassie on the nose.

“I’m a glittery angel!” She twirled once and fluttered her wings. “And I can sing! ‘O Holy Night! The stars are—’”

“Attention, cast!” Darlene Strasserman clapped her hands. “I need everyone gathered in the hall out here. We’re going to pray and then all players in the first scene should follow me.”

“That’s not me,” Cassie said. “I come in later.”

“But let’s go pray with the director.” Noelle gathered up the makeup she’d brought and dropped it into her bag, grabbing the phone she’d tossed after Lucinda called. “Let’s get a picture for your dad.”

“A selfie, with both of us.” She pulled Noelle down to her height and they smiled into the camera, both of them beaming with Christmas joy.

“You are going to be wonderful!” Noelle told her.

“I have a singing solo *and* the biggest speaking part,” Cassie asserted, her eyes glinting with excitement. “I can’t wait to fly on the stage and sing, sing, sing!”

“Well, now you’re going to pray, pray, pray! Go join the crew. I’ll put your clothes in a neat pile so you can change after the play.”

As Cassie hustled out to join the others, Noelle heard voices coming from the bathroom in the back of the classroom, where the door was ajar. Was that...Beth? And Sarah?

She took a few steps closer, hearing the sniffing and sobs of one very sad little girl.

“Everything okay in there?” Noelle asked gently.

Beth inched the door open and beckoned her into the tiny room where Sarah was slumped on the closed lid of a toilet. Still dressed in street clothes, her sheep outfit on her lap, the little girl’s sweet face was streaked with tears.

“Oh, dear. We have an unhappy sheep.” Noelle placed a hand on Beth’s back. “Can I do anything to help?”

Beth looked at Noelle with a sigh of defeat and shook her head. “Sarah won’t do the play. I knew this would happen. I’m trying to tell her that Sheep Number Two is an important and wonderful part of the Nativity, but...you know. This might not be the best night to teach her any lessons.”

Noelle crouched down, leveling herself to face little Sarah, who shuddered and shook her auburn curls, blinking red-rimmed eyes.

“Hey, Sarah. What’s going on, sweetie?”

Sarah sniffled and pushed some hair away from her face. “I...I don’t want to be a sheep.”

“I hear you,” Noelle said, sharing a humorous look with Beth.

“I wanted to be the angel,” Sarah said in a quivering voice. “Director Darlene said I’m too quiet and nobody will hear me. But I know all the lines, and I told her I could do it. But she wouldn’t let me, because Cassie is louder and not shy.”

Noelle stroked her tiny hand. “The sheep is important, too.”

“The sheep is ugly, and I just wanted to be pretty...like Cassie.”

“But you’re beautiful!” Noelle exclaimed.

“Not like an...an...angel,” she stammered.

On a sigh, she slowly stood and looked at Beth. “Can you give me a second?” she asked. “I might have an idea.”

Beth searched her face, curious but also like she knew what that idea

might be.

“I know it’s not the lesson you wanted to teach her,” she whispered. “But...”

Beth nodded. “Maybe what she needs to learn is that Christmas is for miracles, so...” She lifted a shoulder. “Knock yourself out, Noelle.”

With a squeeze of the other woman’s hands, Noelle rushed toward the group as they finished the prayer, reaching for Cassie.

“Can I talk to you a second?” She tugged her toward the stairwell, bringing her down one floor for privacy. “And you can say no,” she added quickly.

“You can marry my daddy, Miss Noelle,” she said, making Noelle jerk back with a gasp. “I wouldn’t say no.”

“I...we...Cassie.” She shook her head and sat down on the stairs, eye to eye with an angel. “Thank you for that vote of confidence,” she said, gathering her wits. “But I have a very serious question for you.”

“I’m serious.”

Noelle shook her head, making a mental note to get that dream out of Cassie’s head so she didn’t get hurt. But now, there was another little girl hurting who they could help.

“I want to ask you to consider giving someone a Christmas gift.”

“Overalls for one of your sisters?”

Chuckling, she eased the girl closer. “What would you say to being, um, Sheep Number Two?”

Cassie blinked like Noelle had asked her to go grab the moon.

“Now hear me out,” she said. “You can sing your solo, I promise, but... Sarah would be in the harness and she’d say your lines.”

“She would? She’d say, ‘Hark! Do not be afraid! I bring you good news. For tonight—’”

“Baby girl,” Noelle whispered, taking her hands. “I know your lines are amazing. Some of the most important words ever written. But what you are announcing is the birth of baby Jesus.”

She nodded, eyes wider with each passing second.

“Well, Jesus teaches us that the real joy of Christmas is giving a gift, not getting one. And the best gift is the one that someone wants every bit as much as you do. One that will make someone else very, very happy. One that is...given freely.”

“I know, but...” She blinked again, working hard to swallow. “I’d have to

be a sheep.”

Noelle dipped her head and gave her a playful look. “You love sheep.” She snorted. “But I wanted to be an angel.”

“All right. I understand.” She started to stand. “I’ll just go—”

She grabbed Noelle’s hand. “Is Sarah crying?” she asked.

Noelle nodded and watched the storm of emotions that clouded her blue eyes.

“And I could still sing?” she asked on a breathy whisper.

“Like no one has ever sung. No sheep, anyway.”

That made her laugh, but her eyes were misty.

“Cassie, you don’t have to do this, but I think if you do, that you would not only give Sarah a gift, but you’d be giving one to baby Jesus. And it’s his birthday we’re here to celebrate.”

She inhaled and blew the air out with Oscar-worthy drama. “Then that’s what I’ll do.”

“Cassie!” Darlene called from the top of the stairs. “Fifteen minutes until you line up.”

“Do you want me to tell Director Darlene?” Noelle asked.

“I can tell her,” she said. “She won’t mind. And I’ll tell Sarah.” She grinned. “She’s gonna be so happy, Noelle.”

“Yes, she is.” Noelle couldn’t help but reach out and hug the sweet child. “Go break a leg, Sheep Number Two!”

Giggling, she took off up the stairs, and Noelle sat for just a moment, letting the emotion roll through her—love, admiration, and no small amount of pride. As she stood, Jace came around the corner.

“Oh! I didn’t know you were there.”

“I’ve been there for a few minutes,” he said, taking one step closer to her. “Long enough to hear you teach my daughter an amazing lesson.”

“I’m sorry she’s not going to be the—”

He closed the space between them and pulled her closer, gently kissing her. She let the sensation rock her, then eased back.

“In church?” she asked with a light laugh.

But he wasn’t smiling. He looked so serious, with that same storm of emotions she’d seen in his daughter’s eyes. Like he was struggling with a decision—knowing what was right and what had to be done.

“Are you unhappy she’s not going to be an angel?” Noelle asked.

“I’m unhappy...that you’re leaving Asheville and I went and fell in love

with you *again*.”

“Oh...oh, Jace.”

The lights flickered a few times and all they could do was stare at each other.

“Curtain call,” she said.

He just smiled, wrapped an arm around her and led her inside to watch the play.



THE PAINTINGS she'd created blurred in her vision. The voices of the children on the stage were drowned out by the thrumming of her pulse. And the feel of Jace's arm pressed against hers in the packed pew made her so warm she thought she might faint in church.

How had this happened?

How did she find herself falling for a man who lived in North Carolina on the day her boss was dangling a promotion that she had wanted for a long time? A promotion that, in a year or so, would lead her to London?

How was she supposed to give up either one?

“Here we go,” Jace leaned over to whisper, giving her goosebumps. “The sheep are on their way in.”

She shot him a grateful look, catching a glance of both her sisters in the pew that could say “Chambers and Company” on the side.

Eve pressed her hands together in a prayer. Angie winked, wearing the sassiest smile Noelle had seen in some time.

Right before the play started, she'd spread the word to her family that there had been a change in casting. No one seemed to care, but why would they? They weren't here for the star, they were here to support Jace and their church. And she was...still hearing the words he'd said in the stairwell.

I went and fell in love with you again.

What was she going to do?

The congregation laughed at the first sight of the three sheep, led by Cassie in the middle. She wiggled and giggled and stopped to make quite a show of being a sheep. She bobbed and weaved and even pretended to take some hay from the manger.

Jace and Cassie slipped their hands together, beaming proudly at the cutest sheep who ever lived.

“Hark!”

And suddenly, all eyes were above the stage as tiny Sarah belted out the single word at the top of her lungs, high-pitched as she tried to have volume, and so incredibly beautiful in Cassie’s angel costume that Noelle just blinked back tears.

“Do not be afraid!” she squeaked with her tiny but determined lungs. “I bring you good news that...that...” Her eyes grew wide as she looked down to the stage. “That...”

“That will cause great joy...” Cassie whispered, just loud enough to make the first three rows muffle laughter.

“That will cause great joy for all the people!” Sarah finished, her face bright again. She picked up her head and continued reciting the lines, not exactly projecting, but everyone got the idea.

When she finished and Mary and Joseph placed the babe in the manger, the pianist hit the first few notes of “O Holy Night.”

Without missing a beat, Sheep Number Two walked solemnly to center stage next to the manger and stood as straight as an opera singer about to perform an aria.

““O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining! It is the night of our dear Savior’s birth...””

Cassie’s angelic voice rose to the rafters and touched every heart, the words crystal clear as the night sky over Bethlehem. She left the room breathless on her big finish, her fleece-covered arms lifted with the last note.

Instantly, a burst of applause thundered and everyone—every single person—stood for her ovation.

Cassie’s face lit like the stars Noelle had painted as she looked through the crowd and found them. She gave her toothless grin and a little wave before she worked her way back with the other sheep.

As they sat down, Jace clung to Noelle’s hand and looked at her.

“I mean it,” he whispered. “I love you.”

She just closed her eyes and let one more tear fall.

Chapter Twenty

Eve

AS THEY HAD for every year that they were together on their birthday, the triplets born on Christmas rose at sunrise that day to meet for coffee and hugs, a private exchange of gifts, and a promise that this year would be better than any other.

On one hand, this Birthmas was no different. By silent agreement, Eve, Angie, and Noelle slipped out of bed at dawn while the rest of the house slept, many dreaming of the wonderful day ahead.

Huddled in the sunroom, grateful for the perfect snowfall outside the window, they each opened two presents, gushing with appreciation for small but personal gifts. As they folded the tissue paper and thanked each other, the conversation naturally turned to the big 4-0 birthday they faced.

“It’s weird to be out of my thirties and know I’m looking at the next decade without Craig,” Angie said. “Weird and oddly wonderful.”

“You’re doing the right thing,” Noelle assured her. “And living here?”

Angie laughed. “I still can’t believe that’s what Brooke wants to do. I keep thinking I’m going to wake up to her wide-eyed regret while she begs me to go back to California. Do you think she’ll like it here in Asheville?”

“She’ll love it,” Eve said. “Before the play last night, I talked to quite a few of the other mothers and the word is that the schools are excellent. My biggest concern is that Craig is going to fight you on living here.”

“He might,” Angie conceded. “And I’ll fight back. But honestly? I think

he'll be just fine living unencumbered in his world. He texted me that he's already flying back, and he seems resigned to this new normal. Totally forgot to say Merry Christmas *or* Happy Birthday."

"Oh, Ange," Noelle sighed.

"It's okay. When I got up, my daughter rolled over, reached out for a hug, and said both. I win, he loses."

"And you'll be less than three hours from me," Eve said, reaching her hand to Angie. "Expect to see a lot of Gallaghers in this house, and I want you to come to Charlotte all the time."

"Done and done." Angie lifted her coffee mug in a mock toast, and both of them turned to Noelle, who was running her fingers over the coffee table book of Biltmore House art she'd just received. "And what about you, Noelle?"

Noelle took a deep breath. "Jace said the L word."

They both gasped, but she held up her hand. "And my boss threatened to yank my promotion if I didn't go to New York for a party on New Year's Eve."

This time, their gasps were even louder.

"Don't worry, I won't. And I told her that, but, oh, you guys. I don't know what to do."

"What does your heart say?" Eve asked gently.

"And your head?" Angie added.

"My heart says I should wake up next Christmas morning wearing Jace's flannel shirt and...a smile. Well, maybe that's not my heart. Maybe that's... my forty-year-old body that feels like a teenager when he's around. But my head?"

Angie groaned. "Your head wants what you've worked for your entire life."

Noelle looked down at the book, her whole body still. "My head is very confused," she confessed. "I feel like I'm falling in love with him, and you can't imagine how I feel about Cassie."

"Yes, we can," Eve countered. "We have kids."

She smiled. "I adore that child. And I have a crush on Jace the size of that mountain range. But is it enough for me?"

Eve tipped her head, not sure she understood the question. "Is what enough? The love of a great man? The daughter you never imagined you'd have? Living near family, grounded and centered, instead of in a high-rise

surrounded by strangers and sleeping by yourself? Noelle, are you seriously asking that question?"

"I'm not you, Eve," she replied. "All that stuff sounds lovely, but I'm unsure it would be enough for me. It's all such a huge change that a month ago seemed out of the question."

"So did leaving Craig," Angie volleyed.

"Or having a fourth child."

The other two whipped around to look hard at Eve.

"Did you decide to go for it?" Angie asked.

When she didn't answer, Noelle leaned closer. "What does your heart, head, and body say?"

"My heart says yes, my head says I'm gonna regret it. And my body refuses to speak to me on the grounds that it is forty and already had three kids."

They laughed at that, and were still chucking when Aunt Elizabeth came in to join them. "Well, there's the sound I love on Birthmas morning."

"Good morning, soon-to-be Mrs. McPherson," Noelle said, standing to give her a hug.

"What are you birthday girls talking about?" she asked.

"Change," Angie said. "And how much has happened to us since we got here."

"Some change we want," Eve said.

"And some we're terrified of," Angie added.

"And some feels like the mighty have fallen into a goat pen," Noelle whispered. "And might like it there."

Laughing at that, Elizabeth sat down and looked from one niece to the next, and all of them waited, just knowing this wise and loving woman was about to give them sage advice.

"What should we do?" Noelle asked after a beat of time.

"Listen to our hearts or our heads?" Eve pressed, wishing her aunt had the answer.

"What would our mother tell us to do?" Angie leaned in, looking like she ached for the answer.

"It's not your mother I'd ask," Elizabeth said. "It's your Father." At their confused looks, she added, "The one in heaven. My advice is to pray."

They blinked and let out soft laughs at the answer they were starting to expect from her.

“I’m serious,” she said. “Ask the Lord for clarity and guidance. Don’t make the decision yourself, don’t ‘lean on your own understanding,’ as the Bible says. Lean on Him, and He’ll make the path so clear, you have no other way to go. You’ll laugh at how obvious the answer is, and then rejoice, because He will bless every step you take.”

Well, that wasn’t exactly the advice Eve was hoping to get, but they all listened, nodded, and hugged over it. A minute later, they heard the excited footsteps of three boys on Christmas morning.

“Santa was here!” Sawyer exclaimed. “He found us!”

Laughing at that, they got up to start the festivities and gift giving, but Eve hesitated for one minute, holding back.

Pray? She couldn’t remember the last time she did that, but before joining them, she closed her eyes.

Baby or not, God. Make the path clear.



THEIR MOTHER WOULD BE HAPPY, Eve thought as the last gift was opened and the cabin echoed with the joyous sounds of extended family. Sonny had come over early with Lucky, who currently lounged in front of the fire, chewing a brand-new bone that Sawyer had bought him with his own money. Caroline, Nate, and Joshua weren’t far behind, bearing more gifts, cookies, and good cheer.

Hannah joined them, too, and even her boyfriend, Keith, made a rare appearance.

And finally, Jace and Cassie came in, laden with gifts, both of them still glowing from the night before. Cassie wasn’t there five minutes when she climbed up on Noelle’s lap to relive the highlights of her big night.

As Noelle stroked the little girl’s hair and looked over her head to meet Jace’s warm gaze, Eve’s heart clutched. She so hoped her sister followed her heart and not her head.

“Those two are in it for the long haul,” David whispered, tightening his arm around her as they cuddled on the sofa as the boys took off with Joshua to ride some snow coasters that Sonny had given them.

“You think? I hope so, but that promotion is a huge deal.”

David looked skeptical, then turned his attention to Eve. “Best gift of the day?” he asked.

“Oh, the antique bear that I gave Sawyer.” She chuckled as she remembered his reaction to the stuffed bear she’d found in the attic the first day they got here. “I knew he’d love that, and he seemed to really respect that it belonged to one of his ancestors. I love how gentle he was with it.”

“I noticed that,” David replied. “Did you like the drawer organizer I gave you?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “I know Angie mocked you mercilessly, but you know how I’m itching to insert those magical things in every drawer in the house.”

“Well, there’s a kitchen cabinet version where that came from.” He winked. “And if you’re a very good girl, you might get that, too.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Honestly, I’m surprised you didn’t add that on.”

“I had a good reason,” he said.

“What’s that?”

For a long moment, he looked at her, his expression expectant. “Because there’s more to your gift. It’s upstairs. Want it now?”

She pushed forward. “Yes! You’re holding back kitchen drawer organizers?”

“I was just waiting for the right moment.”

“Hey, everyone,” Elizabeth called out. “Sonny and I have to run over to the farm for a minute, so don’t have fun without us!”

At the shouted jokes and responses, Eve turned to David. “This is the right moment.”

“Let’s go.” Holding her hand, he stood and led her toward the stairs.

On the way up, Eve glanced at her husband, her heart aching with love. She knew what he wanted for Christmas—but she hadn’t given it to him. All she had to say was, “Yes,” and they’d be well on their way to planning for their fourth child.

But was the path clear? Was the answer obvious? Was this decision blessed?

As they reached their room, he paused at the door, looking down at her.

“I want you to know this gift comes with no strings attached,” David said.

She blinked at him, uncertain what that meant. “Your gifts never come with strings, David.”

“But I don’t want you for one minute to make any big decisions because I got you this.”

“You mean like cleaning out the junk drawer or moving the silverware around? A woman can go wild when she’s given kitchen drawer organizers.”

He didn’t smile. Instead, he looked at her so intently, her knees weakened.

“What is it?” she asked, surprisingly breathless.

“I just love you, Evie,” he said. “You’re the best mother, the most wonderful wife, and the rock-solid partner that any man would envy.”

“Aww. You’re so sweet. All that, *and* kitchen drawer organizers?”

He still didn’t laugh. “And you deserve everything,” he added. “Everything I can give you. But even more than that, you make me realize what I deserve. And that’s why I want to...” He let out a breath. “Come on in and I’ll show you.”

Unsure of where this was going, she followed him into the bedroom, surprised when he walked to her laptop on the dresser.

“I didn’t actually buy anything yet,” he said. “Because I figured you’d want to pick exactly what you want.”

“Okay. I appreciate that, since I happen to know there are a billion different kitchen organizing systems and I have had my eye on one.”

He took the laptop and patted the bed for her to join him, but before he opened it, he gave her one more intense look—long enough that she had to laugh.

“What?” she asked. “It’s just a kitchen organizing system, right?”

“Well, it’s more complicated than that. For one thing, you have to measure the drawers and...” He slowly lifted the lid of the laptop and tapped a key to bring it to life. “And I don’t know which kitchen you’ll like best in our new house in Hendersonville.”

She sucked in a soft breath, her eyes not quite processing the picture of the Cape Cod-style house she’d favorited on Zillow, because her pulse kicked so high she wasn’t sure she’d heard right.

“What?”

“Evie.” He turned the screen to face her. “You can pick the house.”

She stared at him, ignoring the screen. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I met with Terrance Robinson three days ago when you thought I was shopping for you.”

“You...did?”

He nodded. "I spent the afternoon at his practice, which is one heck of an operation. And then I drove all through Hendersonville, which is really nice. And then I looked at a few of these houses—"

"David!"

"I didn't make any decisions, Evie, I promise. Not on the job or the house. But I really...thought about it." His eyes grew misty. "And I had a long, long talk with Sonny."

"You did?"

"You want to know what he encouraged me to do?"

"Pray," she answered. It wasn't a question, because she had no doubt that Sonny and Bitsy doled out the same advice to their loved ones.

"Yes. And I did. And about fifteen minutes later, Terrance Robinson called me. He really wants me to take over this practice, Eve, and I..."

He blew out a breath and she held hers. Was this what he wanted? To give up his specialty and all the prestige and money that came with it?

"I don't want to spend any more weekends away from you and the boys," he finally said. "I don't want fifteen-hour days or surgeries at dawn. I don't want to miss any more of our life and I didn't even realize it until I came here."

She pressed her hand to her lips to hold back all the words that wanted to tumble out, wanting him to say everything.

"This place *is* magic," he added on a laugh. "I can't remember being this happy or spending such quality time with the boys or you. This is what life is all about, Eve, or at least I want it to be. And I'm not giving up neurosurgery. Terrance told me there's a practice in Hendersonville and I could consult for them on some of the trickier cases. Apparently, I have a great reputation."

She smiled. "I could have told you that."

"But like I said," he added. "No strings attached. This isn't about having another baby, Eve. This is about taking real care of the family I have."

"Oh, David!" She threw her arms around him and squeezed hard, her whole body vibrating with happiness and certainty. "This is the best Christmas ever. I am so happy, so grateful, and so in love with you."

He drew back and tipped his head toward the laptop. "Let's look at houses, then. I really like this one."

"I'll take any of them..." She smiled at him. "But let's be sure we have an extra room for the new baby."

"Really?"

“Oh, yes,” she assured him. “I’ve never been more positive.”

He moved the computer and wrapped his arms around her, holding her close and tight. And as she dropped her head on his shoulder, she knew Aunt Elizabeth was right. The path was completely clear, and the decision was blessed.

Chapter Twenty-one

Angie

ANGIE AND NOELLE were in the kitchen together, cleaning up from the buffet brunch and chatting about how happy the kids were with their gifts, when Eve finally came back downstairs.

“Somebody looks happy,” Noelle sang as Eve joined them.

“Someone *is* happy,” she said, underscoring that with a huge grin. “I just got my Birthmas present.”

Angie and Noelle exchanged a look. “You sure you want to share this?” Noelle asked.

“Yeah, you guys were up there a long time,” Angie added.

“We were picking a new house...in Hendersonville.”

Angie let out a soft scream, slapping her hand on her mouth to contain what felt like uncontainable joy.

“Here? You’re moving here?” Noelle didn’t sound quite as happy—maybe more stunned and envious.

Eve nodded and put her finger to her lips. “We haven’t told the boys yet. David has to officially leave the group and accept the new offer, then we buy a house, but yes!” She clapped her hands and twirled. “It’s true.”

“And Baby Number Four?” Angie asked on a whisper.

Eve angled her head and pointed toward the sky. “I’ll let a Greater Power decide that one.”

“Oh!” Angie grabbed her and hugged. “If I can make this happen, we’ll

be so close to each other!”

“And I’ll be…” Noelle sighed. “Somewhere.”

A loud, distinctive horn honked from the driveway and even from inside, they could hear the boys hoot and holler in response.

“Is that Sonny’s truck?” Eve asked as they all headed toward the front door.

They joined the others on the front porch, who were all cheering, pointing, and taking pictures of Sonny’s precious red truck, currently laden with more Christmas presents in the back.

“I wondered why he didn’t give anyone anything,” Noelle admitted.

“This is what my dad does,” Hannah told them. “He waits until all the gifts are given and the whole Christmas unwrapping is over, then he showers us with Round Two. He started it when Caro and I were little, and he never forgets.”

“Ho ho ho!” Sonny called as he climbed out of the truck and jogged around to the other side to open the door for Elizabeth. “We come with more gifts!”

The boys gathered round as each got a gift, and Cassie and Joshua got theirs. A box for Noelle, a bag for Eve, and more for Caro, Hannah, Nate, and Jace. Everyone laughed and opened their gifts, which were small but personal.

As they were all handed out, Brooke came over to stand next to Angie.

“Uh, I guess we weren’t good this year,” Brooke whispered as all around them, gifts were being opened.

Angie gave a laugh. “We’ve had plenty of gifts, honey.”

“Oh, I know. I’m just saying, it’s weird.”

It was, until Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Sonny gathered everyone closer into a chilly circle on the snowy porch.

“Two more gifts,” Elizabeth said.

Brooke and Angie shared a look and a smile.

“So we *were* good enough to get a gift,” Angie teased.

“You were so good,” Elizabeth informed them, reaching into her pocket to pull out two small packages, wrapped in simple white tissue, unadorned with bows. “The wrapping is a nod to my sister.”

“Oh, boy,” Noelle said. “The more humble the wrapping, the better the gift.”

“It’s true,” Angie told Brooke as they each took the slim packages that

barely weighed an ounce. “My mother would put a pair of socks in a package wrapped for royalty and a piece of expensive jewelry in a brown paper bag.”

“So this”—Brooke held hers up—“must be good.”

“Angie first,” Elizabeth said.

Taking a deep breath, she flipped open the tissue, finding...a key. “To your heart?” she guessed.

“To the cabin, where you may live whenever you want for as long as you want.”

“Oh!” Angie cried out. “Thank you!”

“That’s so cool!” Brooke jumped. “I love this place!”

“Of course, it belongs to all three of you,” Elizabeth said. “But I’ll make Angie the official keeper of the family cabin!”

Angie turned to her sisters, who both had tears in their eyes. They hugged and squeezed and celebrated, knowing how important this was.

“And now Brooke,” Sonny said, coming closer. “You’re going to need this if you live here.”

“This?” She held up her small package and unwrapped it to find...another key. “You have another house around here?” she asked with a laugh.

“Don’t you recognize that key?” Sonny asked.

Brooke stared at it, then inhaled noisily, looking up with tears in her eyes. “Uncle Sonny! You can’t—”

“I can and I have.” He turned to the truck. “You drive her with love, and I know you’ll take care of her. I’ll help you, of course. But I couldn’t think of a better person to take this old girl over.”

“The truck?” Angie asked with disbelief.

“It’s not worth a lot,” Sonny said. “But she—”

He couldn’t finish as Brooke threw her arms around him and screamed, “Thank you!” at the top of her lungs.

“Let’s take everyone for a ride!” Sonny said. “The roads are clear, and you should christen her on Christmas Day!”

The boys cheered and piled into the back with Lucky and all the others, but Angie hung back while Brooke ran into the house to get her purse and learner’s permit. When she came back out, she took a second to put her arm around Angie.

“I love this family, Mom,” she whispered. “You know that’s the real magic of this house.”

“Yes, I do,” she said.

“Come on.” Brooke gave her a tug. “Let’s christen my new old truck that’s going to stay parked in front of our new old cabin!”

“Honey.” Angie bit her lip, squeezing the key she still held. “Would you mind if I stayed here?”

“Sure, but why?”

She swiped a tear. “I just want to be alone in...our house. I want to say a prayer of gratitude and maybe whisper hello to my mom and dad. I know they’re here.”

“Oh, Mom!” Brooke’s tears were flowing now, too. “Of course. I love that. We won’t be long.”

She gave Angie a huge kiss on the cheek then darted into the driveway, holding her key high with a giddy laugh of delight.

Angie stood on the porch, waving and blowing kisses as Brooke drove off, not moving until she couldn’t hear their voices or the rumble of the engine as they turned onto Creekside Road.

With a sigh of deep contentment, she turned and took a few steps back and looked up at the cabin. All the unhappy memories were gone. All the sadness, all the grief.

The only thing left was a sense of family and home. The smoke curled out of the chimney, the Christmas lights twinkled on the gabled roof, and the afternoon sun lit the entire place with a promise of bright days ahead.

In that moment, everything was perfect. Yes, she had challenges ahead and life wouldn’t be all sunshine and Christmas lights, but she had family, and Brooke was right—that was the real magic of the house.

Just as she opened the door to walk in, she heard an engine growing louder, as if approaching the house. *That was fast*, she thought, turning to peer down the driveway for the red truck. Maybe Brooke had a...

She frowned at the navy-blue SUV, not recognizing it as any she’d seen in this driveway before. A neighbor, no doubt, or a friend of Elizabeth’s. Slipping inside, she grunted in disappointment.

She really had longed for this rare moment all alone in the house—*her* house—to wrap herself in the bone-deep joy of today. Now she had to make small talk and exchange cookies.

Leaving the door open enough to see who it was, she watched as the vehicle came to a stop. Squinting into the sunlight on the windshield, she saw it looked like a man, alone.

Oh, no! That couldn’t be Craig again—

No. No, that wasn't Craig, she thought as the driver stepped out and looked at the house. She inched the door open a tiny bit more, which let a sudden cold breeze flutter over her while she stared at the man.

No, that certainly wasn't Craig. This man was much taller, wearing an expensive wool coat open to reveal a suit and tie underneath. Whoever he was, he was formal. He stood for a long time looking at the house, giving her a chance to see he had thick dark hair cut very short, and strong features, with a solid build, and a serious expression.

Then, he pulled out a phone and started taking pictures.

"Can I help you?" she called, whipping open the door as she realized it had to be someone who'd seen the address from when the cabin was a vacation rental.

"Yes, hello. I'm looking for, uh, Angel Messina?"

She hugged herself against that cold wind and walked down the steps. "I'm Angie," she said. "How can I help you?"

He nodded and came closer, pocketing the phone. "Max Lynch." He held out a gloved hand to her. "Attorney at law."

"Attorney..." She let out a scoffing laugh, stepping away from the offered hand as rage ricocheted through her. *Really, Craig?* Was he serious? "Already? He sent a lawyer already? The man is in a league of his own for bad form and lousy timing. If you're serving me divorce papers on Christmas Day *and* my birthday, mind you, well then, please just—"

"No divorce papers, Mrs. Messina," he said, reaching into the inside breast pocket of his coat. "Just this to, uh, put you on notice."

Her heart kicked so hard she felt it hit her rib. "On notice...of what?"

He handed her a folded paper. "I represent Garrett Delacorte on behalf of the entire Delacorte family."

The Delacorte family? Her brain, a little slow from a day of pure relaxation, whirred into action. "Isn't Garrett Delacorte...a grandson of Claudia Winchester?" The now famous baby saved by Angie's great-grandmother? Why would her grandson send a lawyer?

He stared at her, his dark eyes penetrating and...a little sad.

"Am I right?" she asked when he didn't answer. "Is this about the Biltmore House or..."

"It's about this house," he said.

Her breath caught in her throat, she opened the folded paper, the legalese blurring under her eyes.

“That’s the title to this property and you can see it is in the name of the Winchester family, and the Delacortes, who are their descendants...and the rightful owners of this house.”

“*What?*”

“That’s the title, Mrs. Messina. And in the state of North Carolina, it proves ownership unless a deed is produced with a different name and date.”

Her jaw loosened. “We have a deed.”

“If you do, and it holds up, then the Delacorte family doesn’t have a claim. But if you don’t have a physical deed—and I should tell you that there is none on file in the state, because I have searched—then they would like their property back.”

She felt her whole body recoil at the news. “It’s our property! It’s been in my family for a hundred years. It was a gift from Louise and Keegan Winchester to thank my grandmother for saving Claudia’s life! They can’t take it back.”

“Actually, they can and, I’m sorry to say, they intend to.”

“After a hundred years?”

“Truth be told, they didn’t know they owned it until recently. Someone from the Biltmore House contacted them to inform them of an exhibit that was being done and mentioned that you were living on property gifted by their family. Garrett, my client, started digging through ancient paperwork, found this, did some research and...he wants the place.”

“Well, he cannot have it!” she exclaimed.

“Unfortunately, he can. So I’m here to inform you that you, and any other residents, have until January first to vacate or produce the deed. Without a deed, Garrett Delacorte will use legal means to remove you and your belongings from his home.”

She choked a laugh as fury, frustration, and a fountain of fear bubbled up in her. “You have got to be kidding. That can’t be legal or possible.”

He shook his head. “It’s legal, unless you have a deed. And possible? Well, Mr. Delacorte is a man of means and power so he’s not daunted by logistics.”

“Logistic?” she scoffed. “This is my *life!*”

“Again, I’m sorry. You can keep that title, it’s a copy. Good luck.”

With that, he nodded, then walked back to the driver’s side, stopping to pull his phone out again. “Could I take one more—”

“Get out!” she yelled, pointing at the driveway and hating the crack in her

voice. “Get off our property and don’t come back. We’ll find the deed!”

Wordlessly, he slipped into the SUV, started it up, and backed out, turning so that all she could see were his taillights as they disappeared.

Then she sat down on the first stair, closed her eyes, and squeezed back tears.

“Mom,” she whispered to the air. “Dad.” She dropped her head back and looked at the sky. “We need your help.”

Two bright red cardinals fluttered overhead, swooping down side by side, then soaring back to the top of the roof.

It was all she needed to see. They would not lose this cabin, this fight, or the dreams they built as a family. She had no idea how, but they would win. They *had* to.



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Hope Holloway is the author of charming, heartwarming women's fiction featuring unforgettable families and friends, and the emotional challenges they conquer. After more than twenty years in marketing, she launched a new career as an author of beach reads and feel-good fiction. A mother of two adult children, Hope and her husband of thirty years live in Florida. She spends her non-writing time walking the beach with her two rescue dogs, who beg her to include animals in every book.

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