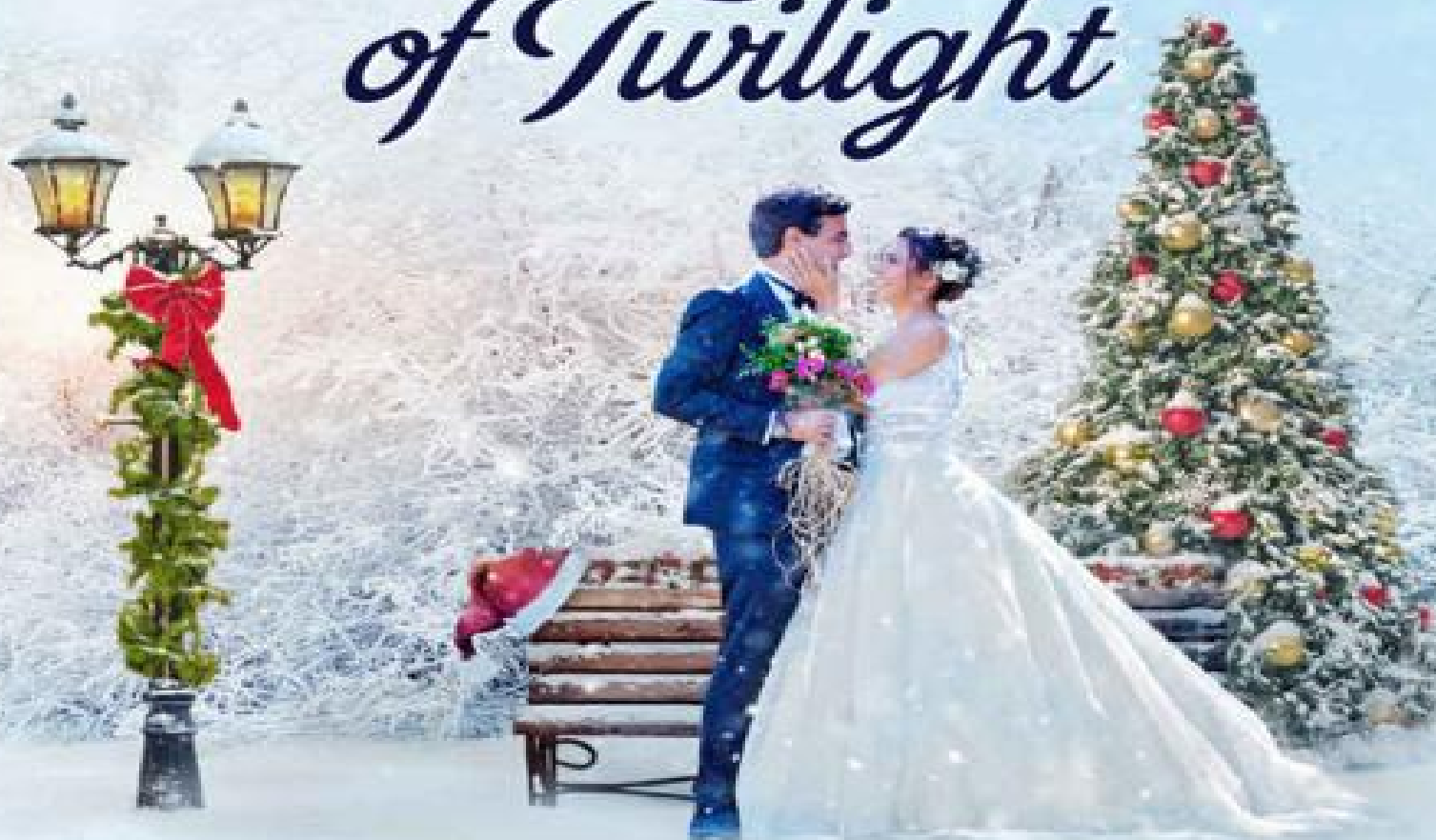


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LORI WILDE

The Christmas Brides of Twilight



A TWILIGHT, TEXAS NOVEL

*The
Christmas Brides
of Twilight*

A TWILIGHT, TEXAS NOVEL

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An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

To Michelle, thank you for your friendship and your love of Chuck. We knew we needed you until you appeared. Keep shining your sweet li

Dedication

To Michelle, thank you for your friendship and your love of Chuck. We never knew we needed you until you appeared. Keep shining your sweet light!

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About the Author

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Chapter 1

WELCOME TO TWILIGHT, TEXAS.

The freshly painted billboard glimmered glossy in the sunlight beaming over Lake Twilight as the town car Noelle Curry hired at DFW Airport motored past.

Elbow-deep in business emails, Noelle barely noticed. Her job came first and she was on a mission to orchestrate the most spectacular double wedding this little burg had ever seen.

Successfully pulling off her assignment was her path to independence from the shadow of her illustrious family. Everything else was secondary. Including her nostalgic past with this darling place.

“Are you famous?”

She glanced up from her cell phone to see the Uber driver who’d picked her up at DFW Airport and had been surreptitiously peeking at her in the rearview mirror for the last forty minutes.

Ugh.

She didn’t get recognized nearly as often as her movie star mother or documentary filmmaker father, but unlike Crescenda and Clint, she didn’t welcome the attention. With attention came scrutiny and with scrutiny came criticism and more expectations for her to live up to. She preferred to stay behind the scenes. It was where she felt safest.

“No,” she said, because in her mind she wasn’t.

“Yeah, yeah, you are. I saw you on that daytime talk show, *The Kluge Show*. You’re her. You’re the Wedding Whisperer.”

One show. She’d been on one measly morning talk show and now she

couldn't check her emails in peace. At this rate, she'd have to hire bodyguards like dear old Mom and Dad.

Eek. Her worst nightmare.

"You have a sharp eye," she said.

The guy beamed. "That's a big compliment coming from you. According to the talk show host, you're the queen of intricate detail."

That was a kind way of putting it. Her mother called it anal. Dad didn't comment on her personality. He globe-trotted, usually with women half her age, and had barely been an influence in her life. Crescenda and Clint divorced when she was three and she'd seen her father maybe a dozen times in the twenty-five years since then.

"You live in LA?" he asked.

"I do."

"And your mother is Crescenda Hardwick?"

ing off
ored

Noelle sighed. Here it came. "She is."

"That's how you got a leg up in the biz."

"Yes."

first,
edding

ce from

If her mother hadn't been married five times and had lots of friends also got married and divorced as often as some people changed their hair color, Noelle wouldn't have had the opportunity to plan celebrity weddings at such a young age. But while Crescenda might have given her the opportunity, it was Noelle's efficient organizational skills and calm aplomb in the face of overwrought drama that caused her successful business, *Once Upon a Wedding*, to flourish.

oked
he

"I love your mom's movies."

"Thanks."

"*Sweet Summer Sunshine* is my fave."

"That was her first blockbuster."

r
ln't
came
stay

"I'm a bit of an actor myself. I was in a dinner theatre production of *Get Your Gun*."

"That's nice."

tch.

The driver, named Knox, was fortyish, on the scrawny side, and reminded her of the bumbling deputy on the TV program her maternal grandparents had watched in endless reruns when, from the ages of eight to fifteen, she visited them every summer right here in Twilight, Texas.

he

A wisp of sadness slipped through her. Grammie and Grampie had both gone thirteen years now, and she hadn't been back to Twilight since. E

fond memories of the small lakeside community, where her beloved grandparents had retired after Grampie left a lifelong career as a pilot with Delta Air Lines, had stayed with her.

Because of Noelle's talk show appearance and her connection to celebrating a media and technology company called The Tie, which paired engaged couples to wedding planning services across the United States, had invited her to be their official wedding planner for this year's Christmas Bride Contest.

It was the first gig she'd gotten solely on her own merit, and it was a breakout opportunity if she didn't blow it.

Couples, vying to have their wedding completely paid for by The Tie, sent in essays about their love stories and Noelle had been the final round judge. Among the contenders, she'd been thrilled to discover a composition penned by identical twin sisters who'd fallen in love with identical twin brothers.

Icing on the cake? Sierra and Sienna Buckhorn were from Twilight.

Now Noelle would be spending the next six weeks in the small tourist town that had been her only source of stability during her chaotic childhood. This trip was, in effect, a homecoming.

Noelle's heart skipped a beat as the car drove down the main thoroughfare, headed toward the charming town square that was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. To the right, the lake glistened silvery blue in the rising sun. A rippling banner stretching across Ruby Street announced: Santa Polar Plunge, Friday, November 17.

That was today.

"Isn't it a little early for Christmas events?"

"Not for Twilight," Knox said. "We get into the spirit right after Halloween."

Annie "Aah, the Christmas creep."

"Yeah, it comes earlier every year."

Noelle wasn't an enthusiastic fan of the holiday, not since her grandmother had died, anyway, and taken her Christmas spirit with them.

As the signal light turned red, Knox halted at the intersection directly underneath the banner. The marina overflow parking was on one side of the road, the lake on the other. From the jam-packed lot, a thick crowd spilled out, many with cell phones out, snapping pictures as a white delivery van pulled to a stop.

The back door flew opened . . .

with And a passel of Santas tumbled out.
Passel. Was that the right word?

ebriety, Curious, Noelle Googled it and learned, to her delight, that a group of
 d Santas was called a sleigh. There were at least two dozen of them—yo
 ited aged, slender, plump, Black, White, Brown, male, female—a diversity
 Santas.

“What’s going on here?”

ier “It’s the annual Polar Plunge benefiting the Special Olympics,” Kno
 her. “Twilight puts their unique twist on the event by having participar
 e, had dress up as Santa Claus.”

nd “They’re going to dive into the lake?”

sition “Yep.”

n “The water’s got to be freezing.”

“That’s the point.”

Noelle herself had once plunged into those dazzling blue waters, but
 ist in the swelter of a hot Texas summer as her grandparents watched from
 hood. blanket spread over the sandy beach. Even then, a poor swimmer, she’
 ventured far from shore.

ghfare, She studied the Santas crossing the road in front of the town car, the
 il trailing behind them. There was one noticeable Santa, taller than the re
 ing strolling in the middle of the pack. He had his chin up, his shoulders b
 . Claus and he moved with a relaxed, loose-limbed stride that drew attention.

This was no traditional ho-ho-ho, lap-sitting Santa Claus. For one th
 was young, near her own age, no older than thirty, and he was ripped, l
 biceps bulging at the seams of his red-and-white Santa suit.

And she forgot all about her emails.

Even beneath the faux white beard, she could see his angular jaw wa
 chiseled and his cheekbones high. His jingle bell hat was cocked rakish
 one side, and he’d hitched his thick black belt low on lean hips.

parents *Oh Santa, you can come down my chimney any old time.*

y As the Santas hit the curb on the lake side of the street, they started t
 of the off their clothing—doffing caps, unbuckling belts, slipping off their fu
 trimmed jackets.

led, Goodness, how brave they were. Not only to plunge into the icy wat
 ulled but to publicly embarrass themselves. Onlookers were laughing, pointi
 and snapping pictures. Humiliation by proxy washed over Noelle. She

never do something like that. Not in a million years.

Tall Santa took off his top, revealing that indeed, he performed physical labor regularly. His abs were taut and toned and she could make out every striation of well-honed muscles. Gawking at his chest, her jaw unhinged. There was something so familiar about him.

Did she know this Santa Claus?

But how could she? She hadn't been in Twilight for thirteen years. So anyone she'd known as a teen would be almost unrecognizable by now. She had certainly altered her appearance—dropping twenty pounds, exchanging glasses for contact lenses, straightening and lightening her unruly curls.

Keeping it tight in Hollywood.

Tall Santa laughed and said something to the Santa next to him. He turned his head toward the person. His fake beard slipped a little and in the sunlight, Noelle caught a glimpse of light blue eyes just as the double dimple in his right cheek deepened.

Goodness! Thirteen years might have passed, but she would know that look in those lively blue eyes and that fetching dimple anywhere.

Gil Thomas.

The light turned green.

"Could you pull over?" she asked Knox. "I want to watch the Polar Plunge."

"I'll slide into the marina's loading zone. Since we'll only be here a few minutes, we won't block anyone, and that way we won't have to compete with the overflow parking lot crowd."

"Oh, great idea." Moving over to the lake side of the road would give her a much better view. "We can leave if someone needs the space."

Knox parked in the loading zone, engine idling. The Santas were kicking off their boots, shucking their pants, and revealing their swimsuits, which were also Christmas themed.

Noelle felt a bit guilty sitting in the comfort of the warm vehicle in the prime location, while the Polar Plunge participants shivered in the winter morning air. She was privileged and she knew it. She should donate to a good cause. She did an internet search for the Twilight Chamber of Commerce website, found the event page, and scrolled through the names of participants.

Sure enough, Gil Thomas was listed.

Her breathing quickened illogically. She hit the pledge button beside his name and sent a thousand dollars via a popular payment app.

While she was doing that, her phone rang, chiming “Here Comes the Bride,” letting her know that dear old Mom was calling.

Her gaze searched the sleigh of Santas. Gil wasn’t hard to find. The towered above the rest. When she’d last seen him, he’d been seventeen six-foot-one. He was at least two inches taller than that now. And currently strutting in nothing but Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer swimwear.

“Halloo,” Crescenda said in an affected British accent. Her mother was in London, shooting a film about Agatha Christie’s life and she sounded completely immersed in her character. “How is my favorite offspring?”

“I’m your only offspring.”

“You forget I have a cadre of stepchildren.”

“I forget nothing, Crescenda,” she said, calling her by her first name and her habit. Her mother disliked people knowing that she was old enough to be her daughter Noelle’s age—as if the internet didn’t exist—and she’d coached Noelle to use her first name in public.

“Are we in a mood?”

“Did you know Gil Thomas still lived in Twilight?”

“Who?”

“The boy I had a mad crush on when I was a teenager.”

“Why would I know that?”

“He lived across the street from your parents. You *did* come back here last year to finally sell their house when the market shot up. Didn’t you tell anyone while you were here?”

“I did sell at a fortuitous time, didn’t I? I was smart to hold on to it and sell the place out. Made a mint on that hovel.” Mom was as sentimental as a bulldozer.

“Yes,” Noelle said, giving Crescenda the ego stroke she was looking for.

“You did a fabulous job, but why didn’t you mention Gil?”

“I try not to think too much about the past. Besides, none of those dimwit Twilightites ever leave town. Why are you so surprised?”

Because Gil once had big dreams about becoming a country music star. Noelle used to sleep upstairs in her grandparents’ house with the window open, listening to him play the guitar on his back porch as she daydreamed about kissing him.

Now she watched him saunter languidly toward the water, unlike his fellow Santas, who scurried past him, heads down against the wind and shoulders hunched. His Rudolph swim trunks clung to his burly thighs

e showing off an eye-popping amount of flesh. Her mouth watered and her pulse galloped as her mind flew to illicit places.

man To steamy North Pole fantasies.

1 and Objectifying his rock-hard body felt wrong in nine hundred different
ently but she stared at him anyway.

was in She tried to focus on something else, but she simply couldn't pry her
fully off him. Truth be told, it wasn't the first time she'd ogled the guy. More
fully once, she'd peered over her grandparents' privacy fence while he mowed
parents' front lawn, shirt stripped off, bare skin covered in sweat.

Back during those long, hot summers, she'd been a shy loner, seeking
refuge from her mother's star-studded lifestyle between the pages of
out of novels. She doubted Gil Thomas even remembered she existed. He might
have a have waved at her a few times and chatted with her once or twice at a
ied neighborhood block party barbecue, but for sure he had no idea her silly
teenage heart had desperately pined for him from one vacation to the next.

Shouting "Hoo-rah!" in unison, the Santas ran toward the water, the
kicking up beach sand as they plunged into the frigid lake.

Noelle sucked in her breath, empathy sending her mind into the water
with them. She shivered as an imaginary chill gripped her body.

But Gil?

are just He looked as comfortable as if he were stepping into a sauna. Unlike
1 talk of the others, whose mouths were pinched and pained, this easygoing
actually smiled as the water lapped at a waist that didn't possess a drop
and rent Damn, if her California girl lungs didn't clutch as she admired his cool
a unruffled badassery.

He didn't care what anyone thought of him.

g for. "Noelle, you still there? Did we get disconnected?"

ie-hard "*Oh Mom, we've been disconnected for so long it's normal.*" "I'm still
stunning blue eyes, dimples galore. Don't feel bad that he barely noticed
tar. You didn't stand a chance. Gil was a ten."

ows Yeah. She knew that. Noelle eyeballed the man bathing in the lake.
med an eleven now. Way out of my league."

s "There's nothing wrong with being a solid seven, darling," her mother
l said, still hamming it up with the British accent. "Everyone can't be a
me. They really had to ugly me up to play Agatha. Besides, you could
, be an eight if you just followed through with the nose job."

er
Crescenda made an appointment for her with a plastic surgeon, but she kept it. She liked that her nose wasn't perfectly straight. It gave her character ways, "Is there a reason you called?" Noelle watched the Santas flee the la blue-faced and teeth chattering as they raced to the beach, helpers waiting gaze with oversized towels to envelop them.

er than
But not Gil. His head was thrown back, his eyes closed, the sun glistened his red like gold off the water sluicing down his chest.

ing
"Yes, I called to tell you I'll be stuck in London over Christmas. I'm unable to come to Twilight for your wedding thingy."

romance
"I'm pretty sure Agatha Christie wouldn't say *thingy*," Noelle said. Ight
would be spending yet another Christmas without Crescenda. What else new?

ly
"Ack! You're right. Although Agatha probably wouldn't say *ack* either ext.

ir feet
"Who knows? She did have a book called *The Murder of Roger Ack*

"Did she?"

"Yes."

er with
"You're the reader, I'll trust you. Listen, darling, the reason I shan't able to spend Christmas with you is that I've met someone, and he's in me to his family's celebration in Kent. It's an opportunity I simply can't e most up."

Santa
Noelle groaned.

of fat.
"Don't make that noise. Be happy for me."

l,
"The ink isn't even dry on your fifth set of divorce papers."

"Who cares?"

"You should."

"Why?"

l here."
"People will talk."

ll, dark,
"And that's a *bad* thing?"

ed you.
"The tabloids will say mean things." Noelle bit her bottom lip, as a montage of memories blasted through her mind—paparazzi camped on street outside their house, kids at school laughing at Noelle and shunning because of her mother's flamboyant lifestyle, hate mail from fans calling her Crescenda a slut because she'd broken up another celebrity marriage, ten like that Noelle—

easily
She shook her head. No, she wasn't going to remember that.

"You care too much about what other people think. You always hav

ixteen, “Because it matters.”

hadn’t “The only thing that matters is what *you* think of yourself. And I thi
aracter. deserve to have all the love I can find.”

ke, For of course Crescenda believed that. She thought the entire world
ing revolved around her. “Mom, I—”

“Mum. That’s what they say in England.”

tening “You’re not from England.”

“No, but Dame Agatha was.”

1 “I gotta go.”

“You’re not the least bit curious about Basil?”

So, she “Nope.”

ie was “But I listened to you talk about Gil Thomas.”

her.” “Fine. Tell me about Basil. Does he have a brother named Dill? A si
royd.” called Rosemary?”

“What? Oh. Ha-ha. No. He doesn’t have any siblings. He’s an only
child . . . like moi.”

“That’s splendid, Miss Piggy.”

be “Are you mocking me?”

ivited “You totally asked for it with the pretentious use of *moi*.”

’t pass “Agatha said *moi*. She spoke French, you know.”

“Goodbye, Agatha. I’ve got an appointment. Have fun making your
and hanging out with Thyme.”

“Now you’re just being tacky. FYI Basil means king.”

“And is he a king?”

“In bed he is.”

“Okay, I do not need to hear this. Bye, Crescenda. Hanging up now.

“In England we say—”

“Bye.” Noelle ended the call. Sometimes, Mom could be a handful.
blew out her breath and glanced back at the water.

At some point, while she’d quipped with her mother, Gil had walked
1 the to the beach. He was the last Santa out of the water. His nipples beaded

ng her It was the only evidence that he was chilled. Someone handed him a to
ng Rubbing his hair dry, he stared across the stretch of sand, peering st

he timethrough the window of the town car.

He sauntered toward the vehicle, naked except for the swim trunks
plastered to his body and revealing the outline of an impressive packag

e.” Noelle jumped and her pulse fluttered. Holy crap! Had he caught he

ogling him? Had he recognized her? But that was silly. The windows v
nk I tinted.

“Put the vehicle in gear,” Noelle told Knox, her voice coming out
exceptionally high. “And let’s get out of here. Quick.”

“On it,” he said.

As they sped away, Noelle turned to look over her shoulder, but Gil
already vanished from view.

ister

movie

”

She

l back
l tight.
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Chapter 2

Banner after banner adorned the road, announcing various upcoming events. The Harvest Craft Fair was this weekend, the Turkey Trot was happening tomorrow morning before Thanksgiving, and the last banner, just as they reached the square, read: Christmas Tree Lighting Festival, Thanksgiving Day, November 23!

Overwhelmed, Noelle took it all in, her objective momentarily sidetracked by a barrage of memories.

Noelle recalled another tree lighting festival the year she'd turned thirteen. It seemed the entire town had shown up for the event. The atmosphere was festive. Her grandparents arrived early to stake out a spot near the tree, and once the mayor threw the switch to light up the thirty-foot pine, it was for-all as people surged forward to decorate the branches.

In their enthusiasm, the crowd stampeded, and Noelle, who'd been clutching a manger ornament, got shoved to the ground. She was face down in the dirt, terrified and struggling to get up, certain she was about to die.

And then, a miraculous hand reached down, grabbed her by the hood of her coat, and lifted her to her feet.

“Are you okay?”

It was only then that she realized she had her eyes tightly closed. Her eyelashes fluttered open, and she stared up into Gil Thomas's gorgeous eyes. That might have been the moment she tumbled madly into her first love's arms.

He reached out to brush debris from her coat, and his casual touch electrified her entire body. She couldn't speak. Couldn't move her tongue.

“Noelle? Are you all right?”

He knew her name! Gil Thomas knew her name! Her teenage heart throbbed.

She'd squeezed her hand tightly around the manger ornament, the tiny small plastic donkey poking into her palm. She looked down and felt a tear slip over her cheek.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?" Gently, Gil steered her out of the way of the throng.

"Not me." She shook her head and held the ornament out to him. "Baby Jesus fell from his crib. We'll never find him in this crowd."

Instead of laughing at her tender tears or pooh-poohing her upset as sensitive as Crescenda would have done, Gil shook his head, clicked his tongue, and said with an earnest expression, "Why, that's a downright shame."

"We can't put the manger on the tree without Baby Jesus in his crib."

"Sure we can," Gil said. "We'll pretend it's just before Jesus has been born and everyone has gathered around the crib to await his arrival."

"Oh!" Noelle loved the way he thought. "That could work."

"C'mon, I'll clear a path so you can put up your ornament."

"Thank you."

He shooed people aside and escorted her to the tree. She spent time looking for just the right branch and once she found it, she turned to see if Gil approved.

But he'd already disappeared, just as he had at the Polar Plunge. There was nothing if not consistent.

Noelle bit her bottom lip. She'd forgotten all about that memory. She stepped out the tinted window of the town car as Knox passed the courthouse location where the town Christmas tree would soon stand, Noelle wistfully pressed her fingertips against the window glass. In her mind's eye, she saw the place she used to be, standing with Gil beneath the sheltering branches of the old pine.

Yikes! Why couldn't she stop thinking about him? This was nonsense. She was here to plan a double wedding, not light a flame where there had never even been a spark. *Eyes on the prize, Curry*. If she made a splash with the Polar Plunge, she could stop planning weddings for her mother and her friends and focus on forging her own way.

Knox left the square and turned down a residential street. Here, the houses were all sprawling Victorians. This was Twilight's richest area of town.

was unimposing compared to the vast wealth of Beverly Hills, but she the quaint little neighborhood and restored homes. And just ahead stood Merry Cherub B&B.

Once upon a time, whenever she visited her grandparents in Twilight babysat the four Cantrell children who'd lived at the Merry Cherub. They were toddlers then and must be teenagers by now. Her spirits leaped at possibility of seeing them again.

Like the town billboard, the Victorian had been given a fresh coat of paint. It was no longer the sweet pink of a cherry Slurpee. Instead, it sported a bright yellow siding with white trim. New outdoor furniture sat on the wrap-around veranda, including a porch swing and two rocking chairs.

Knox took Noelle's luggage from the trunk. "Do you need help inside your bags?"

"I can manage, thank you." She tipped him a hundred-dollar bill.

"Thanks!" He gave a wave, got back into the town car, and drove off.

Pulling the two wheeled suitcases behind her, Noelle turned toward her house. The yard and porch were decorated for Thanksgiving with wreaths of pumpkins, gourds, cornstalks, and dried red chili pepper garlands.

She went up the sidewalk, the wheels of her luggage click-clacking against the concrete. A bright orange leaf broke free of a branch and drifted down like Gildown from the big oak on the front lawn.

There was that dangerous feeling of belonging again.

Home.

It felt like she'd come home.

But that was absurd, wasn't it? She'd never lived in this town. She'd only been an occasional visitor.

Inside the B&B, the foyer opened up into a small reception area. Behind the counter, an attractive woman in her sixties was humming "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" and watering poinsettias with a cute little watering can patterned with a chubby angel and the Merry Cherub logo.

Noelle had been inside the bed-and-breakfast many times, so she was never overwhelmed by the home's excessive angelic decor, which was complemented by angel-themed wallpaper, mobiles, wind chimes, statues, candles, and noisemakers.

The woman spied her and set down her watering can. "Hello! You're home, Noelle. Welcome!"

"I am." Noelle glanced around, looking for Jenny Cantrell. She wanted to give her a big hug but didn't see her. "Is Jenny here?"

loved “Jenny?” The woman frowned, and then a knowing expression came
d the her face. “Oh, you mean the previous owner. The Cantrells left town a
years ago. I’m sorry. I didn’t know them. My husband and I recently re
it, she to Twilight, and I needed a part-time job to keep from getting bored an
ey suits me just fine. I’m Delphine, by the way.”

the “Hello, Delphine. It’s nice to meet you.” Noelle shook the woman’s
“You’ll be in the Roost.” Delphine reached for a key on the pegboard
f paint. mounted on the wall behind the desk.

sunny “The Roost?”

round “Pamela Landry, the representative from The Tie who made your
reservations, thought you’d like privacy, so we suggested the garage
de with apartment out back.” Delphine handed Noelle the key.

“Do I need to sign in or give you my credit card or—”

f. “Nope. You’re all set.” Delphine waved a hand. “The Tie is paying
the everything. I would lead you to your room, but my arthritis is acting up
the the stairs are a challenge, but if you need help with your luggage, I can
ths, my hubs, Luther. We live just down the block.”

“I’m good.” Noelle wrapped her hand around the angel keychain. “I
merrily you, Delphine.”

ifted “In your room, you’ll find a welcome packet and contact info for the
restaurants. We only serve breakfast, zoning laws and all that. We stop
service at ten thirty. You’re . . .” Delphine looked at her watch. “Over
hour past that.”

l only “It’s eleven thirty?” Noelle asked. Time had gotten away from her. She
was supposed to meet the Buckhorn twins and their mother at noon for
and it would take her at least ten minutes to walk back to the town square.

hind it, “It’s eleven thirty-seven precisely.”

ok a “Thanks, Delphine. I need to get a move on.”

g can “Let us know if you need anything.”

Noelle went outside again with her luggage. A wooden sign was staked
is not the ground with an arrow pointing the way to the Roost. A charming
wooded picket fence enclosed the huge backyard filled with trees, including apple
more. pear trees bearing ripe fruit. At the back of the property sat a cozy little
must be cottage.

Could this place be any more on-the-nose adorable?

ted to The wooden staircase led to a deck. Noelle picked up her suitcases and
scaled the sixteen steps to the top. She counted them. Counting was

over something she did to keep herself grounded in her body whenever anxiety crept in.

Positioned on either side of the door of the upstairs living quarters were two potted pine trees decorated with orange garlands and Thanksgiving-themed ornaments. Over-the-top for sure, but at least the pumpkins, cornucopia, and turkeys provided some relief from the relentless angel

Noelle let herself into the small apartment. Without looking around, she dumped her bags at the door and rushed back outside. She couldn't be seen. She was determined to make a good impression on the Buckhorns. If she did well with this wedding, she'd be in good with The Tie and her business would skyrocket.

Preparing to count her way back downstairs, she caught sight of a man closing the side gate.

He had his back to her, so she couldn't see his face, but that imposing height and those broad shoulders looked awfully familiar.

Gone was the Santa costume and in its place were faded Wranglers, cowboy boots, and a black hooded sweatshirt with WINDMILL MUSEUM HALL emblazoned on the back in red lettering. Below the words was a drawing of an old-fashioned windmill featuring musical notes being generated by the spinning blades.

What was Gil Thomas doing here? Did he rent a room at the B&B? Why?

Feeling fifteen all over again, Noelle ducked behind one of the potted pines. She held her breath. Maybe he wouldn't see her.

She crossed her fingers. *Please.*

The gate hinges creaked.

Seconds passed. She heard nothing but the soft whisper of the wind shaking the autumn leaves on a nearby cottonwood tree. Slowly, Noelle peeked around the pine branches . . .

And her gaze crashed headlong into Gil Thomas's azure-eyed stare. He stood at the bottom of the steps looking up.

Ulp.

He'd seen her. Now she looked like an idiot for trying to hide from him.

Noelle swallowed and exhaled at the same time, making an indelicate sound that sounded like a burp. A wall of heat spread from the center of her back across her chest, and up her neck to burn her cheeks with red-hot intensity.

Maybe her embarrassment wouldn't show on her face. Maybe her skin

xiety wasn't blistered crimson.

What *did* she look like?

There Knowing that she'd be meeting with the Buckhorn twins and their mother as soon as she arrived in Twilight, she'd dressed to impress instead of comfort. Image mattered. She wore a navy blue pencil skirt, matching theme blazer, and a ruffled white blouse along with three-inch stacked high heels she Ugh.

late. In aiming for a professional image, she'd ended up looking like a flustered attendant.

she Noelle stabbed her fingers through her long whiskey-brown hair streaked with golden highlights. She had ironed her hair perfectly straight, so there shouldn't have been flyaways sticking out all over the place the way they used to do when she was a sad sack teen drooling over her grandparent across-the-street neighbor.

"Hello there," he called.

She readjusted a pumpkin ornament on the pine tree as if realigning decorations had been her intention all along, not avoiding this potent moment.

Gil came closer and craned his neck back.

from She moved to the railing and peered down. Those stunning blue eyes narrowed in amusement.

If so, "Can I help you with something?" he asked.

"Y-you don't recognize me." *Way to play it cool, Curry.*

she "Should I?"

"Not really, no." She came down the stairs . . . *one, two, three, four, five* . . . to join him on the sidewalk, disappointment a soggy wet sponge in the center of her stomach.

e "We've met?" He arched his eyebrows. "I don't see how that's possible. I wouldn't have forgotten someone like *you*."

as he Her pulse fluttered at his flattery. "It was a long time ago. Before comb-over, glasses and braces and hair-straightening tools. I don't blame you for not remembering me. I was pretty blah back then, and you were a rodeo star. You had your own band. The girls swarmed you like honeybees."

him. He squinted as if trying to see into the past and then suddenly his eyes popped wide. "Holy moly, Noelle Curry! As I live and breathe. Is that really, really, you?"

society. She lifted her shoulders, feeling shy and invisible all over again. She'd thought she'd buried that awkward teenage wallflower. Apparently, she hadn't.

not.

“Why,” he said, “you’re gorgeous.”

mother The flush returned to her cheeks, and she ducked her head.

for “N-not that you weren’t cute before. I mean . . . oh hell, I’ve got my
navy eleven boot wedged in my mouth, don’t I?”

eels. “It’s okay. I’ve changed a lot.”

“You haven’t been back to Twilight since your grandparents died.”

ght “No. I’ve been so busy building my business and there was nothing
me here once Grammie and Grampie were gone.”

aked “Yeah, I heard that your mom came back to sell your grandparents’
ere last year. You chose not to come with her?”

ey “I couldn’t. I had a wedding in Aruba.”

is’ sexy His gaze went to her left hand. “You’re married?”

“No, no. I’m a wedding planner.”

“Aah, you’re the one The Tie sent to plan the Buckhorn/Maxwell
wedding.”

ian. “I am.”

“So we’ll be working together.” A pleased smile tipped up his lips.

s “How’s that?”

He showed her his back, pointing a thumb over his shoulder at the lot
run the Windmill.”

“The Windmill?”

“It used to be the old Twilight Live music hall.”

ge in When they were kids, the old music theatre on the square had been
boarded up and vacant for years.

ible. I “Yep, I renovated the place and renamed it. My wife and I did it tog

His wife.

He was married.

ntact Her silly hopes fell. Of course he was married. The man was hotter t
ot smoking gun with dreamy blue eyes and dimples that wouldn’t quit. It
ar and her turn to stare at the ring finger of his left hand. It was bare.

es But that didn’t mean anything. A lot of guys who worked with their
didn’t wear wedding bands for safety reasons.

really “So you live here now? At the B&B?”

“Yes.” His eyelids lowered and his voice took on a languid quality.
e had seven-year-old daughter, Josie, and I moved into the carriage house.” I
waved at the small cottage behind him. “After my wife died.”

He was a widower.

Her heart ached for him. “That must have been so very hard to lose a spouse.”

size “It was right after my sister, Gretchen, bought the B&B from the Ca She needed help running the bed-and-breakfast and I needed help raising Josie. Moving in was a win-win.”

Noelle remembered his older sister, Gretchen, as a lively girl who told left for ghost stories around beach campfires to the neighborhood kids, who delighted in being scared. She’d attended a few of those neighborhood house events.

“What about your parents?”

“Mom and Dad retired to Costa Rica the year before Tammy Jo died.”

“Tammy Jo was your wife?”

He nodded. “She was killed in a plane crash with her parents. Her dad just gotten his pilot’s license and he had taken them out for a flight. I’d stayed behind to watch Josie, who was still a toddler. Wind shear. Her was too inexperienced to handle it.”

“That’s so tragic. I’m so sorry that happened to you, Gil.” She reached and touched his wrist.

ago. “I That brief contact took her breath away and she quickly dropped her

He gave a sad smile. “Life is hard sometimes, but at least I have Josie, Gretchen and the support of my community. We make it through with help from our friends.”

What a lovely attitude. She wanted to keep on talking to him, but she was already cutting it close and risked being late for her meeting with the ether.” Buckhorns. She didn’t want that relationship getting off to a rocky start.

“Listen,” she said. “I have to go. I have a meeting with the Buckhorns. please let’s catch up later?”

than a “Sure, sure, I won’t hold you back.” He gave her a casual salute, then was turned and moseyed toward the carriage house.

hands She watched him walk away, her gaze locking on his amazing tush, admiring just how fantastic he looked in those tight-fitting jeans.

“My It was only after she hurried toward the town square that Noelle realized she hadn’t asked him how or why they’d be working together, but the idea of being around Gil and his magnificent butt didn’t disturb her.

He Not one little bit.

But she had to be careful. He was definitely a distraction. She’d have

stay on her toes and keep on task. She wasn't here for her romance but
a other people's love affairs. Work came first.

Especially with this job, where she had so much riding on the outco
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stay on her toes and keep on task. She wasn't here for her romance but for other people's love affairs. Work came first.

Especially with this job, where she had so much riding on the outcome.

Chapter 3

His family claimed that Gil was born with a guitar in his hand and the some truth to it.

Music had seen him through highs and lows, from the band he'd for high school that earned him local fame, to buying and renovating the o town square music hall that gave him a living, to sorting through the g losing his wife and in-laws. There weren't many experiences he didn't and convert into song.

Transmuting his life into art.

So he shouldn't have been surprised when a tune about Noelle Curry started running through his head as he listened to his student strummin chords. He and his pupil were in the cottage's garage, directly underne Roost, which he'd converted into a sound studio so he could make moi Josie's college fund by giving guitar lessons at home.

He mentally pushed aside the unfolding lyrics about an awkward gir door who'd blossomed into a confident drop-dead beauty.

Noelle was so far out of his orbit he couldn't reach her by spaceship

Gil forced himself to focus on his protégé, one Derrick Driscoll, a ce public accountant who had rock star dreams and more money than tale Derrick took lessons from Gil every Friday at noon on his lunch break. had also participated in the Polar Plunge with Gil, and he was bundled so many layers now it hampered his guitar playing.

"I can turn up the heat," Gil said. "So you can take off your ski jack

Derrick shuddered. "How about you turn it up and I keep the jacket anyway?"

"Sure thing." Gil pressed his palm against the sweat gathering on hi

forehead. He strolled to the thermostat on the wall and dialed it up to eight degrees.

“I’ll never do that Polar Plunge again.” Derrick shuddered. “How are you not frozen to the bone?”

“I’m used to it. I’ve been taking cold showers every morning for the ten years.”

Derrick’s jaw dropped. “On purpose?”

“Cold showers increase endorphins, improve circulation, and heighten immune response. Didn’t you feel wildly invigorated after the plunge?”

“I felt like an icicle is what I felt,” Derrick muttered and fumbled his pick.

“A lot of successful musicians swear by ice-cold showers.”

“Yeah?” Derrick eyed him as he scooped the pick off the floor. “The music business is a tough one. I’ve practiced regularly. “Maybe if you had a girlfriend you wouldn’t have to take cold showers.”

“How about we don’t talk about my love life?”

“Or lack thereof.” Derrick chortled.

“Warm enough to take off the ski jacket yet?”

“Sure, sure.” Derrick removed his jacket and draped it over a nearby stand.

The stand toppled from the weight of his garment and fell onto Josie’s drum set with a clattering *bang, bam, boom*. Good thing his upstairs neighbor was out.

“Oops, sorry.” Derrick lifted his shoulders to his ears.

“Go ahead and practice your scales.” Gil moved to pick up the stand and transfer Derrick’s jacket to the coat tree by the door.

Derrick obligingly massacred the major scale.

Suppressing a sigh, Gil pulled up a stool beside Derrick, picked up his guitar, and demonstrated how it was done. “You should be able to do this exercise in your sleep.”

“Yeah, yeah, but I’m aching to get to the good stuff. When can I play ‘Bird’?”

“All in good time. Gotta crawl before you can run.” What was it about Skynyrd ballads that so entranced novices? Perhaps it was the endless quality of the song.

He showed Derrick a few tricks and tips, then let the accountant rep

eventy-them back to him. As he listened, Gil's mind wandered back to Noelle
Their brief encounter at the bottom of the stairs had been a bright sp
e you his week. This past Saturday had been the anniversary of Tammy Jo's
and Josie had been cranky ever since, although Gil wasn't sure why. H
: last daughter had only been two when her mom died. She didn't even reme
Tammy Jo.

Picking up on your vibes, most likely, Dad.

en To be honest, he'd actually forgotten what day it was, and Gretchen
" remind him it was the fifth-year anniversary of the plane crash.
s guitar He'd felt guilty as hell, and he'd taken Josie to put flowers on the gr
her mother and grandparents. Josie got clingy afterward and every nigh
week, she'd asked to sleep with him. The kid was all elbows and knees
man sprawled all over the bed when she slept. He'd gotten precious little sl
except Was it time to stop marking her mother's passing? That felt wrong
o take somehow, yet it disturbed him how much the trip to the cemetery had
affected his daughter's emotional well-being.

And Gil's only goal in life was to provide a calm, safe environment
daughter. Raising Josie was all that mattered. He let nothing get in the
that.

7 music An hour later, with Derrick's lesson complete, Gil headed over to th
B&B. Gretchen had asked him to fix the leaky kitchen faucet and he w
e's hoping she would make him a sandwich in exchange for plumbing serv
neighbor His sister had read his mind.

He stepped through the back door to see two plates with ham-and-ch
sandwiches cut diagonally, dill pickle slices, and ridged potato chips, a
l and with two glasses of chocolate milk. It didn't pass his notice that this wa
Tammy Jo's favorite lunch menu.

"Hey," he said. "What's this?"

his own "Have a seat and let's eat before you tackle the plumbing."

his Gil washed up at the leaky faucet, dried his hands on a kitchen towe
embroidered with angels, and joined his older sister at the table.

y 'Free She raised her glass of chocolate milk. "To Tammy Jo."

out the for?"
for?"

quality "To letting her go." Gretchen hoisted her glass again.

Gil lowered his. "Okay, what's going on?"

eat "You buried Tammy Jo five years ago today and Josie's been out of

Curry. since you guys went to the cemetery.”
ot in “I know.”
death “Five years is a long time. Especially for Josie. It’s two-thirds of her
is Or maybe three-fourths. Whatever. I’m bad at math.”
ember “Your point?”
“You’ve been holding on to survivor’s guilt for too long, little brother
time to let Tammy Jo be part of the past.”
had to “So you made Tammy Jo’s favorite lunch?”
“Yes. Our final communion with her. Our goodbye meal.”
aves of “Is that ghoulish?”
at this “Only if you make it so.”
s and “What if I’m not ready to let go?”
eep. “It’s been five freaking years. That’s long enough. Besides, I saw that
you were looking at Noelle Curry this morning.”
“Huh?”
“I was laundering the sheets and I looked out the washroom window
for his there you were at the bottom of the stairs, staring up at her like she was
way of long-lost treasure.”
“I wasn’t.”
e “You were.”
as The song he’d started writing about Noelle skipped through his head
vices. “Okay, maybe I was, but that doesn’t mean anything.”
“Maybe not, but it sure is a sign you’re ready to move forward. I have
reese seen you look at a woman like that since Tammy Jo.”
along “Noelle’s from Los Angeles. She’s here to plan the Buckhorn/Maxwell
as wedding and then she’ll be gone. Nothing’s happening there.”
“I’m not saying you need to get anything serious cooking with Noel
that it’s time to live again. What’s wrong with casual sex?”
“I’m a dad. Josie is my sole obligation.”
l “You’re a human being.”
“Look, I’m just too busy—”
“That’s an excuse.”
at “I’m raising a seven-year-old. I have to set an example.”
“Of what? Stoic self-sacrifice?”
“Gretch, I look around and see other single parents so desperate for
partners, any partners just so they’re not alone, and then getting in over
sorts heads with problematic relationships. I see their children suffer as a res

I'm sure as Hades not doing that to my kid."

"She's a kid who would be much happier if her dad was happy too."

"I'm not unhappy."

"Maybe not, but are you living to your full potential? I don't think so."

"Said the woman who hasn't had a date in two years."

er. It's Two years ago, his sister had been left at the altar and Gretchen had the rejection hard, even as she'd realized that ultimately it was for the best.

"About that . . ."

"You're seeing someone?"

She lowered her lashes, then peered at him. "I am."

"Well, hey, that's great. Who is it?"

e way "A cutter from Jubilee," she said, referring to the town thirty miles from Twilight that was known as the cutting horse capital of the world. "You know him."

"Well, I hope to meet him."

r and "Not yet. It's still new and we're taking it slow."

s some "Good luck."

Gretchen winked. "You too."

"Don't start matchmaking."

l again. other His sister held up both palms. "The way you and Noelle were ogling each other I don't think my matchmaking is needed."

"We weren't ogling each other."

ven't "Please, who are you trying to kid? Yourself? Because you sure aren't fooling me."

vell "I was just being nice."

"Uh-huh."

le, just "I was."

"Noelle used to have a mad crush on you when we were kids."

Gil snorted. "No, she didn't."

"Oh yes, she did. You were just too full of swagger to notice."

Had Noelle been crushing on him? She'd been a quiet girl who mostly to herself, spending the summers and holidays when she visited her grandparents sitting on the front porch swing reading a book. He teased about it a few times, calling her a bookworm.

He wouldn't lie to himself. He liked hearing that Noelle had once been interested in him. He might not have paid much attention to her back then, but he sure noticed her now. In those days, she'd simply been too young

in the present, their two-year age gap was nothing. And in maturity there was a substantial difference between how he was at seventeen and how he was now at thirty.

o.” Gil shook his head. “Don’t go reading anything into her staying here. She’s accustomed to the Beverly Hills—movie star lifestyle. To Noelle, Twilio must be as boring as watching paint dry.”

best. “Don’t be so quick to write her off. From what I’ve read on the internet she’s not a glitz and glamour girl.”

“You’ve looked her up?”

“You know I Google everyone who stays here.”

“This level of investigation sounds like more than a mere internet search.

worth of “They call her the Wedding Whisperer.”

u don’t “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She has a knack for calming anxious brides and making sure wedding plans run off without a hitch. She was on *The Klatch*.”

Gil frowned. “What’s that?”

Gretchen looked at him as if he’d fallen off a turnip truck. “Just the morning talk show on TV.”

; each “Um, even more reason why the likes of Noelle Curry wouldn’t be interested in a small-town guy like me.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be too sure of that.” Gretchen waggled a finger at him. “There’s no crush like your first and you were definitely hers.”

r’t “But she wasn’t mine.”

“Who was your first crush?”

“Jeez, Gretch. That was a million years ago. I don’t even recall.”

“Well, that doesn’t matter. What does matter is that for the next six months, a very attractive woman, who you’ve got chemistry with, will be living here at the Merry Cherub.”

Gretchen was over-the-top with this, but Gil couldn’t deny that Noelle had piqued his interest. Nothing wrong with exploring the attraction.

tly kept After all, what was the worst that could happen? Noelle would return to LA and his life would go on the way it was. They’d have a fun, casual flirtation. No harm, no foul. For the first time in a very long time, Gil wondered *what if?*

en And another line of lyrics of the song about Noelle bounced into his head.

en, Nah, nah. So what if she was the first woman to actively pique his interest in years? Nothing could happen. Nothing *would* happen. He was a single

re was His life simply wasn't his own.
was

2. She's **While** Gil was having sandwiches with Gretchen, Noelle was at Pasta
ght Pappa's with the Buckhorn twins and their mother, Vanessa, her attent
net, totally focused on her clientele. She would do everything in her power
had ever seen. make this the most epic wedding that Twilight, and The Tie for that m

arch." Over the course of the past hour and a delicious Greek salad and che
garlic bread, Noelle had learned why she would be working with Gil at
Windmill Music Hall.

ings go Sierra's and Sienna's fiancés, Dylan and Cody Maxwell, were forme
to hold the reception at the Windmill. In light of the excellent acoustic
the historical significance of the old building—it had been a brothel ba
the late 1800s—the Buckhorn twins agreed.

hottest It didn't seem fair for Noelle to try to talk the brides and grooms out
their desired wedding reception venue, so she made up her mind to be
working closely with Gil. This wasn't about her. This was about the cc
Whatever they wanted, she would make happen.

im. And if her old childhood feelings caused any issues, it was up to her
deal with them in a professional manner. Best course of action? Create
boundaries between herself and Gil Thomas. Which, granted, might be
to do considering she'd be living in the apartment above his garage for
next six weeks.

weeks But right now, she needed to concentrate on the job that The Tie wa
; right paying her to do. A job that could launch her career into the stratosphe

lle had "Okay," she said, tapping the information about the reception into h
tablet computer. "The venue is set. You've already booked the Windm
Christmas Eve, Sunday, December 24. Is there any other prep you've c
your own?"

n to "That's all," Sienna said. She was the older twin, having been born t
minutes before Sierra. Since they were identical twins, it was difficult
them apart, but Sienna had two piercings in each ear whereas Sierra ha
one.

head. "Well," Sierra said. "We have booked the honeymoon. Two weeks i
interest Bora-Bora."
;le dad.

“But that’s all. Nothing else.” Sienna nodded.

“Great.”

“Do you think six weeks is enough time to get this wedding adequately planned?” Vanessa Buckhorn asked. The twins’ mother was in her late forties, with a crisp, tailored style of dress, a lovely auburn pixie haircut, and a thick Texas accent. “It seemed to take The Tie for-evv-er to announce the winner and it feels like we’re cutting this wedding really close.”

“Six weeks is plenty of time,” Noelle assured them. “I have strings I can pull if we run into any trouble.”

“Like what?” Sierra asked, leaning forward in her seat.

“She’s got Hollywood contacts, silly.” Sienna nudged her sister with her elbow. To Noelle she said, “That’s why we entered the contest in the first place. Imagine Crescenda Hardwick’s daughter planning *our* wedding! That’s gonna be epic!”

“We’re over the moon to have you.” Sierra pressed her palms together.

“By the way,” Vanessa said, “would it be crass to ask your mother for an autograph?”

“Crescenda would be thrilled to provide you one,” Noelle said. She showed them her mother’s autographed headshot with her wherever she went for fan encounters just like this. She took three photos of Crescenda from her portfolio and passed them to the Buckhorns.

Vanessa blushed and placed a palm to her throat. “Oh, my goodness, this is so exciting. I’ve heard Crescenda’s parents used to live right here in Twilight. We’ve only been in Twilight for twelve years. We’re originally from Vancouver.”

“Yes,” Noelle said. “But my grandparents moved here after my grandfather retired. Mom never lived in Twilight herself.”

“It must have been so wonderful growing up in Hollywood.” Sienna sighed.

Not exactly, but Noelle wasn’t about to get into that. People enjoyed fantasizing about celebrities. They had no idea about the day-to-day reality of having famous parents—being chased by paparazzi, watching your mom get off to another country to film a movie while you stayed home with nan, or competing for Crescenda’s attention with her fan base. But no one wanted to hear how rough life was for the nepo baby.

Noelle forced a smile. “It was terrific, but you know, I really enjoy visiting my grandparents. In Twilight, I got to be just like everyone else.”

“I guess the grass is always greener,” Vanessa said. “I had dreams o

an actress, but then these two came along and now, well, I wouldn't tra
being their mom for all the Oscars in Hollywood." Vanessa beamed at
ely twins.

Noelle couldn't help feeling a twinge of jealousy. Some people were
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e the other ways. Life was one giant party with Crescenda in charge.

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"You'll need to text Gil to make sure the music hall is open," Sierra
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"Do you have his number?" Noelle asked, ignoring the blip of her h
the thought of having Gil's cell number in her phone.

"We sure do." Sienna read Gil's number off her phone screen.

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Be there in 15. And then he added a laughing emoji. Bookworm.

Chapter 4

Bookworm.

Gil's childhood nickname for her.

He'd remembered.

The fifteen-year-old inside her jumped for joy. *Don't let it go to you*
She had no time for a dalliance.

Outwardly, Noelle gave a slight smile, slipped her cell phone into her
purse, paid for their lunch, and left the restaurant with the exuberant
Buckhorns.

This was what she loved about wedding planning. Bringing happiness
people's lives.

The twins were chattering at once, filling Noelle's head with their likes
dislikes. She'd never planned a double wedding before and while she found
the challenge exciting, it meant she had two brides to please.

Her skills were about to be tested and she welcomed the opportunity
as she mentally prepped for meltdowns. Glitches were unavoidable. What
mattered was the way you handled them.

"Have you given any thoughts to your colors?" Noelle asked as they
walked to the Windmill Music Hall on the opposite side of the town square.

"Yellow," Sienna said.

At the same time, her twin said, "Blue."

"No, no, red." Vanessa shook her head. "It's a Christmas wedding."

The Tie would be sending a videographer out to film their nuptials for
promotional use and Noelle's contact at the company, Pamela Landry,
would be in Twilight for the event as well. It was Noelle's job to make sure the
wedding lived up to The Tie's standards since they were footing the bill.

that included making sure the colors were elegant, cohesive, and would look good on camera.

“Why don’t we have a look at the color wheel when we get to the Windmill, and I’ll show you some on-trend suggestions for a winter wardrobe and see if we can all get on the same page. How does that sound?”

“Good idea.” Vanessa put both arms around her daughters’ waists and they walked as a cohesive unit, taking up all of the sidewalk.

Seeing a mother and her daughters enjoying each other’s company brought a lump to Noelle’s throat. The wind gusted off Lake Twilight, and she pulled her blazer tighter around her body. She wished she’d put on the thick, heavy winter sweater she’d brought.

Shopkeepers had their doors open, an invitation for people to stroll in. Music oozed from the stores, most of the tunes Christmas themed already. Delicious smells wafted from the restaurants and the Twilight Bakery. A bakery employee stood at the entrance passing out kismet cookie samples. Noelle shook her head. They stopped for free cookies, and the minute Noelle bit into one, a flood of memories came rushing back as she recalled the legend of the beloved Christmas cookie.

“Do you remember when we baked kismet cookies on Christmas Eve and we slept with them underneath our pillows?” Sienna giggled.

“How could I forget?” Vanessa said. “I found crumbs in the carpet five weeks afterward.”

“The legend didn’t work for me though.” Sierra stuck out her tongue. “I dreamed of Justin Bieber, and he married someone else.”

“Lucky for Dylan.” Sienna chuckled. “Or Cody and I would be getting married, even married alone.”

“Did you ever make the kismet cookies?” Vanessa asked Noelle.

“I did bake them with my grandmother one year.” Noelle smiled at the memory. It was the last Christmas she’d spent with Grammie and Grandpa.

“Did you sleep with them under your pillow and dream of your one true love?” Sienna asked.

Noelle shook her head. She wasn’t about to tell them, but she *had* dreamed of Gil Thomas that Christmas. Then again, at fifteen, she’d been obsessed with him. Of course she’d dreamed of the boy she’d been crushing on.

The legend claimed if you slept with a kismet cookie underneath your pillow on Christmas Eve, you would dream of your one true love. Pure fantasy of course. Fun, yes, but cookies had no magical matchmaking

l pop powers, and she wouldn't indulge such flights of fantasy.

But the cookies were yummy.

"Here we are." Vanessa opened the door to Windmill Music Hall and ushered them inside.

"Hello?" Noelle called, walking through the spacious lobby. "Gil? Are they here?"

"Good afternoon, ladies," said a sexy male voice.

She turned.

Gil sauntered down the corridor, a cocky grin on his handsome face.

All the air left her lungs, sliding over her parted lips in a heated rush. Her eyes widened involuntarily in the dim lighting, her pupils drinking him

Well-worn Tony Lama cowboy boots, snug-fitting Wranglers hugging her lean hips, blue plaid flannel work shirt underneath the unzipped black

The sleeves were rolled up, revealing the dark hair of his forearms and strong muscled wrists of a professional guitar player.

She counted his steps as he got closer. Ten, nine, eight . . .

His hair was cut shorter than he used to wear it, although it was still long enough to sweep the top over to one side in a rakish flop that looked soft.

Seven, six, five . . .

He smelled provocatively of hand soap and sunshine. She inhaled deeply, savoring his scent.

Four, three, two . . .

And then he was directly in front of her. Mere inches away.

"Yeah," he said. "I came in the back door. What would you like to see first? The auditorium or your command center?"

Noelle blinked. "M-my command center?"

"Well, technically it's my office, but I set up a card table, so you'd have a workspace. I know how disconcerting it is on the road while trying to take care of business and not having a central base."

She'd figured she'd just use the Roost as her command center, but a command center at the Windmill in the middle of all the action would be far more convenient.

"That's so thoughtful," she said, touched that he'd make space for her to love to see it.

"We'll just hang out here," Vanessa said. "Stay out of your way."

"You can come along. I don't mind," Noelle said, a bit panicky at the thought of being left alone with Gil.

“To be honest,” Vanessa said, “I wanted to have a tête-à-tête with th about getting on the same page regarding wedding colors. With just six weeks to plan, we don’t need sibling rivalry gumming up the works.”

“Oh, okay.”

“This way.” Gil led Noelle to the last room on the left, while the Buckhorns stayed in the lobby.

It wasn’t a large office, but it was big enough for his desk and a sma by-four card table. His desk held a twenty-seven-inch desktop Mac tha included the computing system in the monitor. The card table was bare except for a lamp and a pencil holder filled with pens and sharpened p

“Have a seat.” He held out his arm, indicating she should slip aroun side of the card table converted into a desk. “See if the chair is to your liking.”

She went to slip past him; just as she did, he shifted his weight, and ended up accidentally brushing her hip against his.

Gil didn’t back up.

“Um . . . er . . . sorry,” she mumbled.

“For what?”

“Bumping into you.”

“Oh,” he said in a sultry tone. “I don’t mind.”

She didn’t know what to say to that, so she made a dash for the chai was set a little too high and her feet didn’t quite touch the floor. She re around for the height lever to adjust it, but the controls were loosey-go and the chair seat plunged so low her breasts were almost level with th table.

Noelle readjusted and got the chair at the correct height. She ran her along the table. “This was so kind of you. When did you have time to s up?”

“Just before you got here. I keep the card table in the storage closet. can get a cloth to cover it, so it doesn’t look so plain.”

“You’re using a beanbag chair,” she said, just now noticing the dark beanbag chair parked behind his desk.

“Normally, I keep it here for my daughter, Josie, for when I have to her to work. I gave you my chair and took hers.”

“Well, that’s not fair to either you or Josie. I’m fine with a simple fc chair if you have one.”

“Don’t argue with me, Noelle Curry,” he said. “You’re the guest. Yo

the twin's the good chair. I'll bring a folding chair from home, and I don't want to
x anything else about it."

She stood up, feeling at a disadvantage sitting down. "That bossy al
stuff doesn't work on me."

"No?" He looked amused.

"No."

ill four- "What does?"

it "What does what?"

:" "What works on you?"

encils. "A man who lets me have my way."

d the The dimple in his cheek deepened. He tossed back his head and chu
lightly. Noelle studied him, not even trying to hide her appreciation of
gorgeous face.

she "You know what this means?"

"What?"

"We're at an impasse. I'm not about to let you sit in an uncomfortab
folding chair."

"Ditto."

"You *have* changed," he said. "The Noelle I remember would never
gone toe-to-toe with me."

r. It "I'm all grown up now."

ached He raked his gaze over her. "Yes, you are."

osey She sank her top teeth into her lower lip and felt a wave of heat blas
e card back of her neck.

The smile disappeared and Gil looked deadly serious, his gaze hook
hand her mouth. Her heart skipped a beat and her jaw loosened. He caught h
set this gaze and held it. Her body tensed, suddenly both hot and cold at the sa
time as a deep, unexpected yearning took hold of her.

We It was unsettling.

This hungry craving that had her aching to wrap her arms around his
: green pull his head down, and kiss him until both of their brains spun. She
imagined ripping off his clothing, throwing him down on the desk, and
bring having her wicked way with him.

Her cell phone dinged.

olding She looked down.

The text was from Vanessa. We worked out the color scheme.

ou get "Aah, the great color scheme crisis has been resolved," she said.

o hear “What?”

pha “Sierra and Sienna couldn’t agree on the colors for the wedding. The mom weighed in too. Want to bet who won?”

“My money’s on Vanessa,” he said.

Noelle texted back. And the winner is . . . ?

VANESSA: Red.

She raised her head and met Gil’s eyes. “How did you know?”

ckled “Sierra and Sienna took guitar lessons from me for a year at their m
his insistence. Vanessa’s a woman who knows her own mind.” He paused
his “Much like Crescenda.”

“Thanks for telling me. Forewarned is forearmed. Now I know exac
how to handle her.”

“Which means?”

le “I need to get the twins alone and find out what they truly want, then
bat for them with their mother.”

“How will you convince her to do what her daughters want?”

“Find a way to make the changes her idea.”

have “Seems like there’s a lot of subterfuge in the wedding planning gam
“Weddings are high drama. It takes a deft hand to keep things runni
smoothly. That’s actually how I became a wedding planner. Keeping
Crescenda calm during her numerous nuptials.”

t up the “If anyone can handle it, you can.”

ed on “The stakes are high.” She laughed. “This wedding will stream on T
Tie’s website and be featured on several entertainment news programs

er “I’m glad you can laugh about it. Feels like a lot of pressure to me.”

me “Pressure is what makes it exciting.” She rubbed her palms together

“Aah,” he said. “You like pressure? Tell me more.” He sat down on
end of her card table desk and leaned in.

s neck, She had the urge to back up, but there was nowhere to go. The wall
behind her and Gil in front of her. His eyelids were half-lowered, his s
l seductive. The man was as explosive as a firecracker.

“There’s something you should know,” she said. She could not affor
get sidetracked by this man. She had an assignment, and no handsome
was going to sway her from it.

“What’s that?”

“I never mix business with pleasure.”

Oh-ho, Miss Ego? What if he wasn't interested? What if she'd made an embarrassing assumption? Just because she was hot and bothered by him didn't mean he reciprocated her feelings. She felt the tops of her ears burn. Gosh, she was such a self-conscious goofball.

He didn't say a word, just kept studying her with a steady gaze.

"Okay, that's not true," she said.

"Then you *do* mix business with pleasure?"

"No, I mean . . ." She squirmed. "I just said that to keep you at arm's length."

"I'm listening." He kept staring at her, not moving a muscle.

Just watching, waiting.

"You're hot. Superhot, in fact. I like you. A lot. But here's the deal—here to work, not play."

"And if you were here under different circumstances?"

"I'm not."

"But if you were?"

"Look, you're a forever kind of guy and I don't believe in romantic comedies. So there's that. And you deserve someone who can love you until the cows come home."

"Until the cows come home? That doesn't sound very LA."

"It's something my Georgia farm boy Grampie used to say."

The amused smile was back. "You've never been in love?"

With you. When I was fifteen.

"I've been in lust," she said. "But I believe what most people think of as 'love' is really just desire."

"What about your grandparents? They seemed in love to me."

"Well, they were an exception."

"My parents love each other."

"Another exception. Those marriages are few and far between. And besides, who's to say that's not simply companionship and compatibility?"

"You know what?" Gil leaned in so close his terrific scent overtook her nose.

Noelle braced herself for a lecture on the joys of love and marriage. Of course, he believed in love. He'd been married. He was a widower.

"What?" she whispered.

"I tend to agree."

Wow, that was not what she thought he was going to say. Captivate

his stunning blue eyes, a million questions filled her mind. Why wasn't he a true believer? He was from Twilight after all, where romantic myths and legends ran wild. Had there been trouble in his marriage?

She'd come by her prejudice against wedded bliss fair and square. Her mother had been married and divorced five times. Dad was currently looking for wife number four. Most of the people she knew were divorced or looking for in rotten marriages. Being a wedding planner and seeing how engaged couples treated each other in the throes of wedding prep only served to cement her theories.

First came lust, then when that wore off, couples either divorced or fell into a mutually beneficial relationship that, if it succeeded, included companionship, compatibility, and shared values. It was the best anyone could hope for. Life was so much simpler if you just stayed single. But everyone thought that way, she'd be out of a job.

From the doorway came a shocked gasp. "You don't believe in love!" Startled, Noelle jumped, almost whacking Gil in the chin. He unhitched his hip from the corner of the card table and in unison, they turned to see Vanessa and the twins standing in the doorway looking appalled.

Noelle fumbled for something to say that would smooth the whole thing over, but nothing sprang to mind. Oh dear, her worst nightmare. Having people think badly of her. "I—er . . . this isn't—"

"How can you be our wedding planner when you don't believe in love?" Aghast, Sienna's voice came out hysterical.

"This is bad luck." Sierra wrung her hands. "A terrible omen."

"The girls wanted *you* to plan their wedding because your weddings were magical. We wanted a movie star's daughter. That's why they entered the essay contest in the first place. That's why we waited so long to start planning. I don't get it. How do you create such beautiful weddings when you don't believe in love?" Vanessa wailed.

Sierra clutched her head in her hands. "What are we going to do?"

"I'm calling Pamela Landry at The Tie, is what I'm going to do." Vanessa whipped out her phone.

"Wait, wait." Panic gripped Noelle by the throat.

Sienna smacked her palm against her forehead. "This is a total *disaster*."

"It's not," Noelle said, self-preservation kicking in. "And here's the why . . ."

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Chapter 5

Gil watched with amusement as Noelle charmed the Buckhorn twins and their mother, reassuring them that her own beliefs about love had nothing to do with the magical moments she would create for them. She was a wedding planner after all, not a matchmaker. Her worldview didn't matter. This was their celebration.

He didn't get to see the whole resolution though, because halfway through Noelle's spiel, he got a text.

Evelyn White, the principal from Josie's elementary school, sent the message. There's an issue with your daughter. Can you come up here now?

Gil startled and his pulse sprinted. What kind of issue?

EVELYN: It's best if you come see for yourself.

GIL: Be right there.

"I gotta go," he said.

Noelle looked concerned. "Is everything all right?"

"No." He pulled the building keys from his pocket and tossed them to her. "Could you lock up when you're done? There's a pressing issue with a kid."

"Surely," Noelle said. "What do I do with the keys after I lock up?"

"Keep 'em. I've got a spare and anyway you'll need access to the office when I'm not here."

He nodded at the Buckhorns and beelined for the back door.

His heart pounded all the way to Jon Grant Elementary as his imagination conjured up one terrifying scenario after another. He parked, checked in for security, and headed straight for the principal's office.

“Evelyn’s not in there,” the janitor mopping the floor told him as he past.

“Where is she?”

“Miss Reed’s second grade classroom.”

Miss Reed. That was Josie’s teacher. Gil pivoted on his heel and took running in the opposite direction.

“Watch out,” the janitor called. “The floor’s wet—”

He didn’t get the word out before Gil’s boots slipped and he went down hard. The janitor rushed over, but Gil waved him away and jumped to his feet. His health didn’t matter. Josie was in trouble.

“You okay?” The janitor looked worried.

“I’m fine.” His butt and his pride were stinging, but he was good. To avoid not to limp, he headed toward Miss Reed’s classroom.

Evelyn White met him at the door, her cell phone in her hand, and she motioned him into the hallway. Gil backed up.

“The janitor texted me that you fell. Are you all right?”

“I’m great. Where’s Josie? What’s happened?”

“She’s locked herself in the cloak closet.”

“There’s a lock on the cloak closet?”

“No, she wedged a ruler against the door handle, and we can’t pull it out. We could’ve forced it and broken the ruler, but we were afraid the sharp pieces might fly up and hit her in the face.”

“Smart thinking.”

“Nor did we want to create more drama for the students than what Josie already caused.”

That comment made him feel defensive, but he recognized his irritation for what it was. His own guilt.

“We tried coaxing her out, but she’s adamant. So I told Miss Reed to continue with her class as if nothing’s going on, but of course the kids can’t concentrate.”

“What happened beforehand?” He rubbed his aching hip.

“Are you sure you’re all right? We need to fill out an incident report.”

“I’m fine.” He grunted. “You can fill out your form later. Tell me about Josie.”

“They were out on the playground and when Miss Reed rounded up the children to return to the classroom, she couldn’t find your daughter.”

“You lost my kid?” Gil scowled.

flew “No, no. We found her hiding behind the shrubbery. She sprang out, into the building, hid in the cloakroom, and she’s refusing to come out.”
“Did she say why?”
The principal shook her head. “She just keeps telling us to go away.”

ok off “Take me to her.”
Evelyn White ushered him into the classroom. Every head swiveled and gawked at him. He ignored the teacher and the kids who were still wearing coats from the playground because Josie had inconvenienced them. He followed the principal to the closed door at the back of the room.

own his “Josie.” Evelyn White rapped her knuckles against the door.
“Go away!”

rying His daughter’s high-pitched voice went through Gil like an electric shock. His child was clearly upset. “Kiddo, it’s your dad. Please open the door.”
“D-daddy?” She hiccupped and that let him know she’d been crying.
“Come on out, sweetheart. I’m taking you home.”
“You should be firmer with her,” Evelyn White said. “We can’t have disruptions like this in the classroom.”
“How ’bout you don’t tell me how to raise my kid? I’ll deal with it.”
He rubbed his hip again and sent her a look.

t open. The principal got the hint. She didn’t want a lawsuit. Not that he’d expected—the fall had been his fault—but Mrs. White didn’t need to know that.
rp “Fine, but this behavior needs to end.”
“It will.”

Josie’s The door opened and Josie stood there looking so forlorn that his heart broke. Her eyes were red-rimmed and her nose runny. She swiped her face with the sleeve of her jacket. Then she saw everyone was staring at her and she ducked her head, her shoulders hunching forward as she curled inward.
to go on He hated seeing his normally spunky child looking so defeated.
Something had happened on that playground, and Gil would darn sure get to the bottom of it.
“C’mon,” he said. “Let’s go home.”

it.” He held out his hand and when Josie slipped her little palm into his, he squeezed tightly, Gil was prepared to slay any and all dragons for her.

out Thank heavens today was Friday and school was out all next week for the Thanksgiving holiday. By the time classes resumed on the following Monday, this whole thing will have blown over. Unfortunately, there were three concerts scheduled this weekend at the Windmill. He wouldn’t have

, ran much time with Josie as he would have liked, but he'd find a way.
." Gil helped Josie climb into the back seat of his pickup truck and buckled her up. "Wanna tell me what happened?"
" Josie shook her head.
"Something really upset you, huh?"
to She nodded.
ing their "But you don't want to talk about it?"
"No."
"It's pretty cold standing here with the wind whipping off the lake. I'd love a hot chocolate with marshmallows from Perks make you feel like talking."
"Uh-huh."
knife. He grinned and ruffled her hair. "That's what I thought."
r." "You're not mad at me?"
"Why would I be?"
"Because you had to come to school and get me." She stared down at her lap. "B'cause I caused trouble."
"Gil He cupped her chin and lifted it so that she had to look him in the eyes."
"When you're in trouble, I will *always* come and get you. No matter what you are, and I will never be mad at you. Got it?"
"Uhh-huh."
"We'll go to Perks and then you're gonna tell me what happened. Okay."
Ten minutes later, they were sitting across from each other at the coffee shop on the town square. Josie stirred her hot chocolate with a peppermint candy cane and watched the miniature marshmallows circle the cup.
"What happened on the playground?" he asked as nonchalantly as he could, peering at her over the rim of his mug.
"Some of the kids started making fun of me."
"What about?"
"Because I don't have a mom."
Gil winced. Kids could be so cruel. If you didn't fit in, weren't part of the norm, it was easy to become a target. "What'd they say?"
Josie's lips puckered. "I don't want to repeat it."
"How can I help you if you won't tell me?" His heart turned over. He hated that kids were picking on her.
"What they said was mean." She paused to dunk a marshmallow with a melting candy cane.

Was it wrong of him to press her? If she didn't want to talk about it, he leave well enough alone?

"Is this the first time these kids have said mean things to you?"

She shook her head.

"How long has this been going on?" Gil fisted his hand against his temple, doing his best to keep anger from creeping into his voice. He didn't want Josie believing he was upset with her.

She shrugged.

"A week? A month? All school year?"

"Since Silvey Zucker saw us coming out of the graveyard when we visit Mommy."

The hairs on Gil's nape lifted. He didn't like the sound of this. He remembered two of Josie's classmates had been cycling by on their bikes when they'd left the cemetery. Josie had waved at them, but the girls hadn't waved back. It had bothered her then, but apparently something more had been brewing underneath the surface for a while.

Silvey Zucker's dad ran the local car dealership and Ted was one of the richest men in Twilight. Gil was by no means poor—Tammy Jo's life insurance had seen to that—but he didn't have money to throw away on frivolous things like the Zuckers did. Ted Zucker was a loud, flashy braggart who'd been something of a bully back in high school. If Silvey was anything like her father, it sounded like the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree.

"So this has been going on since Saturday?" This was why Josie had been both cranky and clingy over the past week.

"Uh-huh."

"But these girls have been unkind to you for some time?"

"It just got worse after the graveyard."

"What did that girl say to you, Josie?"

Her bottom lip trembled. "She said Mommy died trying to run away from me because I was so ugly that she'd rather die than have me for a daughter." It couldn't have hurt him more if someone had taken out a sword and run it through his chest. A red-hot burst of rage boiled through his veins, but he couldn't let Josie see that. He had to keep a grip on his temper. He had to choose his next words carefully.

"You know that's not true, right?"

She nodded.

"Mommy loved you very, very much."

should “I know, but they said I’m a freak and that’s why you can’t find me
mommy. No one wants me for their kid.”

Oh hell’s bells. Those little gremlins. Gil gritted his teeth. “Honey, I
haven’t even been trying to find you a new mommy.”

high, “Because no one will like me?”

ant “No, no. It has nothing to do with you, sweetheart. I need to fall in l
first.”

“Like you fell in love with Mommy?”

“Like I did with Mommy,” he mumbled.

went to How did you explain to a seven-year-old that love and lust weren’t t
same thing when even adults got fooled, mistaking explosive sexual
chemistry for something more than it was?

ces He’d hired Tammy Jo as a singer in his band and there had been a re
adn’t sizzle right from the beginning. He’d been twenty-two when he and Ta
rad Jo married because she’d gotten pregnant after one wild weekend on a
trip to Galveston. She’d been on the pill, but she’d also been taking
the antibiotics and didn’t know that antibiotics could make the pill less eff
The condom had also broken that night. Under those circumstances, he
n pregnancy had seemed fated.

aggart Neither one of them considered any other option but marriage. They
ything both old-fashioned that way. If it hadn’t been for Josie, he didn’t know
and Tammy Jo would have ended up together, but along with the hot s
l been they had also respected and admired each other and that went a long w

In the end, they’d had a solid marriage, but he’d always known Tam
was melancholy at the way things turned out, longing for something m
than motherhood. Gil had tried his best to please her, putting her unhap
down to her postpartum depression and doing what he could to cheer h
Well, until the end when he’d—

from Gil shoved aside his guilt. He kept that part of his life buried down c
hter.”

In order to live with his guilt, he’d convinced himself that time wou
d run it changed his wife’s outlook and maybe it would have. Tammy Jo hadn’
he long enough for them to resolve their issues. He’d been fully committe
to their relationship, but he’d also had a secret longing for a deeper conne
He just didn’t know if such a thing was possible for him. Maybe love v
a fantasy encouraged by his lore-loving hometown.

“I don’t even remember Mommy,” Josie whispered. “I look at her p
and I try and try to remember her, but I can’t.”

a new “Come here, baby.” Gil scooted his chair back and patted his knee.

Josie got up and came over to sit on his lap. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tight. She buried her face against his chest, her warm tears dampening his shirt.

ove “I want you to ignore those girls. What they say isn’t true. Don’t listen to them.”

“Okay.”

“You’re going to meet mean people in this world who feel like they want to take their hurt out on others, but we’re not like that, are we?”

he She shook her head.

“Look at me, kiddo.”

She raised her chin and he dabbed at her tears with a napkin he pulled from the holder on the table.

ummy “You’re better than that. So when they tease you, just pretend it’s the sound of the wind blowing. Don’t hide. Don’t lock yourself in the closet. Hold your head high and go about your business.”

ective. “Okay.”

r “At first, they might get worse, trying to make you cry and run away, but you’re not going to do that, are you?”

were “No.”

if he “That’s right. If you don’t react, eventually, they’ll get tired and leave you alone. Can you do that?”

ay. “I’ll try.”

my Jo “That’s all anyone can ask.” He smoothed her hair and kissed her forehead.

ore “Now let’s forget all about this and go home. I’ve got a concert tonight. Aunt Gretchen will look after you, but I’ll be home in time to tuck you into bed.”

leep. After Gil left, Noelle had spent an hour convincing the Buckhorns that she could handle the wedding. She had led the twins and their mother through the color schemes most appropriate for this year’s winter wedding palette. What got them fully on board with her advice was showing them her portfolio of the successful celebrity weddings she’d planned.

All was smoothed over.

icture Crisis averted. *Whew.*

In the end, Noelle had gotten all three women to compromise on a color scheme.

burgundy, navy, and gold palette, putting a color wheel spin on Vanessa's desire for red, Sienna's urge for yellow, and Sierra's hankering for blue. She texted Pamela Landry at The Tie, telling her about the venue for the reception and the color choices and got the green light. While ostensibly Pamela trusted her judgment as the wedding planner, she still had to run all decisions past the woman since The Tie held the purse strings. If she was truly the best of the best, as Pamela had claimed when The Tie invited her to take part in their contest, why did she have to get permission?

It was annoying, but part of her contract.

She locked up the music venue, stuck Gil's keys in her bag, and headed back to the B&B. She wondered how things had gone with Gil and his daughter. She almost texted to ask him, but that seemed too forward, so she resisted the urge. While Noelle might have had a crush on him when she was a kid, she barely knew the guy now.

Never mind that he was ridiculously attractive.

It had been really nice of him, though, to set up a desk for her at the Windmill, but now she worried about having such close proximity to him again. Maybe it was a bad idea. She crinkled her nose.

Her heels clacked against the sidewalk. Her toes were aching. She'd been on her feet most of the afternoon and she couldn't wait to get back to her apartment and kick off her shoes.

She passed by Perks coffee shop and casually gazed in through the large picture windows at the cute café with bistro tables and blue gingham tablecloths.

Inside, she saw Gil sitting at a table, a little girl on his lap. The child's face buried against his chest so Noelle couldn't see her features, but she could see Gil's. He looked worried as he patted his daughter's back.

At that moment, he raised his head, reaching for the cowboy hat sitting on the table in front of him, and he spied her.

Their gazes met.

She stopped in her tracks, her heart beating wildly. What was it about that man that so revved her cardiovascular system?

He lifted a hand in greeting, offered her a soft smile.

She waved back and then quickly went on her way, not wanting to savor that tender moment with his child. Yep, sharing an office with him was starting to look more and more like a very bad idea. She'd already screwed up on the Buckhorns. She couldn't forget she was skating on thin ice. Best to

sa's all about Gil Thomas and keep her thoughts firmly centered on the we
e.

r the "And they all lived happily ever after," Gil said, reading the final line
ly fairy tale. He closed the book and put it on the nightstand.

in her Normally, he loved this nighttime ritual when he read Josie a bedtime
was and tucked her in, but for some strange reason, he'd been distracted to
her to his mind crammed with thoughts of Noelle Curry. More lyrics for the s
ded he'd been writing about her had flitted through his brain when he'd see
ded through the window at Perks, and now he couldn't get the lyrics—or h
out of his head.

o she And that was simply untenable.

ne was "Happily ever after like you and Mommy?" Josie asked.

im. "Like Mommy and me." Life wasn't that simple, but right now, Josi
needed fairy tales. When she was grown, he'd tell her the truth about h
relationship with her mother, but she didn't need to know that for year
years.

been "But you're not happy anymore, are you, Daddy?"

er What? That pulled Gil up short. Did he really come across as unhapp
didn't think so, but here was his kid with evidence to the contrary, and
Gretchen had said the same thing.

ig "I *am* happy," he said. "Aren't we living happily ever after together
and me and Aunt Gretchen."

l had "But we don't have a mommy to love us."

it she He paused, thinking of the best way to address this. "That's why it h
you so much when those girls said the mean things that they said. You
like there's some truth to it?"

ing on "I guess."

He ran a hand through his hair, not knowing what to say.

at this "Maybe if you found us a new mommy, you could be happy again a
could be a real family."

poil his Was she saying this because she believed having a stepmother woul
rting to the Silvey Zuckers of the world from bullying her? Or was she truly ac
ce with for a mother's love?

forget "What would you like Santa to bring you for Christmas?" he asked,
changing the subject. He was in over his head here. He needed some fe
perspective. Later, he'd talk to Gretchen and get her take on the situati

lding. maybe give his mother a call.

“I wanna skate in the living snow globe.”

of the “Got your back, kiddo. I entered us in the drawing, but remember it’s
random chance. We might not win a slot. Is there anything else you want
Christmas? But it can’t be a pony. We don’t have the space for a pony.
ie story as long as they were living at the Merry Cherub.

ight, Josie nodded. “I know, you already tol’ me. Besides, there’s someth
song else I want more.”

en her “More than you want a pony?”

er— “Lots more.”

“Well, let’s hear it.”

She reached for the rag doll at the foot of her bed. It was the doll Ta
Jo had bought Josie for her second birthday. She tucked the well-loved
e underneath the covers with her.

is “You’re not going to tell me?”

s and “You haven’t figured it out?” Josie searched his face.

“Sorry, your old pop is a little dense sometimes.”

py? He “Why, Daddy . . .” Josie met his gaze and held it. “I want a *mommy*
today Christmas.”

? You

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d stop
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on. Or

maybe give his mother a call.

“I wanna skate in the living snow globe.”

“Got your back, kiddo. I entered us in the drawing, but remember it’s random chance. We might not win a slot. Is there anything else you want for Christmas? But it can’t be a pony. We don’t have the space for a pony.” Not as long as they were living at the Merry Cherub.

Josie nodded. “I know, you already tol’ me. Besides, there’s something else I want more.”

“More than you want a pony?”

“Lots more.”

“Well, let’s hear it.”

She reached for the rag doll at the foot of her bed. It was the doll Tammy Jo had bought Josie for her second birthday. She tucked the well-loved toy underneath the covers with her.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“You haven’t figured it out?” Josie searched his face.

“Sorry, your old pop is a little dense sometimes.”

“Why, Daddy . . .” Josie met his gaze and held it. “I want a *mommy* for Christmas.”

Chapter 6

The next day, Saturday, November 18, Noelle, Vanessa, Sierra, and Si had planned to attend the Harvest Craft Fair to see if they could find inexpensive, locally sourced crafts to decorate the tables at the reception.

Noelle woke brimming with ideas for the double wedding. Despite her fears about working in Gil's office, she couldn't wait to get to the Win and dive into planning before meeting the Buckhorns at the craft fair and a craft fair before he ever showed up.

She grabbed coffee to go and a pumpkin spice muffin from the side table at the B&B's dining room and walked to the town square, her laptop computer bag slung over her shoulder.

Inhaling the crisp morning air, she listened to the autumn leaves crunch under the heels of her fashionable ankle boots as she traveled the cobblestone walkway leading into Sweetheart Park.

Yesterday, she'd made a big gaffe by telling Gil that she didn't believe in love within hearing distance of a client. She should have kept her mouth shut but when the look in his eyes had matched the sexy feelings churning through her body, she'd wanted him to know right up front where he stood with her.

She was all for hot sex, but a relationship? Not so much. For twenty years she'd managed to stay out of long-term romantic entanglements. She had no intentions of leading anyone on.

Especially Gil.

He was a good guy with a young daughter to raise. She wasn't about to complicate the man's life.

"Good morning!" strangers called to her as they passed by.

“Good morning!” Noelle returned the friendly greetings echoing throughout the park.

She’d forgotten how nice it was to live in such a friendly town with sense of community. Nostalgia washed over her, and she found herself missing her grandparents. Grammie had passed away from a sudden heart attack at seventy-one. Losing the love of his life after fifty years of marriage, Grampie had lost the will to live, and four months later, he’d died of a heart attack. The death of her grandparents had only strengthened her resolve to avoid marriage. She never wanted to go through the kind of pain her Grampie had gone through after losing his beloved wife.

Love, she’d decided at fifteen, simply made you too vulnerable.

While she was enjoying her visit to Twilight, the town’s romantic vibe certainly clashed with her own, as evidenced by the Sweetheart Tree in the middle of the bifurcating path in front of her.

She paused.

Her stomach did a funny little pitch and roll at the sight of the ancient pecan tree with heavy branches gnarled like old knuckles. Over the years, hundreds of couples had carved their names along with lovey-dovey sentiments into the weathered bark.

The original names, which had started the whole tradition, were those of two of the town’s founders, Jon Grant and Rebekka Nash. According to legend, the two teenage sweethearts found their love torn asunder by the Civil War, but they never stopped thinking of each other. Fifteen years later, they met again at twilight on the banks of the Brazos River in the same spot where the millstone town now stood.

In recent years, to preserve the old pecan, a white picket fence had been erected around it, along with a sign that warned: Do Not Deface the Sweetheart Tree.

Offered as a substitute to the lovers longing to be part of the tradition, the town had installed a metal frame around the tree trunk and made available purchase charms for engraving and attaching to the frame. This innovative feature had not been part of the Sweetheart Tree when Noelle was a teenager.

Impulsively, she hurried to the tree and glanced over her shoulder. No one was in the immediate vicinity. Gingerly, she stepped over the white picket fence. She leaned in, noticing how much the carvings had faded over time.

Dropping to her knees in the dirt, she searched the base of the tree, looking for one carving in particular. It took her several minutes of searching,

squinting, and pushing away fallen leaves from the roots and then, *boom* found it.

a solid Noelle ♥ Gil.

Her pulse pounded in her throat as she remembered the pocketknife grandfather had put in her stocking that final Christmas in Twilight. Wedding, her grandparents had napped after the holiday feast, she'd walked to the store to look for tree branches to whittle and spied Gil throwing a football with his dad.

They hadn't seen her, and she'd crouched behind the Sweetheart Tree to watch Gil in motion, admiring the way he moved, so athletic and graceful. She'd glanced down at the names carved on the tree and she'd fisted her fingers around the new Swiss Army knife in her coat pocket and the next thing she knew she'd made this carving.

Evidence of youthful foolishness.

She hoped Gil had never seen it. Quickly, she covered the carving with a pile of leaves.

“Embarrassing old flame?”

Noelle jumped and turned to see an attractive blonde about her own age opening up the charm kiosk.

“Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to startle you, Noelle.”

Noelle blinked. “Do we know each other?”

“We had a few sleepovers whenever you came to visit your grandparents.” The woman smiled.

“Benji Truesdale!” Noelle said. “Oh my gosh, I haven't seen you in thirteen years. It's been far too long.”

“I've been following your career.” Benji pointed at Noelle's laptop computer branded with her Once Upon a Wedding logo. “I caught you on *The Knot*.”

“Did you?”

“You were fantastic. You looked so professional and polished. I'm so proud of you, but then again, I always knew you'd do remarkable things.”

Benji held her arms wide. “Can I have a hug?”

“Oh, absolutely!”

They hugged each other. The years slipped away, and they were fifteen again, as comfortable as they'd been when they'd braided each other's hair and mooned over boy bands together.

“How did we lose touch?” Noelle asked, regretting not having kept in touch with Benji.

m, she Truth was, in the aftermath of her grandparents' deaths, it had simply too much to think about Twilight. The friends she'd made, the town where she'd spent her holidays and summers, were all painful reminders of what she'd lost, so she'd compartmentalized her life, cutting off this part and tucking it at the back of her mind. Now she regretted that defense mechanism, realizing just how much withdrawing had cost her.

ith his "Well, you lived in LA and once your grandparents were gone, there was no reason for you to come back."

ee to "I should have reached out to you," Noelle said. "There's no excuse for not have kept in touch. At the very least on social media."

er hand "Hey, I didn't reach out either. Sadly, life gets busy and childhood friendships go by the wayside if you don't tend them."

"I've missed you."

"I missed you too."

ack up "We've got a lot to catch up on." Noelle waved at Benji's left hand. "You've gotten married."

"Yes, to Spencer Maxwell. We married last spring."

age Since Noelle hadn't gone to school in Twilight, she didn't know many people who hadn't lived on her grandparents' block or been in their orbit. The name rang a bell. "Is your husband related to Dylan and Cody?"

"Yes, he's their older brother. I'll be in the wedding as the candlelighter."

rents." "That's wonderful! I'm thrilled!"

"We need to hang out. I've got to work the kiosk today. It's a fundraising project for the Angel Tree and I'm on the committee this year. It'll get busy when the craft fair opens, but after that, let's grab a drink, okay?"

case "Yes, let's do." They exchanged phone numbers.

latch." "Oh," Benji said. "Before you go, you might want one of these."

so She keyed open the kiosk, rummaged through a stack of boxes stored there, and found what she was looking for. Turning, she pressed a silver coin into Noelle's palm.

een It wasn't a normal coin, rather some special sort of currency with the Oliver Wendell Holmes quote "Love prefers twilight to daylight" on one side and a picture of Jon Grant and Rebekka Nash embracing on the other side of the coin.

"What's this?"

up with "Twilight's selling bona fide wish-granting coins now." Benji giggled. "A dollar apiece. This one's on me."

y hurt “What for?”
here “Just in case you have the inclination to make a wish.” She nodded i
hat direction of the Sweetheart Fountain several yards away.

d Benji was referring to the local myth that if you threw a coin into the
Sweetheart Fountain and made a wish to be reunited with your first lov
Jon Grant and Rebekka Nash, your wish would come true. The fancifu
e was brought tourists to Twilight. A mystique totally manufactured by the c
ouncil, but it worked. Twilight had turned love into a commodity and
not to they’d added specialized coins into the mix.

“You know.” Benji winked. “About Gil Thomas.”

Josie seemed to be her old self again, talking up a storm about the upc
Thanksgiving holiday as they walked to the B&B for breakfast.

“I see Inside, Gretchen and Delphine scuttled about as they replaced food i
on the breakfast buffet, kept the area cleaned, and chatted with the gue
glanced around but didn’t see Noelle among the diners.

ny Raising a hand in greeting, he smiled at his sister and guided Josie to
bit, but buffet. Perks of living on the property of the B&B. Free breakfast. Atd
he did work it off in repairs, and for a house that was well over a hund
hter.” years old, that was no small undertaking.

aising But he wouldn’t have it any other way. Moving to the Merry Cherut
super been the best decision he could have made in the aftermath of his wife
death, and Gretchen had told him many times she felt the same way.

He and Josie got their plates and parked themselves at a corner table
leaving the choicer spots for the guests. While Josie dug into her waffl
topped high with strawberries and whipped cream, Gil downloaded a p
dating app.

d Gretchen and his friends had been urging him to try online dating fo
er coin while, but he’d been resistant. After what had happened at Josie’s schc
e yesterday and what she’d told him last night about wanting a mommy
ne side Christmas, well, it was clear he needed to get serious about finding a w

ide of He wouldn’t have a mommy for her by Christmas this year, but may
next year if he was lucky.

Except when he thought about dating, Noelle was the one who popp
his head. *She’s not a candidate. She’ll be gone in six weeks.* Besides, s
ed. “A made it clear she didn’t believe in love.

To be honest, Gil was a little shaky on the happily-ever-after thing he had in the past. He didn't know if he could find what he was looking for on a dating site. "Never mind," he muttered and deleted the app.

"What did you say, Daddy?"

"Nothing." Gil looked at his daughter, who had whipped cream on her upper lip. He motioned to it with his finger. "Got a moustache."

"Oops." Josie giggled and scrubbed at her face with a napkin, then beamed, showing her missing front teeth. "Did I get it?"

"You did." He smiled at his daughter. He loved spending time with her. Being a single dad was hard, but he wouldn't change a thing about his daughter. Josie was his heart and soul.

Gretchen zipped by, carrying a big plastic tub filled with the dishes she had just bussed.

"Hey, sis," he called. "Have you seen Noelle?"

"She grabbed breakfast on the go and left early."

"Oh," he said, feeling a twinge of disappointment as he finished up his breakfast. "Can you keep an eye on Josie while I pop over to the Windmill and get set up for tonight's concert?"

"Sure thing." To Josie, she said, "Want me to put *Frozen* on for you in the parlor?"

"Yay!" Josie applauded.

"Help me stack these dishes in the dishwasher and then I can watch you," Gretchen said.

"Aww, Auntie, do I hafta?"

"Yes," Gil said firmly. "You do. Family helps each other."

"Okay." Josie got up to follow her aunt into the kitchen as Gil cleaned their table.

Remembering he needed to bring an extra chair to the Windmill, he grabbed a folding chair from the attic, tucked it under his arm, and left the B&B, walking through Sweetheart Park on his way to the music hall.

He hurried past the Sweetheart Fountain with the statues of Jon Gray and Rebekka Nash embracing. Twilight's monument to true love. He passed the fountain every day on his way to work and barely paid attention. If a car hadn't cawed loudly and pulled his attention in that direction, he wouldn't have seen Noelle.

She was standing on the edge of the fountain, her eyes on the water, and she was contemplating tossing a coin in. She was silhouetted in the moonlight.

himself. sunlight, looking like a goddess with her glossy whiskey-brown hair
te. skimming her shoulders and her stylish clothes molding to her curves.

Gil stopped in his tracks.

er Today, she wore thick black leggings, a long red tunic sweater, a red
black-checked headband, and cute little ankle boots. He much prefer
in this casual attire to the professional business suit she'd worn the day
before, but she rocked both outfits. Right now, she looked like the lead
a heartwarming Christmas movie.

her. Damn, but she was breathtaking.

life. She looked so graceful, her body lithe and strong, her balance on the
circular rock wall surrounding the fountain was impeccable. She exerc
she'd regularly. That much was clear. Yoga? Dance? Pilates? Maybe all three

She lifted her chin and gazed at the reunited high school sweethearts
from concrete. The legend of Jon and Rebekka etched into a plaque. *To
coin into the fountain, wish to be reunited with your first love, and you
his be.*

mill Noelle drew back her arm.

Watching, Gil stopped breathing. What was she wishing for?

in the Him?

Excitement pulled along his nerve endings, leaving his body buzzing
energy. What was *that* about?

with Noelle executed an underhand toss.

The object left her palm and sailed toward the embracing lovers in the
middle of the bubbling fountain.

ed off Gil waited for the coin to splash into the water, but she overshot the
fountain, and whatever she'd thrown hit without a sound, falling onto the
ground strewn with autumn leaves.

took a She'd missed the water.

cutting Did it negate her wish?

nt and That's when he saw she hadn't thrown a coin at all, but rather, she'd
a bite of muffin to a squirrel who scampered across the lawn to snag it
:d the stuff it into his plump little cheeks.

row *Good grief, Thomas, he chided himself. What the hell are you thinki
dn't course she wasn't making a wish for you. Wise up.*

as if It might be foolhardy, but so was lying to himself. Truthfully, it was
rning to deny his feelings. He'd *wanted* her to want him. But he had zero cha
with her for so many reasons he couldn't begin to count them all.

Before she could catch him gaping at her, Gil turned and jogged the way around the park.

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Before she could catch him gaping at her, Gil turned and jogged the long way around the park.

Chapter 7

After spending the morning at the craft fair, Noelle and the Buckhorns a skilled artisan all four of them liked who was able to customize table ornaments for the reception at a price within their budget.

Feeling triumphant, Noelle texted Benji, asking her to come over and out at the Roost.

Eager to catch up with her old friend and pick her brain for local vendors who might best meet her needs for the wedding, she stopped off at the store for wine and the ingredients for a charcuterie board. Carrying her groceries she skirted the corner of the B&B, opened the gate, and entered the back yard.

She headed for the garage apartment, mentally preparing how she would arrange the meats, fruits, and cheeses on the board, and not paying much attention to what was going on around her.

“Hey, lady.”

She stopped and looked around to see who’d called to her. A young girl with long dark hair was sitting cross-legged on the back porch swing with a tablet computer in her lap. She looked just like him with the same dark wavy hair and impossibly blue eyes.

“Oh, hello.”

“Do you make weddings?”

Noelle smiled. “Yes, I’m a wedding planner.”

“Cool. Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.” Noelle went up the steps to join the girl on the porch.

“Sit by me,” the girl invited, scooting over on the swing and patting the cushion beside her.

“My name’s Noelle. What’s yours?” Noelle settled her bags on the floor.

and held out her hand as she sat down. The girl shook it. Noelle was impressed with her poise.

“Josie.”

Gil’s daughter was slender with pigtail braids, and a gap-toothed grin. She wore trendy jeans, a fluffy orange sweater, and a popular brand of sneakers. Gil did an excellent job of keeping her dressed in the latest styles. Kud was her Dad. Although, her aunt Gretchen probably had a hand in picking out the child’s clothing.

“Nice to meet you, Josie. Are you thinking about getting married?”

“No!” Josie scowled so intently that Noelle squelched a laugh. “It’s not *me*. I’m just a kid. It’s for my daddy.”

A ripple of weirdness washed over Noelle. Gil was engaged? Why had she found he mentioned it?

“When is your dad getting married?”

“No, not yet.” Josie grinned. “He’s gotta fall in love first, but after that he’ll hang around and he’ll wanna get married so I can have a mommy. Is that something you can help me with?”

“Not until your dad proposes to the woman he falls in love with.”

“Oh.” Josie’s face fell. “He doesn’t even go out on dates.”

“Tell you what. I’ll give you my card and whenever that day comes, give me a call and I’ll return to Twilight to plan his wedding.”

Not really knowing why she did it, Noelle reached into her purse for a silver business card carrying case. She took it out. Something else came out of her purse with the case and hit the ground with a *clink*. She handed Noelle the card.

Josie looked down and traced the embossed Once Upon a Wedding scene. Gil’s was an open storybook with two entwined wedding rings in the center.

Noelle bent to see what had landed on the porch. It was the coin Bertha had given her. She straightened with the coin clutched between her fingers.

“What’s that?” Josie eyed the coin.

Noelle held out her palm.

“That’s pretty.”

“Here.” Noelle was never going to throw the silly thing into the four winds. She didn’t believe in that nonsense. “You can have it.”

“Thank you!” Josie took the coin and slid it into her pocket along with Noelle’s business card.

The screen door opened, and Gil’s older sister stepped out. “Sweet p

could you come help me set the table?"

Gretchen looked much as she had thirteen years ago when Noelle had seen her. The woman's brown hair, a shade lighter than Gil's own, was plaited into one long braid and secured by a kitschy turkey barrette.

"Noelle!" Gretchen squealed and swooped out onto the porch. "At last, we've been like two ships passing in the night. Delphine's been keeping up with your comings and goings." Gretchen wrapped her in a tight embrace. "It's so good to see you."

"It's good to see you too." Noelle returned the hug.

Gretchen stepped back. "I'm thrilled you're here. How fun that the Buckhorn twins won the essay contest and you're the one planning the wedding!"

"It is a blast to be back in Twilight."

"Who knew you'd become a wedding planner?" Gretchen's laughter rang from the porch. "I figured you'd be a writer or a librarian or a college professor. You were always so book smart."

"I sort of fell into the job, helping my mom with her many weddings." Noelle chuckled. "Turns out I have a natural knack for it."

"It's because you've got such great organizational and observational skills," Gretchen said. "Remember that Christmas we had a neighborhood scavenger hunt and you beat out everyone, even the older kids because you were calm and quiet and took the time to fully read the instructions."

"I won a gingerbread house." Noelle smiled, remembering.

"I was so jealous. I wanted that house so bad."

"And now you own your own gingerbread house."

"I do, don't I." Gretchen laughed. "I guess we've both found our place in the world."

"We have."

"I saw you on *The Klatch*. Delphine and I were watching it together at the front desk and when they introduced you, I started jumping up and down hollering, 'I know her, I know her.' You're the most exciting thing that has happened in this town in, like, forever."

"It's not that big of a deal." Noelle blushed.

"Tell that to the ladies at Hot Legs Salon and Day Spa. They can't stop talking about the wedding."

"So no pressure, right?"

"Oh, you'll handle it. Of that I have no doubt. Listen, you wanna join me,

for our family dinner? Although we eat pretty early on the weekends but
id last Gil has to be at the music hall by five for tonight's performance."

s "What a lovely invitation, but my friend Benji is coming over and we
going to have snacks and drinks and reminisce."

ast! "Oh, yeah, of course. You have groceries." Gretchen waved at the sign
ng me Noelle had set on the porch. "But it's an open invitation. You're welcome
hbrace. anytime."

"I thought you couldn't serve guests any meals but breakfast."

Gretchen waved that off. "Pffft. You're not a guest. You're family."

ir
Nothing was going according to plan.

r lit up
sor. First, when Gil arrived at the Windmill that morning, he realized he'd
forgotten the spare key after giving the original to Noelle the night before.
He'd trotted back home, skirting the park again just in case Noelle was
there.

s."
l
ood
: you Upon his return to the music hall, he discovered a pipe had burst in
the restrooms. It had been a relatively easy fix and luckily the floor was
concrete, but repair and cleanup had stolen two hours from his day. After
that, he had to track down a delivery that had gone awry, find a replacement
for the ticket taker who called in sick, and field a call from Principal W
who phoned to check on Josie.

ices in He told her about the Silvey Zucker mean-girl thing, and she promised
to
look into it. By the time he'd sorted out all that, it was two thirty. His
schedule had been thrown off by Noelle's arrival, and Gil lived and breathed
by his routine. As a single dad, if he didn't keep on track, everything would
unravel.

One off-kilter day and already things were starting to fray.

at the
vn
t's No more of that. He had to keep his mind off Noelle and solidly centered
on his daughter.

top The Turkey Trot was on Wednesday and today was the last day to get
his
costume altered. Because of his weekend schedule, Gretchen would have
dinner on the table by four, so he had just a little over an hour to go home
to
the costume, go to the tailor's, have the fitting, return to the B&B, eat,
then get to the music hall by five to greet the musicians and help them
for the seven P.M. concert.

n us Unless he just skipped dinner, which he refused to do. Family dinner

because an essential part of his routine.

He rushed home.

re're Josie was sitting on the porch watching a movie on her tablet compu

“Hi, Daddy.”

acks “Hey, kiddo, whatcha watching?”

me “*Spy Kids*.”

“Wanna help your old man get dressed in his turkey costume?”

He could wait until he got to the tailor to change into the costume, but the elderly man who did the tailoring lived just down the block. No need to get dressed at the guy’s house when he could easily do it here and just walk home. Yes, it meant parading down the block in a turkey costume, but Gil wasn’t afraid of looking silly. He didn’t give two hoots and a holler what anyone thought of him. Convenience was key.

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ore.

is still

“Sure.” Josie switched off her tablet and followed him to the carriage house.

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s

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ement

white,

“How do I look?” he asked a few minutes later once he was in the carriage house and peering at his daughter through the eyeholes in the papier-mâché toilet paper roll head.

“Your legs are baggy.” She giggled.

“Which is why I’m heading to the tailor.”

“Can I go with you?”

“Sure. But we gotta hurry.”

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ould

She took his hand, and they went out on the porch. Gil’s gaze shot to the carriage house, and he wondered if Noelle had returned. He thought about Josie if she’d seen her, but he didn’t want to look like he cared that much. He didn’t say anything.

They started down the steps. A pitiful mewling sound came from the sycamore tree next to the carriage house.

tered

Josie dropped his hand and pointed at a high branch. “Daddy, look. There’s a kitten and it’s stuck.”

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ve

me, get

and

set up

Gil followed her finger. Sure enough, a tiny white kitten clung precariously to a limb. “It got up there on its own. It’ll find its way down. C’mon, walk faster, hurry.”

Josie balked and folded her arms over her chest. “It’s a baby. We can’t leave her up there.”

r was

“If she’s still there when we get back, I’ll get her.”

Josie’s mouth turned down and she looked as if she might cry. “Dad

listen to her. She's *scared*."

Indeed. Once the kitten caught sight of them, her mewling intensified.
iter. "Please." Josie pressed her palms together.

How could he turn his back on a tiny kitten and his daughter's big-eyed plea? He sighed. "Fine."

"Thank you."

"Here, hold this." He took off the turkey head and thrust it at Josie. But the dang thing was almost too big for her to hold. He fetched a ladder from the shed, dragged it over to the tree, and, somewhat hampered by the baggy k over. of his costume and his cowboy boots, climbed the ladder.

Even when he got to the top rung, the kitten was still out of his reach. sn't only that, as he grabbed for it, the little cat hissed and flattened her ears against her head.

Dadgummit. He would have to climb into the tree to get her.

"Be careful, Daddy. Don't hurt her," Josie called from the ground.

costume "It's not the kitten's health I'm worried about," Gil muttered under his turkey breath. He was slightly acrophobic, but his fear was manageable *if* he could look down.

Concentrating on the kitten, he grabbed hold of the limb directly above his head, wedged one foot at the juncture where two strong branches diverged, and pushed off the top of the ladder with his other foot.

That's when the ladder fell, leaving Gil dangling eight feet off the ground.

to the asking Noelle and Benji were sitting in the living room of the small apartment building, so catching up on old times and discussing how little Twilight had changed. Benji had also told her about the best places in town to order wedding invitations, flowers, cake, and gifts for the wedding party. To be certain, she'd double-check reviews, but she trusted her old friend's judgment. There's felt like she had a head start on the planning. As they were talking, a knock sounded at the front door.

seriously Noelle and Benji exchanged glances.

we gotta "Are you expecting company?"

n't just "Other than you? No."

Noelle got up and Benji followed her to the door. She opened it to find Josie Thomas standing there, an oversized papier-mâché turkey head c in her hands.
ldy,

“Hi,” Noelle said. “What’s up?”

d. “My daddy.”

“Excuse me?”

yed “He needs you.”

“Oh?” Noelle looked over Josie’s head to see if Gil was behind her.

was not. “In what way?”

The Josie bobbed her head. “He’s stuck.”

1 the “Stuck?”

y legs “The ladder fell down.”

“That sounds problematic,” Benji said.

1. Not “I tried to lift the ladder, but it was too heavy,” Josie explained. “He

s go get help. You were closest.”

“Let’s go,” Noelle said, both intrigued and concerned.

She and Benji followed the girl outside.

Noelle whipped her gaze around the yard looking for a fallen ladder

is stranded Gil but didn’t immediately see him.

lidn’t “Where is he?” Noelle asked the girl.

Josie pointed at a sycamore tree, the top visible beyond the roofline

ove his carriage house, still wearing its yellow-orange autumn cloak. Noelle to

ged, around the corner of the house, Josie and Benji close behind.

Noelle stopped short and they almost plowed into her. For there, dre

round. a turkey, and hanging on to a high branch for dear life, was Gil.

t, **“What on earth are you doing up there dressed as a turkey?”** Noelle a

ed. Not waiting for a reply, she motioned for Benji Maxwell to help her

the two women grabbed hold of the ladder and righted it underneath hi

n, Gil glanced down, so relieved to have help that he didn’t mind a littl

and ribbing. He’d expected his daughter to go for Gretchen, but he’d take

nock whatever he could get. “It’s a long story.”

“One I’m eager to hear.” Noelle sounded amused.

“Me too,” Benji said.

Noelle scooted the ladder into place, and Gil touched the top rung w

nd toe of his cowboy boot and breathed a sigh of relief. Noelle settled bot

feet on the bottom rung, standing on the ladder to anchor it in place.

latched “I’m holding it steady,” she said. “You’re safe. C’mon down, Thom

Turkey.”

Even though his arms ached from dangling, Gil managed a laugh. His dismount from the ladder wasn't particularly graceful, and he had a wince to kiss terra firma once his feet were on the ground, but mostly, he was grateful as hell he didn't end up with busted bones.

He Noelle stepped back as he came down.

He turned to face her. "Thank you."

"Happy to help." Her smile was wry. "Love the costume."

"It's for the Turkey Trot on Wednesday."

"I figured."

"Sorry to have troubled you."

He said to "No trouble at all. You're running in a turkey costume?"

"I'm the official mascot. I cheer on the runners."

He asked "And the reason you were in a tree?" Noelle folded her arms over her head and her teasing grin widened. "If memory serves, you're afraid of heights." How had she remembered that? Cringing, Gil felt the tops of his ears

He remembered One time at the local water park when they were kids, she'd come up to him at the tallest flume in the park. He'd been trying to gather his courage to follow his friends down, gripping the sides for dear life, but determined to look off master his fear.

"Are you scared?" she'd asked him.

He confessed as "Terrified," he confessed because she'd given him such a genuine grin.

"Just close your eyes," she said. "And don't look down. That's what I want."

He asked. Then she'd stepped around him, wrapped her arms around herself, and plunged down the flume. After that, he'd had to let go of his fear and face her. No way was he going to let a younger kid show him up.

He remembered. He met her gaze. She possessed the same warm, accepting smile now as she had back then.

He asked. "A fear I've mostly conquered," he said, reaching into the pocket of his jacket and pulling out the tiny white kitten who'd crawled to him while he'd been suspended, and whom he'd managed to grab onto with one hand without kill himself in the process.

He remembered. Noelle, Benji, and Josie let out a collective "Aww."

He asked. "I wanna hold her!" Josie said. "Canna hold her?"

He remembered. The tiny kitten dug her claws into Gil's palm at the commotion and he winced. "Shh," he whispered. "You gotta be gentle. She's a baby and she's scared."

He asked. "Okay," Josie whispered back, dropping the papier-mâché turkey he

is putting her hands together in front of her.
ld urge Gently, Gil transferred the kitten into his daughter's upturned palms
; "She's so little." Josie softly stroked the kitten's head, and soon the
began to purr.

"She likes you," Noelle said. "You have a way with cats."

"Canna keep her, Daddy?" Josie asked. "Canna, canna, canna?"

"Honey, she's probably someone's pet. Don't get your hopes up."

"But she might be a stray. She could be a stray."

He didn't want her to get her heart broken over a kitten she might not
able to keep. "We'll take her to the vet in the morning and see if she has a
chip or if they've heard of anyone who lost a kitten."

"I'm gonna name her Snowball."

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age to head. "We'll get her a bowl of cream and a soft bed and—"

d to A car horn honked, and the driver stuck his head out the window to
"Those are some hot turkey legs, Thomas."

rin. Noelle and Benji giggled. Gil rolled his eyes and muttered, "Everybody
comedian."

I do." "They are some pretty hot legs," Noelle said.

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bring your kitten inside and we'll get her a soft place to sleep." Putting
w as palm to the back of his daughter's head, he guided Josie inside and away
from his most embarrassing moment.

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Chapter 8

On Sunday morning, Noelle lounged in bed, grateful for a day to sleep before diving full force into the wedding planning on Monday. She was dealing with jet lag and, if she dared to admit it, her growing attraction

She couldn't stop thinking about what a great dad he was. Climbing to rescue a kitten for his daughter when he was afraid of heights. The image of him in that tree, dressed in a turkey costume, brought a smile to her every time it popped into her head.

Which was far more often than it should have. Yes, he was hot. Yes, they had chemistry. Yes, he seemed like a truly nice guy.

But so what?

She was only in town for a short while. Nothing could come of it. She was a city girl through and through and he was a small-town guy. Best to keep him as nothing more than a sexy fantasy slotted far into the back of her mind.

Yawning, she rolled over and was about to go back to sleep when her phone buzzed. Lazily opening one eye, she reached for her phone to see who'd texted.

GIL: Do U want 2 come 2 church with us?

Noelle paused. The only times in her life when Noelle had attended church had been with her grandparents and she wasn't particularly religious, but she threw back the covers, sat up, and stared at his text.

Did she?

GIL: We attend the Presbyterian church, same as the Buckhorns. It's just a few blocks away.

Well, that was convenient. Attending would give her an opportunity to scope out the venue where the Buckhorns wanted to hold their wedding.

NOELLE: Sure.

GIL: Meet us outside in ten. We'll walk over.

NOELLE: C U then.

She tossed her phone on the bed, flew to the closet, and scrambled to get dressed. No time for breakfast. She pulled a power bar from her purse, gobbled it as she applied her makeup. By the time she reached the bottom of the stairs where Gil, Gretchen, and Josie were waiting for her, she was breathless and oddly excited about church. Not because she wanted to hear the sermon, but because Gil had invited her.

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to Gil.
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"Good morning," Gretchen said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Wonderfully, thank you."

Gil smiled. "Are you bundled up warmly enough?"

"I think so." The air had a slight chill to it, but her jacket was insulated. "I'll heat up as we walk."

, they

Gil guided everyone through the backyard gate and clicked it closed behind them. She caught a whiff of his aftershave and a helpless smile crawled over her face. He smelled so darn good. Like pumpkin spice and pine.

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To Josie, Noelle asked, "How's the kitten?"

Josie looked ready to tear up. "Daddy took her to see Sam this morning and he found out she had a chip."

"Sam Cheek is our vet," Gil explained. "I called him first thing and he opened up the clinic for us."

"The kitten belonged to Ms. Isabel." Josie sounded glum.

church
ut she

"Isabel Merchant is an older lady who lives on the next block," Gil explained. "She'd left her front door open while she was unloading groceries and the kitten got out. She was so grateful that we returned her. Her husband died last month, and her daughter got her the kitten for company."

"So I don't getta keep her." Josie sighed.

"Maybe Santa will bring you a kitten of your own for Christmas," Noelle said.

"Really?" Josie perked right up. "You think so? Dad, can Santa bring me a kitten for Christmas?"

"Honey, having a pet is a big responsibility," Gil said. "You can't ju

to one on a whim. We have to be sure you're really ready for one. Maybe
g. year."

"But I loved Snowball." A tear trickled down Josie's cheek.

Noelle felt for the child. It hurt to fall in love with an animal and not
able to keep it.

"Remember, Ms. Isabel said you could go over and visit the kitten a
o get you want. Let's start with that."

then "I guess so." Josie blew out her breath. "But my heart is kinda broke

om of "Hey," Noelle said, looking for something to distract the girl. "Have
ever played I Spy?"

hear a "Yes, yes." Josie's mood lightened immediately. "I spy something p

Noelle looked around. "Is it the pot of chrysanthemums on your nei
porch?"

"Nope." Josie shook her head.

"Is it the red ribbon in your Aunt Gretchen's hair?"

ted. "No."

Noelle shot a glance over at Gil. He gave her a gentle smile.

"Give up?" Josie asked.

"No, no. I can do this." Noelle tapped her chin. "You're pretty. Is it

nd Josie laughed. "No, silly, it's *you*." Then Josie threw a look at Gil ov
shoulder. "Isn't Noelle pretty, Daddy?"

ing Gil's eyes found Noelle's and the smile slipped from his face. "Yes,
said in a serious voice. "Noelle is very pretty."

"You didn't guess it. I win." Josie did a little jig.

he But Noelle couldn't help feeling that she was the one who'd won.

Inside the church, Gretchen slid into the pew first, followed by Josie
Gil, leaving Noelle to slide in beside him. Other people arrived, forcin
Noelle to scoot nearer to Gil until they were so close their shoulders w
almost touching.

oceries She'd never been in this building; her grandparents had attended the
sband Baptist Church on the other side of town, but the reverential smell rem
her of them, and she felt a pang of sorrow that Grammie and Grampie
oelle no longer part of her life. She'd lost a lot with their passing—structure
security, a soft place to land.

g me a And yet, here in Twilight, she'd found those qualities again.

ist get Noelle inhaled deeply and tried to focus on what the minister was sa
but her thoughts were all over the place and she couldn't seem to corra

the next She sneaked a sidelong glance over at Gil.

Through the stained glass window, bright autumn sun filtered in, bathing his profile in an ethereal light. He looked enrapt. Sustained.

to be Joyous.

The man looked filled with the Holy Spirit.

anytime His pumpkin spice-and-pine scent tickled her nose again. The fragrance creating an odd but intense longing for something she'd never had. She "en." compelling urge to reach for his hand and press her soft palm against his "you" calloused one.

It was insane.

pretty." This feeling.

neighbor's This yearning.

To keep from following her impulses, she squeezed her hands into fists and dropped them into her lap. The moment felt weighted and special, although she had no good reason for why.

She decided to fully embrace it, this hyperawareness of everything.

The tweed pattern of his wool sports jacket. The sharp crease of his starched dark-wash blue jeans, the cowboy boots that were worn down at the heels. The tiny white dollop of shaving cream right below his earlobe. "you?" she saw the Barbie Band-Aid wrapped around his left knuckle and started "ver her" grinning.

"he" When she'd picked the Buckhorn twins' entry as a winner and decided to come to Twilight, she had expected a nostalgic trip down memory lane. What she hadn't expected was for the past to welcome her home with wide open arms.

g, then If fifteen-year-old Noelle could see her now—sitting in the church pews beside Gil Thomas—she'd literally lose her mind with rapture.

ere *He's not yours to claim. Calm down,* she told the girl she used to be.

Why had she come to church with him? What game was she playing? "First" had a life in Los Angeles, and he had his life here. She was fooling herself. "indeed" she thought anything could come of this thrilling attraction.

were She had nothing to offer a traditional man like Gil. He needed a woman who could play wife and mother and love the role to pieces. That just wasn't her. Given her background and her views on romantic love in general and marriage in particular, she just didn't have the tools. She had to honor the "ying," truth. She wasn't the marrying kind.

l them. Marriage?

Good grief. You've been in town for three days and you're thinking marriage? What's happening to you?

She nibbled her bottom lip. She was a wedding planner. Was it so surprising that marriage dominated her mind?

Pull the plug on the fantasies. Live in the here and now.

Josie was wriggling in her seat, turning around and peering over her shoulder, waving at someone.

Gil placed a hand on his daughter's knee, and Josie turned back around to face the front. He smiled down at Josie with such an expression of love on his face that Noelle's heart clutched. Her father had never looked at her the way he looked at Crescenda, either, for that matter. She felt a tug of jealousy then, not resentment that Josie's parent loved her so very much, but a green-eyed envy that she'd never experienced that kind of unconditional parental love. Her parents had simply been too self-absorbed to give a child the attention she'd needed.

Gil turned to look at her then, the smile still on his face, transferring divine light from Josie to Noelle. He shifted, oh-so-slightly, and his knee bumped into hers.

Intentional?

Just barely a touch, but she felt it like a lightning bolt striking straight at the center of her heart. She sucked in her breath through clenched teeth and fixed her attention on the man in the pulpit.

The minister was talking about the sustaining power of unconditional love. "Real love is not about physical attraction, although that is a necessary component in a healthy, well-rounded romantic relationship. Real love is about wanting the best for the other person, regardless of what it means for you. Real love is caring for others without expecting anything in return."

Noelle cast a sidelong glance at Gil just as he turned to look at her.

Their gazes met.

She felt the impact like a punch to the stomach, hard and quick. His eyes burned, twin hot flames. She stopped breathing.

His eyes rounded wide, and his lips parted. She caught a glimpse of straight white teeth and smelled peppermint on his breath.

"Believe in the power of love," the minister said. "Whenever you put your faith in love there's no reason to worry. Believe that love will show you where you need to go. Let love lead your heart, above all else. Love has the power to transform and heal."

about Gil's gaze never left her face.

Noelle couldn't look away. Didn't want to look away.

The minister continued, "As Paul says in First Corinthians: 'Love is and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth.' And love is what we should strive to live by. Not just with family, friends, and your closest intimates, but with everyone."

and to Noelle finally took a breath.

on his The minister signaled the piano player. "Now, let's open our hymnal at way. page twenty-three and raise our voices as we sing 'My Savior's Love.'

ge of Gil took the hymnal from the back of the pew in front of them and opened it. He held the old hardcover book out in front of him so she could reach for it just as Gretchen did the same for Josie. Piano music and the accompanying choir started the song as the congregation joined in.

ove. The service was old-fashioned. Quite unlike the modern megachurch that she attended once with a friend in LA where the hymns were projected on the jumbotron. This service was intimate and sweet, creating that powerful sense of a close-knit community she'd forgotten existed.

tion The music welled up inside her, stoking her emotions and bringing a tear to her eye. How much she'd missed this town without even knowing it.

that She dabbed at her eye with a knuckle.

ee Gil touched her wrist.

ht to Noelle looked down to see him pressing a clean handkerchief into her hand. His kindness touched her deeply. She smiled at him through a wisp of film of tears.

1 and He leaned his head down to hers and whispered, "Thinking about your grandparents?"

al love. She nodded, unable to speak.

is Then he did the darnedest thing. Gil slipped his arm around her shoulder and drew her closer, and held the hymnal up higher. Singing in perfect harmony, their grateful voices joined those around them and merged into a tender moment of connection.

s for And she told herself that tomorrow she'd get her mind back where it belonged, on wedding planning.

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“Would you like to eat lunch with us?” Gretchen invited Noelle when service was over.

Oh yes. She wanted that more than anything, but her emotions were not after that service. She couldn't stop thinking about how Gil's arm had draped around her shoulder as they'd sung together and about how easily he could derail her from her mission.

She needed distance from this little family. Needed to clear her head and put on her logic goggles. She'd gotten swept away by the religiously welcoming community, and lingering grief over losing her grandparents.

Time for some boundaries.

“Thank you so much for the invitation, but I've got a lot of work to do,” she said, which was certainly true.

“On a Sunday?” Gretchen sounded disappointed.

“The day of the week doesn't matter much to me.”

“Please,” Josie wheedled. “We're going to Froggy's for fried chicken.”
“As tempting as that invitation sounds . . .” And it was tempting. Froggy's made the best fried chicken in the world. “I'm going to have to decline.”
“Thank you so much for asking.”

“Aww man.” Josie scowled. “That stinks.”

“Don't pressure her,” Gil gently chided his daughter. “Noelle's allowed to make the choices that are right for her. Don't make it difficult for her to do so.”

Josie rolled her eyes and Noelle wondered if it was a lecture she'd heard often.

“What did I tell you about eye rolling, missy?”

“That it's rude, but Daddy, I want Noelle to come with us.”

“And we don't always get what we want, now do we?”

“No.” Josie glowered and tucked her hands into her armpits.

“Would you like it if someone tried to make you feel guilty for not complying with what they wanted you to do?”

“No.” Her tone softened.

“Tell Noelle you're sorry.”

“Sorry,” Josie mumbled, toeing the church lawn with the tip of her black patent leather shoe.

“Look Noelle in the eyes when you talk to her.” Gil put a hand on his daughter's shoulder.

Josie raised her head and met Noelle's gaze. “Sorry for being bratty.”

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ould

Noelle smiled. “That’s perfectly all right. I can be bratty sometimes
Josie returned her smile, and all was well. Noelle waved goodbye to
Thomas as they headed toward the lake and Froggy’s while Noelle t
back to the B&B.

Part of her ached to go with them, but the part of her that knew she l
keep her feet planted firmly on the ground was relieved.

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eantry,
ts.

It would be so very easy to fall in love with this town, with this
community, with Gil Thomas and his daughter. If she had any hopes o
keeping her heart safe, she had to stay on her toes.

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do,”

Good thing she’d be so busy in the weeks leading up to Christmas th
she’d have little time for anything else.

And that’s exactly how she wanted things to be. Work had seen her
through all of life’s ups and downs. It would see her through this too.

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After their meal at Froggy’s, as they returned to the B&B, Gretchen
reminded Gil that he’d promised to winterize the pipes. The forecast w
that the first hard freeze of the year was due to arrive on Thanksgiving
evening along with potential snow flurries.

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o say

He parked Josie in the parlor of the B&B with a movie and Delphin
promised to keep an eye on her. He and his sister gathered supplies and
outside to wrap and cap the water spigots.

heard

Gretchen held the supplies like a surgical nurse in the operating room
passing him the tools as he asked for them.

“Plumber’s tape.” He held out a palm.

She smacked the roll of tape into his hand and watched as he wrapped
around the coupling. “So what was that all about with Noelle at church

“Huh?” He peered over at Gretchen, who’d squatted down beside hi

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loing

“You putting your arm around her.”

“She was sad about her grandparents. I was just trying to make her f
better.”

“Uh-huh.” Gretchen’s voice held a knowing tone.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

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“You’re pretty talented at hiding your motivations from yourself.”

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is

“Humph.”

“You like her.”

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“Yeah, so what?”

too.” “She likes you too.”

the “Again, so what?” He grunted. The tape had gotten twisted. Frustrated
turned yanked it off, wadded it up, and tossed the mangled tape over his shoulder.

“So, I think you two would make a good couple.”

had to “I don’t recall asking your opinion.” He peeled off another piece of tape
and tried again.

“She wanted to come to lunch with us, I could see it on her face, but
f conflicted,” Gretchen said.

“I probably shouldn’t have touched her without her permission.” He
hat shouldn’t have, but when he’d settled his arm on her shoulder, just intending
to comfort her, she’d leaned into him and hadn’t moved away. “She’s good at
good boundaries. That’s healthy.”

“Unless it’s just avoidance.”

“Can we not talk about it?” he asked, finally getting the tape on correctly.
He held out his hand. “Wadding.”

arned Gretchen passed him a worn-out tea towel. “She’s good for you.”

He raised his head to stare at his sister. “How do you figure?”

“She’s shaking you out of your rut.”

He curled the towel around the spigot. “We’re not having this discussion.
e thought I made that clear.”

d went “I know you need the rut in order to keep things on track. I know your
n, routine is important, but you’ve turned stodgy, Gil, and you’re just now
thirty. It’s time to live a little.”

“Cap.” He would not indulge his sister by feeding this conversation.

ed it She handed him the Styrofoam cap to fit over the towel-wrapped faucet.
l?” “Tammy Jo would want you to move on.”

m. “Moving on is one thing,” Gil said. “Leaping into the fire without looking
is a whole other prospect.”

eel “And yet you put a desk for her in your office.”

“I shouldn’t have done that,” he mumbled, regretting the impulse all the while
and he hadn’t spent a single hour in his office with Noelle in it. To be honest,
he didn’t know why he’d offered to share his office. In hindsight, it was a
dumb idea, but he didn’t know how to reverse it now.

“It’s okay to be attracted to her.”

“Gretchen, if you don’t hush up I’m gonna stuff one of those tea towels
your mouth.”

“Idle threats.”

He picked up a tea towel from the stack she had on the ground in front of her. “You that confident?”

Laughing, Gretchen raised her palms and tried to get to her feet from a crouching position, but lost her balance and ended on her back.

He pantomimed jamming the towel into her mouth, teasing as they had done with the kids whenever Gretchen picked on him.

“Um . . . Dad.” Josie was standing on the porch looking down at the tablet tucked under one shoulder. “Why are you being mean to Aunt Gretchen?”

Gretchen tilted her head back so she could see Josie on the porch. “I’m not setting me, Jo. Your dad’s picking on me.”

Josie flew down the steps and flung herself over Gretchen’s body. “Dad, don’t hurt Auntie!”

“I’m not hurting her.” Gil jumped to his feet, hating that Josie thought he was capable of hurting anyone, much less his own sister.

Gretchen laughed so hard, tears came to her eyes. “We were just teasing. Sweet pea. Siblings do that sometimes.”

“Oh.” Josie’s eyes glazed. “I wish I had a sibling.”

“Maybe someday.” Gretchen winked at Gil. “If your dad will ever get up from his rut and look around.”

Gil put down a hand to help first Josie and then Gretchen off the ground. Chuckling, Gretchen dusted grass from her hair.

“What’s a rut?” Josie asked.

“Doing the same thing over and over, day in and day out,” Gretchen said.

“Like you’re one to talk.” Gil glowered.

“Oh, I *am* one to talk. I have a date tonight, so you’ll have to forage for your own dinner.”

“I can handle that.”

“See, taking the first step out of your rut isn’t that hard. Just do one step each day that’s different from the day you did before. Tonight, it’s eating at my house instead of mine.” With that, Gretchen turned and went up the steps.

“Hey, you’re not going to help finish wrapping the pipes?”

“Nope,” his sister said. “Consider it your penance for not letting me talk about Noelle.”

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Chapter 9

On Monday morning, Noelle decided to stay holed up in the Roost cre wedding planning bible and making phone calls instead of going to the Windmill and working at the card table desk in Gil's office. After that inspiring church sermon, being near him felt unsustainable.

At least for today.

In flannel pajamas, bathrobe, and her whimsical Bigfoot house shoe she'd planned on sneaking into the B&B early before most of the other were stirring, grabbing breakfast to go from the buffet, and scurrying to the apartment.

She darted outside in the morning dusk only to run into Gil, who was leaving the B&B carrying a white box of what looked like donuts.

Busted.

Of course he would catch her when she looked her worst—hair mussed, no makeup, baggy pj's and Bigfoot slippers. She should have taken the time to get dressed. She knew better than to go out in public without looking her best. Crescenda had drilled that into her. Image mattered. So much for her covert, buffet-raiding mission.

Gil, on the other hand, looked magnificent. Rugged cowboy to the max in his shearling jacket, white Western shirt with silver snaps, and snug-fit Wranglers; those sharp blue eyes and daring dimples looked especially appealing in the dawning sunlight.

"Good morning," he said.

"Morning," she mumbled, fixing her gaze on the roofline above his head and the sycamore tree she'd rescued him from. Her feet pointed in the direction of the B&B, but he seemed inclined to talk.

“Going in for breakfast?”

“Yup.”

“I was just picking up mine and Josie’s. I let Josie sleep in since she doesn’t have school this week.”

“Donuts?” She eyed the box. Noelle loved donuts.

“Pastries.”

Ack! She loved pastries even more. Though she rarely ate them. Too carbs, too much sugar.

“Gretchen made kolaches. Three flavors. Apple, cherry, and cheese.

“Apple’s my favorite.”

“I’m afraid I got the last of those. At the rate the guests were swarming there might not be any pastries left. But if you want, I’ll share mine. I’ll bring you up two of each flavor.” With his elbow, he motioned toward his house.

“Come on in, I’ll divvy out a couple for you.”

“Umm . . .” Going into his house was the very last thing she wanted she did love apple kolaches.

“Gretchen uses the apples from our trees.” He inclined his head toward the fruit trees at the back of the property. “And I put on a pot of coffee while the guests left the house. Coffee and apple kolaches, breakfast of champions.”

She should say no. Just thank him and just go on into the B&B or run back to the Roost.

Heavy lids hooded his eyes, the thick lashes giving him an insouciant look. He’d sprouted beard stubble since his shave on Sunday morning and she found the slight scruff wildly appealing. Then again, she loved his smooth, freshly shorn look just as much. Shaven. Unshaven. The man was objectionably hot.

“You coming?” He stepped toward the cottage.

Damn her, she was.

He opened the door, stood to one side to let her in. They stepped into the open concept kitchen and living area. He set the box on the countertop, took off his coat, and hung it on the coat tree by the door. Noelle was wearing a bathrobe and he didn’t offer to hang it up for her. Yay.

“Just let me check on Josie,” he said. “Help yourself to the coffee.”

He disappeared down the hallway as Noelle moved to the coffee pot. He was back before she could find a cup.

“Josie’s conked out. I don’t know how she can sleep so hard.” He turned off and shrugged. “Kids.”

Something was gnawing on him, but she could see it had nothing to do with her. Best to keep her mouth shut and not dig into it, but that didn't stop her from wanting to erase the frown causing a furrow between his eyes and that faraway look in his eyes.

Not her problem to solve.

Gosh, it was so easy to fall back into her people-pleasing, childhood habits. Her therapist had once told her that people-pleasing had been her way of trying to control a chaotic environment. Noelle wasn't sure she bought that, but hey, she'd managed to survive growing up in her famous parents' shadows, so maybe there was something to it.

"Where did you go?" she asked, studying his face.

He gave a short chuckle that was more snort than laugh. "I was going to ask you the same thing. You seemed a million miles away."

"Not miles," she said. "Decades."

"Thinking about your grandparents?"

That was close enough. She nodded.

"The holidays do bring up old memories." His steady gaze locked on her.

"I don't really get into celebrating the holidays. Not since I lost Grandpa and Grampie."

He grinned. "Oh, you will this year. You're back in Twilight and just in case you forgot, we go all out."

"I recall."

"You're coming to Thanksgiving dinner with us," he said. A statement, not a question, as if it was a foregone conclusion.

"What if I have plans?"

"Do you?"

"I could have plans."

"With whom?"

"Benji."

"Then bring her along."

"She did invite me to go out to Thanksgiving dinner with her family, but they aren't cooking this year because of all the wedding prep, but I haven't said yes yet."

"I could get Gretchen to ask the Buckhorns and Maxwells to our Thanksgiving dinner. Unless that's crossing a boundary."

"Actually, that might be fun. It would give me an opportunity to socialize with the brides and grooms and learn more about them in an informal

do environment.”

t stop “Consider it done.”

rows “Gretchen won’t mind?”

“Gretchen is a more-the-merrier kind of hostess, but I’ll run it by her to make sure.” He came over to where Noelle stood at the coffee station, shoulder brushing lightly against hers as he reached for a coffee cup from the rack.

into Accidental or on purpose?

nts’ She tilted her head and slanted him a sidelong glance.

He was looking down at her, a big grin on his face. Oh, definitely intentional. Gil dipped his head and for one freakish, trapped-in-her-teasing-to-fantasy second, she thought he was about to kiss her.

She startled in a total *hot-dog-let’s-do-this* kind of way, then realized embarrassed, that he was going in for the creamer nestled in a turkey-saucer ceramic dish.

He stilled. His hand outstretched.

n her. She held her breath.

mmie His blue eyes glimmered in the light spilling in through the kitchen window and the smile faded from his face. He wasn’t quite touching her stomach almost.

The air between them quivered with energy.

Hello, Dolly, she was quivering.

ent, not He wrapped his hand around the plastic pod of creamer, his forearm pressed against her breasts. She should move, get out of the way, but her feet seemed welded to the floor.

Holy wedding vows.

Her body heated from deep within her center, spreading out in all directions, burning her skin, her neck, her cheeks. Time, as a concept, collapsed in on itself and no longer existed. She was pinned to this spot, stabbed by his icy blue eyes, blistered by an intense internal heat.

. They He’d stopped breathing, his gaze latched on to hers.

said Frankly, so had she.

Then his gaze traveled from her eyes, down her nose to her lips and beyond, taking in her pajamas and Bigfoot slippers, and his smile returned more amused than ever, dimples digging deep.

ialize She delighted him. A thrill raced up her spine, lodged at the base of her brain, blasting red-hot tingles to every nerve ending in her body.

“Love the slippers,” he said. “Bigfoot fan?”

“Not particularly. I just like the irony.”

“You have small feet?”

r to his tip over in a strong wind.”

om the “No offense, but your mother’s sort of an ass.”

“Sometimes.” Noelle nodded. “But aren’t we all?”

“I love that you have small feet,” he said. “Then again, I’d love it if feet were big.”

Love.

engage- A fresh ripple of tingling heat went through her. “Why?”

“Because those feet belong to you.”

d, a bit Her heart beat so hard she could hear it in her ears.

haped “Are you cold?” he asked.

“Wh-what?” she stammered, then realized, horrified, as his gaze drooped to her breasts, that she hadn’t bothered to put on a bra and her nipples beaded and were poking perkily through her pajama top and bathrobe.

er, but She set down her coffee cup on the counter and wrapped her fluffy bathrobe more tightly around her. *Note to self: In future, do not leave the Roost unless fully dressed.*

“I could turn up the heat.”

“No!” She cringed that the word came out so loud and adamant. “I’m inches I’m fine. You don’t need to fiddle with the thermostat on my account.”

med “You sure?” He pressed his lips together, suppressing a grin.

“Positive. Let me at those kolaches. I’m starving.” She picked up the coffee cup and scurried over to the counter where he’d left the box of pastries, and she sank down on a barstool.

t, He followed her over and parked himself beside her, disturbingly close. She took a big swallow of coffee to avoid looking at him and it was so that she hissed as she gulped it down.

“You okay?”

“Fine.”

“I forgot to tell you that my pot brews hot.”

ned, Of course it did. Everything about the man was hot.

“You sure you’re okay?” he asked.

her The roof of her mouth was slightly singed, but she’d live. “Mind if I eat a kolache?”

“Go for it.” He waved at the box.

She flipped open the lid and stared down at the array of pastries. They looked so delicious. She reached for a paper towel from the roll on the counter, peeled off a sheet, and used it as a makeshift plate for the apple kolache.

Gil did the same, adding a cherry kolache to his paper towel.

Noelle took a bite of her pastry. It tasted so good that she let out an involuntary moan of pleasure. “Oh gosh. Gretchen missed her calling. She could have been a pastry chef.”

“Kolaches are her specialty. It’s the number one comment on our Yelp reviews. Best kolaches this side of West.”

“West what?”

“West is a small Czech community outside of Waco. They’re known for their kolaches. My mom’s parents were Czech, and Grandma taught Grandma how to make pastries. Mom wasn’t a baker herself. She claims the skill passed down a generation.”

“I didn’t know your maternal grandparents were Czech.”

“Why would you?”

She canted her head and studied him. “There’s a lot I don’t know about you.”

He took a sip of his coffee and held her gaze. “Ditto.”

“We might have known each other since childhood, but we haven’t talked had all that many conversations over the years.”

“Now is a great time to change that.”

“Is it?”

“Huh?”

“Do we *really* want to get to know each other? I’m flying home on Christmas Day, right after the wedding.”

“That gives us five weeks to get to know each other.”

“For what reason?” she asked, licking crumble topping off her bottom lip.

“Enjoying each other’s company.”

“That’s all you want?”

His gaze hung on her mouth. “That’s all.”

“You’re not looking for anything else? Because if you are, I’m not your girl. Long-distance relationships just don’t work.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s why I stopped touring as a musician and opened the Windmill. I was married and I couldn’t keep my marriage afloat and

out on the road.”

ey “You chose your family over your career.” She found that quality admirable. Something neither one of her parents had been able to do.

le “Yeah, but I had to be honest with myself. While I love music, I’m a fair to middling musician. I was never going to have a stellar career. I could have made a good living as a studio musician, but that would have meant leaving Twilight and I love this place too much to ever leave for. So I run a music venue to showcase talent better than I am, teach guitar lessons, and write songs. It’s enough.”

elp “Wow,” she said.

“Unimpressive, huh?”

1 for “Quite the opposite. It’s admirable that you know yourself so well and have no delusions of grandeur. You’re down-to-earth.” After growing up in a kitchen she did, with parents who put all their faith in drama and dreams, she found Gil’s levelheaded approach to life compelling.

“I’m basic. It’s okay. I know it.”

“Basic is good,” she said. “So very good. It means you’re solid and dependable and . . .”

out “Boring.”

“Oh, not in the least, Gil Thomas. I don’t know many men who would climb into a sycamore tree in a turkey costume to rescue a kitten.”

really “Who knew that was the way to your heart?” He winked. “If that impressed you, then come run at the Turkey Trot with me on Wednesday. I’ll run alongside the runners to cheer them on. There, you’ll get the costume in full effect. Come see me shake my tail feathers.”

“While that does sound tempting, I’m more of a Pilates gal than a runner.”

“Who cares? It’s for fun and charity. We have a blast. That’s all that matters.”

m lip. His invitation was so tempting that she blurted out, “Yes, okay, I’ll do it” before she fully thought it through.

your Suddenly, the room seemed to shrink, narrowing down to just the two of them sitting at the counter. Gil’s beautiful blue eyes drank her in. She was mesmerized, trapped by his dilating pupils and terrified at the wild feelings ping-ponging around inside her. She dropped her gaze and gave the apolache her full attention.

ned “I meant to thank you,” he said.

id stay “For what?”

“I saw the pledge you made in my name for the Polar Plunge. That’s very generous of you.”

“It was nothing.” She polished off the kolache.

“Not true. The money means a lot to the kids in the Special Olympics. I mean, I’m curious about one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“How did you know about the Polar Plunge?”

She came clean. Telling him that she’d watched him take the dive one morning she’d rolled into town.

“A bit of a voyeur, are you?” His laughter enriched the kitchen.

She measured off an inch with her thumb and forefinger. “At least when it comes to handsome Santas stripping off their clothes.”

“You think I’m handsome?”

“Don’t even pretend otherwise, Mr. Thomas.”

His smile deepened, showing off that double dimple again. “There’s something I’ve wanted to ask you.”

“Yes?”

He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out her business card. “I found this in Josie’s jeans when I went to do the laundry. What’s it about?”

Noelle swallowed hard and shook her head. Was he upset with her? “I asked me to help plan your wedding.”

“My *what*?” He looked taken aback.

“I gave her my card and told her to call me when you’d proposed to someone. It was in jest, but she must have taken it to heart. She really likes her mom.”

“Yeah.” He blew out his breath and ran a hand through his hair. “I know.”

She told me she wanted a mommy for Christmas. Gotta admit, she took me by surprise. I’ve been so busy trying to be both mother and father, I didn’t realize that no matter how hard I try there are some things I just can’t get for her. I thought living near Gretchen would help fill the gap, but apparently she’s still struggling.”

“I’m sorry.”

He opened up and told her about Josie’s problems at school. “I’m worried about her. I feel like I’m screwing everything up.”

“She’s a great kid and you’re doing a bang-up job parenting her. Believe me, I know what screwed-up parenting looks like and you’re a million miles away from that.”

was

“Thanks.”

“All parents have doubts. The difference is that you really *care*. You do the best for her, and you sacrifice to make that happen. Despite what the Hallmark greeting cards would have us think, not all parents are like that.”

“Still, you turned out pretty darn amazing, Noelle Curry.” His smile was gentle, encouraging.

“Because of my grandparents and the people I met in Twilight.”

“Twilight is a special place,” he said. “You can see why it feels important for me to live anywhere else.”

Noelle’s cell phone buzzed. She pulled it from the pocket of her sweater and glanced down at the text. It was from her mother.

CRESCENDA: Call me!

Groaning, Noelle stuck her phone back into her pocket.

“Problems?”

“Mama drama.”

“Aah.”

Noelle pushed back her barstool. “I gotta go. Thanks for the kolache coffee. I’m fully fortified for a day of wedding planning.”

“She” “My total goal.”

“Thanks.”

He stood up, towering over her. She had a flashback to the day she’d arrived, and he’d stood head and shoulders above the other Santas. Her mind also called up images of what he’d looked like in the water, the sunlight shimmering off his bare chest.

Gil moved toward her, blocking her exit, and lowered his head.

Noelle stared up at him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m thinking about kissing you.” His voice was low, sexy, and hot.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Wh-why?” They’d already talked about why they were not a good match. Discussed why nothing could come of their attraction. What was he planning?

“Because you look so gorgeous in those Bigfoot slippers.”

“The slippers are a turn-on, huh?”

“You’re the turn-on, Bookworm.”

“B-but we just discussed how long-distance relationships don’t work.”

“Right now, the distance between us is only a couple of inches.”
Her stomach churned, but in a spectacular way, like a kid at Christmas.
She moistened her lips. His head dipped even lower. She went up on tiptoe.
Their lips were almost touching . . .
A floorboard creaked.
Simultaneously, their heads shot up.
There Josie stood, yawning and rubbing her eyes. “Morning, Daddy.”
“Morning, Noelle.”
They sprang apart.
“Morning,” Noelle greeted the girl, pulse thumping.
“Whatcha doin’ here?” Josie asked, stretching her arms over her head.
“Um, um . . .” Panicking, she couldn’t think of a single reason why she should be in Josie’s house alone with the girl’s father. Her phone buzzed again. Yes! Saved by the bell.

CRESCENDA: I’m waiting.

“I do have to go.” She sidled away from Gil and beat a path to his door.
“Enjoy your kolaches.”
As the door clicked closed behind her, she could have sworn she heard him say, “To be continued.”

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Chapter 10

His door flew open.

Gil startled.

Noelle stood at the threshold. Her hair buffeted wildly from the gust wind. More lines to the song he was writing about her pinged around his brain like heated popcorn kernels.

“Could I see you outside for a sec?”

“Uh . . .” He cast a glance at Josie, who was busily noshing a kolach. “BRB, kiddo.”

Josie waved a blithe hand.

Gil went outside, closing the door behind him. Noelle had her bathrobe wrapped tightly around her, but he could still see her nipples poking through the material. He tried not to stare. “What is it?”

“What did you mean by that crack?”

“What crack?”

“To be continued.”

He shrugged, amused by how riled she seemed. “Seems pretty self-explanatory to me.”

“Let’s get something straight. It’s *not* going to be continued.”

“No?” He arched an eyebrow.

“No.”

Gil shrugged. “Okay.”

“That’s it? Just okay?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“That you won’t try to kiss me again.”

“I won’t try to kiss you again,” he parroted.

“Because kissing me would be a big mistake.”

He couldn't help staring at those plump delicious lips he'd almost kissed. Desire rolled through him, hard and fast. He tried to tell himself it was because he hadn't been with a woman in five years, but he knew this felt much deeper than that. There was something about Noelle that endlessly intrigued him, and he didn't know why.

“See, now that's where we disagree,” he drawled and then let silence spread out between them.

“Well?” She sank her hands onto her hips, deepened her frown, and one Bigfoot slipper.

“I think kissing you would be the best darn thing that happened to either of us in a very long time.”

Did saying that to her freak him out? Oh, yeah, you betcha. But he was the kind of guy who ran from tough emotions. Face life head-on. That was his motto. Those words to live by had gotten him and Josie through some pretty tough times.

Noelle's phone buzzed in her pocket.

“You've got a text.”

Her phone buzzed again. She winced and then it buzzed a third time.

“Sounds urgent.”

“It's not,” she said. “It's my mother.”

“Your mother never has emergencies?”

“Quite the opposite. My mother *always* has an emergency.”

“She sounds like a handful.”

Noelle snorted. “That's putting it lightly.”

“It's not that easy, is it? Being the child of a celebrity.”

“Perks come with it.” Her lips pursed—sweet, pink, kissable lips. “I remember that whenever I feel a pity party coming on. Everyone has a cross to bear. Plus, I'm well aware of the privilege afforded to me simply because of who my parents are.”

“That's admirable.”

She raked her gaze over him, empathy darkening her brown eyes to chestnut color. “Some of us have more crosses to carry than others.”

“That doesn't mean you don't deserve kindness and understanding.”

A soft sigh escaped her. “If Josie hadn't interrupted us would you have gone through with the kiss?”

“Would you have wanted me to?”

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rough

“You’re being evasive answering my question with a question.”

Was he? Maybe.

“Yes,” she said before he could reply.

“Yes?”

“I would have let you kiss me.”

“That’s good to know.” He suppressed the grin that ached to light up his face.

“Which is why it’s lucky Josie woke up when she did. If she’d have tapped one minute later she would have caught us in the middle of a lip-lock.”

That thought sobered him.

“We can’t . . . there’s no room in my life . . . I’m . . . you’re . . .”

“I get it.” He nodded. “Believe me, I get it.”

This feeling between them was too much, too soon. It wasn’t rational because they were both logical, grounded people. They had their differences for sure. He was laid-back while she was tightly wound. He was small town, and she was big city. He had traditional values, and she was thoroughly progressive. He was big picture, and she was detail oriented. Yes, there were many differences where they did not dovetail, but neither one of them had their head in the clouds. They were sensible. They wouldn’t allow lust, passion, and desire to sweep them into something they weren’t ready for.

Her phone buzzed again.

“You better take that,” he said. “You’ve got a mom to handle, and I’ve got a kid to tend.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“Sure.” He shrugged and gave her his best smile. “That’s what friends are for.”

“Is that what we are?”

“I hope so. I’d like to think so.”

A beautiful light flared in her eyes again and then she was gone, fleeing the steps and into the Roost.

He watched her go, his heart doing a funny little swoop and dive. Before he knew it, Josie opened the door.

“Dad, better come inside before I gobble up all the kolaches.”

“What is it, Crescenda?” Noelle asked as she flopped down on the couch in the upstairs apartment.

She fingered her lips, thinking about the kiss that hadn't happened. Wishing it *had* happened and then hating that she thought such a silly thing. She simply could not get anything going with Gil. Too much was riding on this wedding for her to get diverted from her goal.

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been
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out their feelings consisted of demands. Call me! Call me now! Noelle Elizabeth call your mother!

"I'm here. What do you want? What's so important that I had to drop everything to call you?"

"Darling, the most *wonderful* thing has happened."

Noelle bit her bottom lip and tensed her shoulders, bracing herself. Crescenda paused for dramatic effect.

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Ten, nine, eight . . . *wait for it* . . . seven, six, five . . .

Crescenda exhaled in a loud whoosh.

Four, three, two . . .

"Basil proposed!"

Noelle pulled the phone away from her ear to stare at it in her palm. Hell, not again.

If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. Grammie's motto played in her head and kept Noelle from blurting the thoughts pouring out at the back of her lips. She wanted to jump through the phone screen, teleport to London, grab her mother by the shoulders, and shake some sense into her.

"Do you want to know what my answer was?"

No, not really. Sighing, Noelle brought the phone back to her ear. "I can't guess from the thrill in your voice."

"Yes! I said yes! My darling, you'll be planning another wedding ceremony next spring."

"How long have you known this man? You've been in London, what, four weeks?"

"I met him in LA when he cast me as the lead."

"Okay, four weeks, that's so much better. Forgive me. For a minute I thought you were jumping the gun."

"Sarcasm doesn't become you."

"You've been married five times, Mother."

"It just means I'm a hopeless romantic and an eternal optimist. Unlike some sourpusses I could name."

"Or it means you have no idea who you are deep down inside, and you're just a mess."

to men to give you external validation.”

thing. “Humph. You sound like my therapist.”

g on “I just don’t want to watch you make yet another mistake.”

“Making mistakes is how we grow.”

orting “I think you’re supposed to learn from the mistakes, not just keep m
Curry, them ad nauseam.” Okay, maybe she was being too harsh, but darn it, I
wasn’t ready for stepdad number six.

P “Basil’s different from the others.”

“Maybe he is, and maybe he isn’t. Ultimately, this isn’t about the m
your inability to stick it out when the going gets tough. Any of the guy
were married to could have been a lifelong companion if you didn’t cu
run when things got tricky.”

“Now you sound just like your father.” She sniffed delicately, letting
Noelle know she was miffed.

“Maybe you should ask yourself what kind of man proposes to a wo
after knowing her for just four weeks?”

Oh “A man in love, that’s who.” Despite her obvious shortcomings, Cre
could be quite loveable when she turned on the charm.

’s “Or a man who’s fallen for an image.”

ishing “You’re being mean.”

eleport Was she? Noelle nibbled her bottom lip. She felt wretched. This was
to her. things went between them. She’d known Crescenda for twenty-eight y
and still hadn’t figured out how to forge a stable relationship with her
can while still maintaining her own identity.

me “I don’t want to rain on your parade. Basil might be a perfectly won
man—”

“He is.”

it, three “But if he is, why rush things? Get to know him first before taking t
plunge. I’m not saying not to marry him, just take your time for once. I
really long engagement. Years even.”

there, I “I know what’s going on here.”

Noelle suppressed a sigh. “The only thing going on here is that I’m
concerned about you. Every time you go through a divorce—”

“This time it’s for real.”

ke “That’s what you said about Marty and Nate and Felix and Jack and
pretty sure you must have said the same thing about Dad once upon a t

ou turn “You’re jealous. That’s the truth of it. Admit it. You’re jealous that

many men love me.”

“Yeah, Mother, that’s it. I’m desperately jealous of you.”

“You are!” Crescenda’s tone escalated. “You’ve never had even one propose to you. No man has ever loved you. You’re not allowed to judge. You don’t have a clue what love is.” If her mother had pulled out a dagger and plunged it directly into Noelle’s heart it wouldn’t have hurt as bad as those bitter words.

“I’m going to hang up. We can talk again when you’ve calmed down. It’s not your business.” “Calmed down? I’m perfectly calm. You’re the one who’s out of control. You’re the one who’s so miserable you can’t be happy for me. What do you ever do to deserve such a wretched child as you?”

DARVO.

She recognized the acronym for what it was. Deny. Attack. Reverse blame and offender. It happened every time she tried to hold her mother accountable for her actions. Noelle knew what was happening and yet every single time she walked right into it.

And came out feeling battered and ashamed.

Her therapist said she was a glutton for punishment and part of her wondered if it might be true. What Crescenda had said was correct. Not counting her childhood crush on Gil, Noelle had never been in love, and no one had ever been in love with her, at least not to her knowledge.

And despite planning weddings for a living, she had no clue what her mother even looked like.

“So, you and Crescenda Hardwick’s daughter. What’s up with that?” Driscoll said to Gil on Tuesday as they sat in the CPA’s office going over the previous month’s receipts.

“Huh?” Gil blinked at the accountant.

Derrick shrugged. “I’m plugged into the town grapevine. I do taxes for the businesses in Twilight. What can I say?”

“Nothing is up.” He shouldn’t have responded. He should have just ignored Derrick’s question, but he couldn’t seem to help himself.

“I go to the barber shop. People talk. Your haircut looks nice, BTW. Getting spiffy for Noelle?”

That dart hit home. He had gotten a trim yesterday after he’d caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and noticed how shaggy he looked. “I’m not a barber.”

gossip mill is working overtime. Don't feed the beast."

"I also ran into Delphine and Luther in the checkout line at H-E-B."

"Those two enjoy embellishing things."

"So there's something to embellish?" Derrick seemed to be enjoying himself way too much.

"No."

"Come on, don't be embarrassed. Noelle is a pretty woman. She's smart and successful, although I imagine a big part of her success is due to her parents' celebrity, but that's just icing on the cake."

Why couldn't people in his hometown mind their own business?

"I've heard that Noelle had a huge crush on you when she was a teenager and everyone in town knew about it."

Gil plucked a receipt from the file folder he'd brought with him. "Here are my deductions for the overhead lighting I had to replace in the auditorium."

"Delphine said you invited Noelle into your house for kolaches yesterday morning. Is that a euphemism for—"

Good grief! He had no idea that Derrick enjoyed stirring the gossip mill so much.

Gil scowled. "Do you want to keep playing scales for the next month? Would you like to work on 'Free Bird'?"

"Free Bird'!"

"Then hush up about Noelle, okay?"

"Got it." Derrick's smile was smug. "She's special."

"Yeah, so let's keep her name out of the rumors as a favor to me, okay?"

"Maybe you had a little bit of a crush on her too back in high school?"
No, he hadn't. She'd just been the summer kid across the street, but he wished he had paid more attention to her.

"You *do* know that getting married would give you a huge tax deduction, right?" Derrick asked.

"I can take away 'Free Bird' as easily as I can gift it." Gil grunted.

Derrick straightened and reached for the receipt. "Lighting, you say?"

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"Got it." Derrick's smile was smug. "She's special."

"Yeah, so let's keep her name out of the rumors as a favor to me, okay?"

"Maybe you had a little bit of a crush on her too back in high school?"

No, he hadn't. She'd just been the summer kid across the street, but now he wished he had paid more attention to her.

"You *do* know that getting married would give you a huge tax deduction, right?" Derrick asked.

"I can take away 'Free Bird' as easily as I can gift it." Gil grunted.

Derrick straightened and reached for the receipt. "Lighting, you say?"

Chapter 11

At the same time Gil was in Derrick Driscoll's office, Noelle and the twins sets of engaged twins walked into the Twilight Bakery right around the corner from the accountant.

Cody and Sienna, and Dylan and Sierra strolled arm-in-arm in front of Noelle, and she felt a bit like a fifth wheel.

Delicious smells wafted up to greet them as she followed the brides-grooms-to-be inside for the cake tasting. She'd made the appointment at noon so that Dylan and Cody could meet them on their lunch hour. The semiprofessional musicians both worked day jobs for Twilight's Parks Recreation and played in their own band on nights and weekends.

"Hello!" A cheerful woman who looked to be in her mid to late forties greeted them. She wore her hair swept back off her neck and she was dressed in a sage green prairie skirt and white high-necked, long-sleeved blouse covered by a Thanksgiving-themed apron.

"You're Noelle." The woman shook her hand. "I don't know whether you remember me or not, but I'm Christine, the owner. Welcome back to Twilight."

"I remember you and your delicious baked goods." Noelle recognized Christine from when her grandparents occasionally brought her to the bakery for Sunday breakfast before church. It was nice to see that some things had changed. "It's wonderful to see you again."

"I already know these four." Christine beamed at the twins. "Come on back—I've got the cakes waiting for y'all."

Inside the tasting room, Christine had assembled five different cakes on a long oak wood table. They took their seats.

“Keep in mind, the decorations on the tasting cakes are simple. This is for tasting purposes. You can embellish your cake as much or as little as you want for your reception. I have a portfolio of wedding cake photographs you can leaf through to select your design.” Christine picked up a thick notebook filled with plastic sleeves of photographed wedding cakes she’d done in the past and passed it to Noelle, who sat to her right.

Noelle cracked open the book and blinked at the gorgeously decorated cakes. “You’re so talented, Christine.”

“Oh.” Sierra linked her arm through Dylan’s and leaned over to stare at a picture of a cake overflowing with buttercream roses. “That’s far too elaborate. We like things simple.”

“Excuse me?” Sienna said. “We don’t want *meh*. This wedding will go over social media. We need to bring it and Christine can deliver the goods. We say we go all out. The bigger the better.”

“Less is more,” Sierra said.

“Sometimes,” Sienna said, “less is just less.”

Dylan and Cody exchanged *let-the-gals-sort-it-out* glances. “How about we taste the cakes first and then decide on the style later?”

“Good idea.” Dylan nodded.

Christine cut the first cake, and then put a wafer-thin slice on each of five plates, and then passed the plates around the table. “Italian cream. My second-best seller.”

“What’s your first?” Sierra asked.

“Vanilla is always a crowd pleaser for weddings.” Christine smiled.

“*Bor-ing*.” Sienna rolled her eyes.

Noelle held her tongue. She would give the sisters a chance to work out their conflict on their own before offering compromises. No bride was happy when she felt she had to give up her vision to please others.

Noelle took a bite of cake. “Mmm.” The moist Italian cream practically melted in her mouth. “Sooo good.”

“I vote for this one.” Cody polished off his piece of cake.

“You’re jumping the gun,” Sierra said to her soon-to-be brother-in-law. “We have four more cakes to taste.”

“I’m ready.” Dylan waved his fork.

Christine cut the vanilla cake next. It was just as good as the Italian one. Sometimes, simplest was best, especially with something as traditional as a wedding.

is just “It’s delish,” Sienna said. “But I still say we should kick it up a notch
as you “On to honey lavender.” Christine doled out slices of the third cake.
is you Cody’s nose wrinkled. “You put pot porry in a cake?”
ebook “It’s potpourri,” Sienna whispered to her fiancé. “And lavender is a
n the cake flavor.”

ed Noelle tasted the honey-lavender cake. “It’s so light and airy.”
“Yes,” Sierra said. “It’s perfect for a spring or summer reception, not
much for a Christmas wedding.”

e at the “It’s not as bad as I thought it was gonna be.” Cody grunted. “But I
vanilla one best so far.”

be all “What’s next?” Dylan asked.
ods. I Christine grinned. “My third most popular, red velvet.”
Noelle’s LA clientele would turn up their noses at what most would
consider a plebeian choice, but Texas had deep Southern roots and in the
South, red velvet was queen.

bout if “Now we’re talking,” Dylan and Cody said simultaneously and rubbed
their palms together as Christine served up the red velvet cake.

f the The red velvet was Noelle’s personal favorite so far, but she wouldn’t
It’s “This one.” Cody put up a hand to cover his mouth as he finished chomping
the bite of red velvet.

“Yes.” Dylan nodded.

Both Sierra and Sienna shook their heads.

“It feels like a birthday cake.” Sienna’s jingle bell earrings jangled. “I
always makes red velvet for birthdays.”

this “I agree,” Sierra said. “It’s birthday cake.”
appy if Well, at least the sisters were finally on the same page, but now they
in opposition to their grooms.

ally “What’s our final choice?” Noelle asked Christine.

“It’s brand-new. I just perfected the recipe.” Christine’s eyes twinkled.
“You would be the first ones to have this as your wedding cake from
Twilight Bakery.”

aw. Noelle noticed Sierra’s and Sienna’s faces lit up. The sisters liked the
of being special.

cream. “Salted caramel.” Christine put the slices onto the five plates.

l as a Everyone dug in.
“Holy moly!” Cody groaned.

h.” “This is orgasmic.” Sienna closed her eyes.

“I toasted the vanilla beans in browned butter.” Christine blushed. “It adds a lot of extra flavor.”

legit The cake was drool-worthy with salted caramel mousse in the center and a baked crumble on top, just like a pie. In Noelle’s opinion, it was the best they’d tasted, and all of the cakes had been phenomenal. Plus, it so would be perfect for a winter wedding, and it would merge beautifully with the gold in the color palette.

like the “I don’t like it,” Dylan said.

Everyone stared at him.

“Huh?” Sierra blinked. “Why not?”

“It tastes like butterscotch.” Dylan’s upper lip crinkled. “You know butterscotch.”

he “It’s not butterscotch,” Christine said. “It’s made with granulated sugar and not brown sugar the way butterscotch is.”

ed Dylan pushed his plate away and folded his arms over his chest. “I’m not eating butterscotch cake. I vote for the red velvet.”

it Sierra, his bride-to-be, bit down on her bottom lip. “But all the rest of the guests love the salted caramel.”

ewing “So y’all get what you want and I’m out in the cold?” Dylan looked at the bride. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

He made a good point, but the salted caramel cake fit the wedding in a different way.

“Mom” “What are we going to do?” Sierra asked Noelle.

Noelle met Christine’s gaze. “Could you do a half-and-half? One side salted caramel and the other red velvet?”

7 were “I could do it,” Christine said. “But the flavors would clash. I don’t recommend it.”

ed. “We could have a groom’s cake,” Noelle said. “I’d have to redo the cake and take money from another area. Maybe trim our floral expenses, but that’s the perfect solution.”

ie idea “Yeah,” Dylan said. “Do that. Two cakes are always better than one.”

“Oh man.” Sienna sighed. “The flowers are so important. I’d hate to cut into the floral budget.”

Noelle put on a bright smile. “How about we tackle one challenge at a time. We’ve sailed over the cake hurdle. Let me worry about reshuffling the budget.”

“As long as we get what we want,” Sierra said, “I’ll be happy.”

That Getting four people on the same page was no walk in the park, but Noelle would find a way. The couples departed, chattering about the yummy cookies, leaving Noelle to finish up the ordering details with Christine.

easily “I thought for sure they’d end up with vanilla cake as the compromise,” Christine said. “I’m thrilled to get a chance to make the salted caramel cake with you. It’ll be epic.”

“Of that, I have no doubt. After it’s prominently featured on The Tie website, you’ll get loads of national orders. I hope you’re prepared.”

“I’m looking forward to that opportunity. I appreciate you buying local instead of ordering from a Fort Worth bakery.”

I hate “Of course. I’m so glad we got this ironed out.”

As Noelle signed the contract, Christine thanked her for her business. She added in a lowered tone, “I know you’re the Wedding Whisperer, but good luck with those four. You’re gonna need it. The Buckhorns are notoriously difficult to please.”

of us “Oh,” Noelle said, smiling. “Thanks for the heads-up, but I’m quite good at discerning customers.”

While she appreciated Christine’s support, Noelle really didn’t need the reminder of an earworm wriggling through her head.

The Buckhorns are notoriously difficult to please.

1 every The sisters and their mother did have strong opinions, but she hadn’t seen them being any more difficult than the average family planning a wedding. As much as she liked Christine, she decided not to let the old woman’s view of the Buckhorns color her own. Being good at her job meant putting her wants, needs, and opinions in the back seat in service to her customers.

budget She counted her steps from the park to the Merry Cherub, her gaze fixed on the sidewalk. Five hundred and sixteen, five hundred and seventeen, five hundred and eighteen, five hundred and nineteen, five hundred and twenty. Head down, she rounded the corner of the B&B and *bam!*

Ran smack-dab into Gil’s chest.

.” “Whoa there.” His arm went around her waist to steady her.

cut “Woolgathering?”

ta Suddenly breathless, Noelle stepped back, eager to get away from his breath-stealing body.

ig the “S-sorry. My mind was on wedding planning.”

“You’ve been going full throttle since you got into town. Last night

took the B&B's garbage to the curb at eleven before I hit the sheets, I s
Joelle you through the window still poring over your work."

akes, *Hit the sheets.*

se," That terminology called up an erotic image of Gil lounging in bed w
nothing but a cowboy hat.

. It'll She shook her head. "I'll have to remember to keep my blinds close
"That won't solve the problem."

e's "What problem is that?"

"Your workaholism." His grin beguiled her.

cally "I'm not your problem to solve." She pressed her lips together to ke
from returning his grin and encouraging him.

s and "Aah, that's too bad. Are you still coming to the Turkey Trot tomor
morning?"

good "I shouldn't. I really do have a lot of work to do."

usly "All work and no play . . ." His dimples deepened. "But really, no
pressure. I just thought you might get a kick out of seeing me in the tu
used to suit."

that "I got an eyeful the day you were stranded in the tree."

"But you didn't see me in full strut."

She couldn't help smiling. What would it hurt? She had done well w
wedding cakes today. She'd earned a little free time and he was right, s
t yet needed to pace herself. A short break from work wouldn't kill her.

ler "Okay, you win. I'll give the fun run a shot but only because it's for
worthy cause."

meant "You won't regret it," he said. "I promise."

r

ixed **W**orkaholic that she was, Gil half expected her not to show up, but Ne
l . . . arrived at the starting line a few minutes before the eight A.M. kickoff c
Wednesday morning, November 22. She'd been in town for exactly five
and already, he found himself looking forward to seeing her again.

Her hair was pulled up into a high ponytail that bounced jauntily wh
walked. She looked good enough to eat in those yoga pants and that fo
is fitting purple Lycra jacket that enhanced her porcelain complexion.

Gobble, gobble, gobble.

"You ready?" he asked, unable to corral his grin.

when I "I came to perform. It'll be good to push my body."

saw “Working even as you play.” He clicked his tongue.
 She held up the packet she’d picked up from the registration table. “
 you help me put on my runner’s number?”

earing “Absolutely,” he said. “Turn around.”
 In a graceful twirl, she handed him her packet and pivoted on her he
d.” giving him her back.
 He took the Tyvek number and the safety pins from the packet, and
 set the packet on the ground beside his ice chest filled with water bottles
 for the contestants, and leaned in closer.

ep Gil tried not to notice how good she smelled as he affixed the number
 to her clothing. Touching her gave him shivers. This felt too intimate, but
ow wasn’t complaining.
 “All done.”
 She turned around. “Thanks.”
 “You’re welcome.” Did he sound breathless? Had she noticed?

key “Where’s your head?” she asked.
 “Huh?”
 “Your turkey head.”
 “Oh,” he said, embarrassed. His thoughts had gone to naughty places
with the pointed to the nearby picnic table. “Over there. It’s hot inside that danger
she and I’m waiting for the race to start before I put it on.”

a All around them, runners were securing their numbers to their clothing
 stretching, and lining up under the starting banner.
 “Looks like the time has come,” she said, giving him the once-over.
 Her gaze held amusement. For sure she was having fun, but beneath that look
 there was something else. What? Attraction?

elle In this turkey getup? *Ha! Dream on, Thomas, dream on.* Yeah, he’d
n dreaming about her both in and out of bed. A lot. Almost constantly, if
e days was being honest. Ever since she’d rolled into his life again.

en she She bounced over to the picnic table in her springy high-end sneakers
rm- picked up the turkey head, and brought it back to him.
 “Don’t make fun.” He took the papier-mâché head from her.
 “Oh, I’m not promising that.” Her laughter filled the air and gave weight
 to his hopes.
 “Fine.” He put on the turkey head and stuck out his arms as wide as
 he would go. “How do you like me now?”
 She pressed her lips together, her eyes dancing with suppressed laughter

“This is definitely a turn-on.”

Could “Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah.” Her mouth quirked up in that one-sided grin she used when she was truly happy. “So hot.”

els, Gil’s heart just about swelled to bursting, which was stupid considering she was dressed like tomorrow’s dinner entrée.

then “Hey, Turkey Tom,” one of the event organizers hollered. “Get over
es for and start the race. You’ve got work to do.”

er to
t he

Chuckling, Noelle took her place at the end of the line. Back home, she worked out six days a week with either HIIT training, Pilates, or yoga. It had been a while since she’d gone for a run, and she could very well embarrass herself on this three-mile circle around Lake Twilight.

Turkey Tom stood off to one side of the starting line with a bullhorn. “Ready!”

“Ready!” the runners cheered back.

“Set!”

s. He The runners leaned forward, preparing to surge.

g thing “Go!”

Boom.

ng, The starting gun went off, and the runners moved en masse. Even when she had been a regular runner, Noelle had never been particularly fast, so she let the eager beavers stream ahead of her.

Her She waved at Gil as she jogged past. She wasn’t lying when she’d told him the turkey costume was a turn-on. Not because the suit was sexy, but because the man willing to make a fool of himself over a charity event was.

been Noelle glanced over her shoulder, mesmerized by him. He’d been playing the va-va-voom as a teenager, but this guy? This guy was in a whole other league. Gil had matured and life had carved the softness from him. He was full grown, seasoned, and hot as hell.

ings to After the final runner crossed the starting line, Gil fell in behind the others, trotting along with them and hollering encouragement.

they She thought about how he’d looked when they’d been talking. How she had lowered his eyes framed by long, thick lashes and he had given her a side-glance that scorched her girly parts. A day’s growth of beard stubble had covered his steely jaw, making him look a little dangerous.

gher.

Her pulse quickened and she realized her pacing was off. If she kept running at this tempo, she wouldn't be able to finish the race. She slowly letting runners she'd passed early go on by her.

From behind, she heard exaggerated pounding and hazarded another glance over her shoulder. Here came Gil, flapping his arms, gobbling, and galumphing along.

She burst out laughing.

"Hey, lady," he said to her, his voice muffled inside the costume. "You're flying when your butt is this big."

That hit her funny bone just right, and she dissolved into peals of laughter. Staggering and holding her side, she tried to keep running, but it was a little impossible.

"C'mon, c'mon." He jogged beside her. "Knees up like this."

She tried to copy him, but she couldn't stop laughing. "You look . . . look . . ."

"Handsome?"

"That's not the word that leaps to mind."

"Sexy?"

"Not really."

"It's the big butt, isn't it?"

"Stop making me laugh."

"I could go on a diet . . ."

"No! I like big turkey butts and I cannot lie."

Gil started humming "Baby Got Back" and it sounded tinny coming inside the turkey head.

Noelle was laughing so hard her side hurt. "Oh, please," she howled, gripping her flank harder. "Please stop."

He was dancing now. Showing off his mad skills.

Other runners were slowing, peering over their shoulders to see what was going on behind them.

"Y . . . you . . ." Noelle wheezed, caught in the spasm of hysterical laughter. "You're . . ."

"Save your breath. You got a race to run." He was trotting backward, facing her.

"When did you get to be so much fun?" she asked, gasping for air.

"I was always fun. You just forgot."

"No . . . no . . . you . . ." She could finally haul in a deeper breath and

seemed to quell the giggling fit.

red, “Yes?” He fell in beside her again.

They were at the very end of the race, all the other runners far ahead of them. Noelle didn’t care one bit. She might be competitive in business, not when having an enjoyable time, and boy, was she enjoying herself.

“You’re not as self-conscious as you were,” she said. “There’s a joy you now that you didn’t have back then. You don’t take yourself too seriously.”

“Not anymore.”

ighter. “How did you change?”

lmost “That’s an easy question to answer. Josie. Having a kid lets you see world fresh through their young eyes.”

They were jogging so slowly they were almost walking, but this conversation felt weighted, important, and deserving of a more deliberate pace.

“You love Josie very much.”

“More than life itself. Until I had her, I didn’t really know what unconditional love was. She comes first,” he said, his tone heartfelt and earnest. “Always.”

Of course she did. Noelle wouldn’t expect anything less and she admired him all the more for his commitment to fatherhood. Not everyone was dedicated to their children.

“I must go do my turkey duties, and cheer on the contestants. See you from the finish line.”

Waving goodbye, Gil took off at a dead sprint, hurrying to catch up with the pack leaders. He looked so comical, tail feathers flapping as he ran. Noelle started laughing all over again.

Picking up the pace again toward the end, Noelle avoided last place, beating out an octogenarian runner. But she didn’t care. It was all in wholesome fun. She’d had no illusions about finishing with a respectable time. It took her forty-seven minutes to complete three miles. The winner did it in twenty-two minutes. But she’d finished the course, and that was enough for Noelle.

Gil was at the finish line, cheering her and the great-grandmother or the bullhorn as they came down the home stretch. Jogging side by side the elderly woman regaled Noelle with stories of her family. Props to Grandmother that she was crushing eighty-two.

“I want to be you when I grow up,” Noelle told the woman. “Sorry to smoke you.” Then she poured on the heat, crossing the finish line just off of the great-grandmother.

“Next year . . .” The woman panted. “I want a rematch. Same time, same place, I’m taking you down, whippersnapper.”

Noelle wouldn’t be here next year, but she played along. “It’s a date about

The woman gave her a thumbs-up and trotted over to her waiting family of twenty-plus people. They encircled her in a huge group hug and spirited her off to their vehicles. Melancholia, that wistful emotion, wrapped around Noelle’s heart. She’d never had that many people turn out for her. What a rich life that woman must lead.

“Hey.”

She turned to see Gil, sans the turkey head, smiling softly at her. “Hi there.”

“Nice run.”

“I finished,” Noelle said. “Yay, me.”

“I was just thinking . . .” His gaze met hers.

“Yes?” She leaned in and caught her breath.

“This afternoon, I’m taking Josie to a Christmas ornament crafting event for kids at Ye Olde Book Nook. Would you like to come along? It’s okay if you don’t. I know our small-town traditions must seem silly—”

“Yes, yes. I’d love to come. Thank you for the invitation.”

Gil looked ridiculously pleased, and that made Noelle feel special. “I’m glad you’re coming along. Josie likes you.”

“She’s a delightful kid.”

“Well,” Gil chuckled. “She has her moments.”

“As do we all.”

His smile wrapped a wreath of happiness around her, warm as a wool sweater. “Do you want to walk over with us or meet us at the bookstore at one o’clock?”

“I’d love to walk with you.”

Excitement brightened Gil’s eyes. “I’ll head home, change clothes, pick up Josie from the babysitter, and meet you at the bottom of your stairs at ten forty-five. How’s that sound?”

“Perfect, see you then.” Noelle practically floated back to the B&B, glad she’d taken a break, and she didn’t count once, not even on the stairs.

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Chapter 12

Telling herself that taking time for herself would make her a better work planner by coming back to her work refreshed, Noelle was excited about the crafting event. As a kid art had been her second-favorite hobby after reading and she missed it.

Besides, it was a holiday of sorts. Thanksgiving Eve.

By the time they got to Ye Olde Book Nook, everything was set up with energetic six- and seven-year-olds spilling through the doors.

From a flyer in the window, Noelle read that the crafting event was on all day with different time slots for different age groups. That was nice. The younger kids wouldn't have to compete with older ones.

Several parents Gil knew came over and he introduced Noelle to the event. While organizers checked in the children and showed them where to sit, Noelle and her friends chatted about the wedding and how lucky it was that the Bucks and Buckles sisters had won The Tie's essay contest.

The bookstore had erected the Christmas ornament-building station at the back of the building. Supplies were arranged in color-coded trays, pipe cleaners in the red bins, plastic straws in the blue, cotton swabs in yellow, colored beads in silver, wine corks in gray, white paper plates in green, and candy-colored ribbon in purple. It was a rainbow of colors and a plethora of textures beckoning kids to jump in and have fun. Lined up at each station were glue sticks, glitter, children's scissors, tape, and rubber bands.

"Wanna bet how long the supplies stay tidy in those neat little bins?" Noelle asked Gil.

"Five minutes tops." Gil laughed.

Leading the event was an elementary school teacher named Flynn

Calloway, a pretty woman in her early forties with naturally curly hair spilled down her shoulders. Noelle remembered Flynn from the times she visited her grandparents in Twilight. Flynn used to run her family's pop restaurant, Froggy's, before they'd sold it.

"Noelle!" Flynn exclaimed, coming around the table to greet her. "I see you were in town planning the Buckhorn/Maxwell wedding for The Twilight. So much fun!"

"Dad." Josie tugged on her father's sleeve. "Can I sit by Ian?"

"Why don't you ask Ian?"

A curly-haired boy, who looked a lot like Flynn, was seated at the table. He ducked his head shyly and used his foot to push out the chair next to him so Josie could sit down.

Grinning, Josie plunked into the chair. "Hi, Ian."

Ian's face blushed pink and he mumbled, "Hey."

"Ian's my middle child," Flynn said to Noelle. "His older sister, Grace, will be here for the next time slot with the eight- and nine-year-olds."

"Goodness! You've been busy since the last time I was in Twilight." Noelle smiled.

"Oh, we've got a third." Flynn laughed. "Amos is still too young for going to school and crafts. He's with my husband, Jesse."

"That must be so fun."

"Hectic as all get-out, but I wouldn't have it any other way." Flynn wriggled her fingers. "We better get this party started before the wee ones start, Gil's begin bouncing around the room."

At that, the families gathered around. Most children had at least one parent with them, either a mom or dad, a grandparent, or stepparent. One had an aunt and uncle. Another lucky kid had not only his parents, but both sets of grandparents with him.

But there was one little girl who sat all alone at the end of the table, keeping her distance from the rest of the children. A quiet child with soft eyes. Empathy wrenched Noelle's heart.

She went over to the girl and crouched down so that she was eye level. "Hi, my name's Noelle. What's yours?"

"Ebby."

"Hello, Ebby. Is your mom or dad in the store?"

Solemnly, Ebby shook her head.

"You're on your own?"

that “My dad dropped me off. He’s gotta deliver a horse to a customer, b
she’d he’ll be back later.”

pular “Do you know Ian and Josie?” Noelle nodded toward the two other
children.

heard “No. I go to school in Jubilee.”

e. How Noelle felt the little girl’s loneliness like a visceral punch and her m
jetted back twenty years to a film set in Boulder, Colorado.

Back then, Crescenda would occasionally take her on location so the
could spend “quality mother-daughter time” together and would then
ble. promptly forget about her, leaving Noelle to watch TV for endless hou
o him alone in their trailer. This one time, bored after three weeks of cloisteri
Noelle had left the trailer and wandered off the set, ending up in some
alleyway, petting the flea-bitten dog of a homeless man. Crescenda los
mind when she learned—several hours after the fact—that Noelle had
ice, missing. She ordered flea baths and called the cops, threw around
accusations. It had been a whole thing.

’ Even now, Noelle cringed at the memory.

After that, whenever Crescenda filmed on location, she sent Noelle t
arts with her grandparents, which had turned out a much better solution for
everyone involved.

Noelle put a hand to her stomach. She had to be careful not to projec
childhood experiences onto Ebby. But goodness, she sure knew what i
nes like—alone in a place where you didn’t know anyone and had to fend
yourself with strangers.

person “Would you like to come sit by Josie and Ian?” Noelle invited.

an Ebby’s eyes widened, and a fragile smile lit her little face. “Really?”

ts of “Yes, absolutely. Let’s move your chair down.”

Face aglow, Ebby hopped up and pushed her chair across the aged
hardwood floor and Noelle followed her.

erious “This is Ebby. I told her she could join us,” Noelle said to Gil, Josie
Ian. “I hope that’s okay.”

rel. “Sure, sure,” Gil said. “C’mon, Ebby, get closer. We’ve got orname
make!”

Ebby beamed as if they’d just given her the best Christmas present e
and Noelle felt as if she’d done a good thing.

ut Noelle amazed him.

Gil studied her. She crouched between Ebby and Josie's chairs, her : animated, as she helped the children pick out one of the four ornament options available. He hadn't noticed Ebby was alone.

But Noelle had.

ind He liked that about her. Her keen sense of observation brought thing her radar that wouldn't even show up for most people. He supposed th was one of the things that made her such a good wedding planner.

His mind drifted off into a fantasy about what could happen between each scenario featuring Twilight as a backdrop.

ng, Maybe . . .

t her But why would she want him? He was just an ordinary, small-town gone and she was the daughter of Hollywood celebrities with a successful w planning business in L.A. Besides, she'd made it perfectly clear she did believe in love or the traditional values he held dear. The song he'd sta writing about her tingled through his brain.

to stay *Spent her time reading books, writing down her thoughts
Never guessed she'd become something greater than she sought*

et her "Daddy," Josie said. "I'm gonna make a paper plate angel tree topper.

t felt "Huh?" He blinked, upset with himself that he'd been ignoring his k

for "I'm making an angel."

"That's great, honey. We'll put it on our Christmas tree." He knelt o floor to his daughter's left. Noelle was still crouching to Josie's right.

, "What's on your craft list?"

Josie held up a laminated card that Flynn had given her.

"How about you, Ian?" Gil asked the boy. "Have you picked out wh you're going to make?"

, and "Jingle bell ornaments," Ian said.

nts to "Of course you are." Flynn leaned over her side of the table to ruffle son's hair. "Anything musical and this one gravitates straight for it. He from my dad's mother, who danced and sang in burlesque when she w her twenties. She could also strum a wicked banjo riff and play a mean harmonica."

ver "You don't say."

Flynn had told him the story of her Vegas showgirl grandmother ma more times than once. She seemed to admire her ancestor's bawdiness

face Maybe because Flynn had always been such a responsible rule-follower herself.

“And you, Ebby?” Noelle asked the girl.

“Snowflakes!” Ebby said.

is onto she looked from Gil to Noelle and back again. “Since y’all are already
at trait invested in three of the designs, one or both of you should go for the
Popsicle-and-pipe cleaner reindeers.”

1 them, “Ooh.” Noelle sent Gil a sexy look and rubbed her palms together. “
get a side competition going just between you and me, cowboy?”

guy Whoa, Noelle was flirting with him! Gil’s pulse kicked up, spurred
edding by her quirky half grin.

ln’t “Let’s see which one of us can make the best Popsicle stick, pipe cle
rted reindeer.” Noelle threw down the gauntlet.

“Go for it!” Josie laughed. “Beat her, Daddy. You can do it.”

“I thought we were friends,” Noelle said to Josie, pretending her feet
were hurt.

“We are, we are.” Josie looked alarmed. “I didn’t mean nothing by it.”

“I was just teasing,” Noelle said. “You gotta be loyal to your dad.”

” Josie blew out her breath and patted Noelle’s hand. “We *are* friends.”

id. “You’re my friend too.” Ebby searched Noelle’s face with anxious eyes.
“Right?”

n the “Yes, I’m your friend and Josie’s friend and Ian’s friend.” Noelle smiled
at each child.

“And Daddy’s too?” Josie asked.

Noelle met Gil’s gaze over the top of his daughter’s head.

at “And Daddy’s too,” Noelle echoed, then lightly touched the tip of her
tongue to her upper lip and winked at him.

her Gil would be the first to admit that his mind leaped to things it had never
got it business jumping to. Like how much fun it would be to tug Noelle’s hair
as in from that ponytail and let the silky cascade fall against his bare hands.

Uncool, Thomas, uncool.

Everyone gathered their supplies and went back to their seats to begin
projects. Noelle and Gil returned to their places. They took turns helping
child with their project while also working on their own reindeer ornament.

ny “Daddy,” Josie said. “Noelle’s using a neon green marker to decorate
Reindeer aren’t neon green.”

er “She’s avant-garde.” Gil wriggled his eyebrows at Noelle. “You can put her in a box. She’ll just bust out of it.”

“Daddy’s reindeer is brown,” Josie said to Noelle. “Like reindeer are *supposed* to be.”

Then “Traditionalism is a crowd pleaser.” Noelle busily colored the Popsi stick with the neon green marker. “But there’s more than one way to slice a cat.”

In that moment, Noelle sounded so much like her Southern grandmother and nothing at all like the polished LA woman in front of him, that Gil took a double take.

faster “Huh?” Josie wrinkled her nose.

“Just wait.” Gil nodded. “It’ll turn out good. Trust Noelle on this. She has an artistic eye and attention to detail.”

Josie looked skeptical.

“I just now remembered Noelle won the summer art contest at the library,” Gil said. “That was the year I worked mowing lawns for the town’s public buildings, and they posted her art on the bulletin board.”

t.” “I can’t believe you remembered that. I’d forgotten all about it myself.”

“As I recall, it was a painting of a bride in her wedding dress.”

.” “You do remember.” Her gaze latched on to his.

eyes. “You were thinking about weddings, even back then.”

“I did the painting after Crescenda married Felix, her third husband. I smiled at she studied Gil, her eyes took on a sweet light. What was that look? Affection?”

A delicious chill went straight through his bones, and it was all he could do to suppress his shudder of desire. Unless he was imagining the whole thing because he *wanted* her to want him. His mind went to that moment in the kitchen when he’d almost kissed her.

10 Right now, he wished he *had* done it and gotten it out of his system. air Because he hadn’t been able to think of much else since. The anticipation of what her delicious mouth might taste like had kept him awake at night.

Dominated him.

in their He ached to kiss her.

ng each A lot.

nents. A whole lot.

e. Her gaze left his eyes and drifted down to fix on his lips. Oh, hell’s sake, he wasn’t the only one thinking about kisses.

It put “Daddy, you’re not paying attention.”
e “What? Oh, sorry.” He blinked at his daughter. “What is it?”
“What should I make my angel’s hair out of?”
“How about glitter?”
cle “Oh, yeah! Cool idea. Thanks.” Josie took the glitter he offered.
kin a Noelle laughed. “You will be cleaning up glitter for months after
Christmas.”
other “Glitter expert, are you?” He lowered his voice, and his eyes went ri
did a back to her full pink lips.
“For Mom’s fourth wedding, she had people throw glitter as they left
chapel. She’d already done birdseed, confetti, and bubbles and she was
ne has running out of ideas. Never again.” Noelle shook her head.
“I defer to your wisdom.” He snapped his fingers at his daughter. “For
the glitter, sweet pea. Why don’t you glue down yellow beads for her hair
brary,” Josie narrowed her eyes. “Nope. I’m using glitter.”
blic Gil looked at Noelle. “Help.”
“She’s your kid.” Noelle grinned and shrugged. “She takes after her
elf.” Stubborn.”
Nailed him.
“I gotta pick my battles,” he said. “Guess I’ll be cleaning up glitter until
next Christmas. In for a penny, in for a pound.” He motioned at Josie.
” As me that glitter, kiddo. My reindeer needs some sparkle.”
Once everyone had finished their ornaments, glitter, bits of tissue paper,
pipe cleaners, cotton swabs, and straws were strewn everywhere. Glori
ould do messy, just as any worthy craft project should be.
hing “And now,” Flynn announced, “it’s time to judge our entries. The pi
is winners get kismet cookies!”
“Yay!” The kids cheered, clapped, and wriggled.
“Put your ornaments on the table in front of you for the judging.”
ion of Everyone complied. Flynn started at the far end of the long table wh
and the others sat. She had her hands clasped behind her back and slowly
examined each project as she walked past.
“Well,” Flynn said. “All the projects are so exceptionally good I simply
can’t pick one winner. That means everyone gets a kismet cookie!”
A chorus of cheers filled the room.
bells, “What about Daddy and Noelle’s ornaments?” Josie said. “Who will win
reindeer?”

“They’re grown-ups,” Ebby said. “They don’t getta win.”

“Ebby makes a good point,” Flynn said. “We’ll let Gil and Noelle sort out themselves, but what say we give them kismet cookies too?”

“Yeah!” Ian said.

“In fact,” Flynn said, “cookies for everyone!”

Flynn passed out the homemade cookies, individually sealed in wax pouches, while the parents and children gathered up their ornaments and started filtering out of the bookstore.

“Need some help with cleanup?” Noelle asked Flynn.

“Oh gosh, yes, please, thank you,” Flynn said.

Gil went for the broom and dustpan in the corner while Noelle got the children involved in putting the supplies back into the proper bins.

Josie paused, studying the reindeer ornaments that he and Noelle had made. “You’re right, Daddy. A neon green reindeer shouldn’t work, but looks exactly like Christmas. Bright and happy. Sorry, but Noelle’s reindeer wins.”

“Thanks, Josie. I appreciate the compliment,” Noelle said.

“I like this one better.” Ebby pointed at Gil’s reindeer. “It’s the way they are *supposed* to be. Nice and normal. No weird stuff.”

Over the heads of the kids, Gil met Noelle’s eyes. The reindeer ornaments and children’s critiques encapsulated the difference in his and Noelle’s personalities. He was rooted, routine, and conventional. Noelle was flexible, vibrant, and one-of-a-kind.

Nothing in common.

Total opposites.

Yeah, but weren’t opposites supposed to attract?

After the craft event at the bookstore, Noelle offered to help Gretchen and Gil with the baking for the next day’s Thanksgiving celebration. Noelle would have been rude, after all, to just retreat when there was so much work to do.

There in the bustling kitchen, with Christmas music playing from the radio that sat on the windowsill, she’d spent the late afternoon peeling apples for the backyard tree. But although she was having a blast with the two women, the moment triggered a recall of the very first time she’d baked an apple pie with her Grammie.

The memory crept, soft as a kitten padding on quiet feet, across her heart that and she was suddenly filled with so much love and laughter as Grammm showed her how to peel the apples all in one piece and then throw the peel over her shoulder to reveal the initial of her one true love.

Noelle's peel had curled into a distinct G, which had sent her heart fluttering. She'd forgotten all about that precious memory with her grandmother. Impressionable teen that she'd been, Noelle had taken it as a sign that Gil was her one true love.

So silly.

Boy, had she been gullible. Hoping against hope there was such a true love but knowing from watching her parents flail in their numerous relationships, it probably was a big fat lie. How could an apple peel forecast your future?

It couldn't and that was the thing. The magical nonsense of Twilight myths and legends was starting to wear her down. If she didn't stay strong her resolve, she was going to get swept away.

And the very last thing she needed was to fall in love with a small-town guy with amazing dimples and soulful blue eyes.

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Chapter 13

Thanksgiving Day at the Merry Cherub was, hands down, the best Noelle ever had, and that included the year Crescenda hired a private plane to take them to a Plymouth Rock celebration with two dozen of her celebrity friends.

Gretchen was hosting an open house in Noelle's honor. Townsfolk could come and go as they pleased, and Noelle was stunned at how many people showed up to meet her. The Buckhorns and Maxwell twins came, along with Benji and her husband, Spencer. Noelle told herself it was just because people wanted to rub shoulders with someone who was celebrity adjacent, but she was surprised at how many people wanted to talk to her about her wedding planning business and her appearance on *The Klatch*. Only a few were asked about Crescenda or her father.

It was nice, for a change, to be welcomed for herself, and not for who her mother was.

They had met Ebby's father, Tyler, when he picked up his daughter at the bookstore and Gil had invited them to the Thanksgiving meet-and-greet, as well. Josie was thrilled to have someone her age to play with, and they took off together.

Gretchen invited Tyler into the kitchen for eggnog and conversation. She learned Tyler lived between Twilight and Jubilee and he'd just gotten divorced. Since school was out for the week, and he hadn't had a baby the day before, Tyler had dropped Ebby off at the craft event. He thanked Noelle profusely for looking after his daughter and showing her so much hospitality. Noelle liked the lanky man who smelled of horses and leather and seemed really nice.

Since Gretchen and Gil's parents were coming to Twilight for Chris

they wouldn't be attending the Thanksgiving celebration, but they made up for their absence by Facetiming the family from their lanai in Costa Rica.

After the lavish Thanksgiving dinner that lasted for two hours, some gathered in the kitchen pitching in with cleanup, while others went to the backyard to play games, where it was a lovely fifty-eight degrees and filled with sunshine and a soft breeze, but a norther was predicted for later that evening. So they enjoyed the pleasant weather while they had it.

Noelle fluctuated between the kitchen conversations and the outdoor sports. At one point, Gil coaxed her into joining a game of flag football. She knew little about the sport, but she didn't let that stop her. She took in a quick tutorial Gil gave the participants and assumed her position in the formation.

elle There were eight people on each team. Included among the players were Sierra and Sienna, Dylan and Cody, and Benji and Spencer. Dylan and friends were on the same team as Noelle and Gil.

ould Watching Gil bend over to hike the ball was a thing of beauty. Holy people Christmas! He'd had a great butt in high school, but now, in his tight-fitting jeans, his thirty-year-old tuchus was absolutely mesmerizing with that red bandana sticking half out of his back pocket.

ent, Noelle was so busy staring at him that she wasn't prepared when even he began moving. Some going left, others right, a couple of participants puffed straight up the field of play.

Oops, oops! Who had the ball?

io her Noelle wrung her hands, unsure of what to do, but the basic rule was to drive the ball through the opponents to score a goal.

from In a flash, Gil zigzagged in front of her, the ball tucked against his back and suddenly he was pressing it into her hands. "Head down, dart left, let the girls let go of the ball."

. They Happy to follow instructions, Noelle did exactly as he asked, hugging the football against her side as if glued there, and she took off running to the goal.

sitter Gil charged right, pretending he still had the ball in his possession. The feint worked. The opposing team went after Gil.

ked Gil Realizing she was temporarily in the clear, Noelle poured on the heat and sprinting as fast as she could, the goal line in sight. Quickly, the other players recognized she had the ball and came thundering after her.

EEK!

tmass, She felt her hair tie loosen and a hank of hair fell from her ponytail to the ground.

le up swish into her eyes. But she'd be darned if she was going to let a broke
ca. tie prevent her from making the goal. The team was counting on her.

Plus, she wanted to earn Gil's respect.

he Her teammates rushed to protect her, doing their best to block the
filled opponents and clear a path for Noelle down the field.

at Her legs churned, kicking up fresh leaves that had fallen since Gil h
raked the yard when they'd returned from the craft event yesterday. Sh
r watched him from the kitchen window of the B&B as she'd peeled app
l. She while Gretchen and Delphine rolled out pie crust dough.

the The goal line wasn't far away. Just a few yards left. But she was out
breath and couldn't see with her hair in her eyes. Her legs felt like she
running through syrup.

were "Go, Noelle, go!" Gretchen cheered from the sidelines, and that gav
Sierra the encouragement she needed to push forward.

Almost there, almost there, she chanted to herself.

itting Cody Maxwell jumped in front of her, while his bride-to-be, Sienna,
grabbed for the flag sticking out of Noelle's back pocket.

flashy The couple was ganging up on her.

eryone Noelle swung her butt away from Sienna's reach, as Sierra came to
Noelle's defense and ran interference, slipping adroitly between Noelle
lowed her twin.

"Go, Noelle!" Sierra said. "You can do it!"

s to Noelle kept running, even though her lungs were crying out for air. !
might stand on her feet all day as she helped a waffling bride shop for
wedding dresses, but sprinting was a whole other skill.

ody, Someone came up behind her, running faster than she was, angling f
don't flag in her pocket.

Gracious, but the other team was relentless!

ig the She could hear the person breathing down her neck, panting just as l
he left. as she was. Noelle didn't look to see who it was. The goal line lay just
The of her.

Almost there, almost there.

it, Noelle flew across the ground, her hair streaming out behind her. Sh
players going to make it, oh yes, she was!

Behind her, the pounding feet grew louder.

"Go, Noelle, go!" More people hollered from the sidelines.

to So focused was she on the end zone that Noelle never looked down

en hair she didn't see the coiled-up garden hose partially hidden by the leaves
was too late.

The toe of her sneaker caught the edge of the hose. She was moving
that there was no chance for recovery.

She was going down!

ad Instinct had her putting out her hands to catch herself and the ball pe
ie'd from where she'd stowed it between her elbow and her ribcage. She di
bles face-plant as the ball bounced away.

Rats. So close.

of Her tumble caused a chain reaction. The person running behind her
was also traveling too fast to stop. The next thing she knew, someone was l
on top of her.

e her "Are you okay?"

That's when she realized the someone was Gil. It hadn't been an opp
teammate coming after her. It had been Gil running to block people fro
snatching her flag.

Aww.

His chest pressed flat against her spine, his belt buckle pressing into
lower back. It was cold against her bare skin where her sweater had ric
e and during the spill.

"Noelle?"

She didn't answer because she couldn't catch her breath. Not with h
She squashing her lungs.

"Uh." She grunted and closed her eyes, concentrating on getting in a

for the Gil scrambled off her and gently flipped her over. "Noelle, are you l
Please answer me if you can."

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

He was stretched out beside her on the ground, propped up on one e
reavily leaning over, and looking concerned. Lightly, he patted her cheeks. "N

ahead Her gaze fixed on his lips.

The game had stopped, and everyone gathered, circling around her,
their faces blurred like an impressionist's painting in the rain, and she
ie was only focus on one face, one pair of eyes, one sexy mouth.

Gil.

More than anything in the world, she wanted him to kiss her. Ached
The heat in his eyes told her he felt the same way.

and "Noelle?" His brow knitted.

until it His blue eyes peered at her from beneath half-lowered lids. His lashes were thick enough to use as paintbrushes. The bit of beard stubble ringing his face so fast gave him a rakish look that both excited her and gave her pause. Her feet were treading dangerously close to something she was afraid to feel. A woman wouldn't go there, not even in her mind.

opped His mouth stretched thin with concern. "Are you all right?"

d a "I was about to ask you the same thing."

"I'm not the one who face-planted into a pile of leaves." His chuckle was soft and reassuring.

was People were staring, but for once in her life, Noelle didn't care what anyone else thought. Every ounce of her attention was fixed on this man who was so very close to her. His rich masculine scent filled her nose and his heart galloped. For one cuckoo moment, she could've sworn he was going to kiss her in front of everyone.

om In fact, her body prepared for the impact of his mouth against hers, warming and softening and . . .

"Noelle," he murmured.

her "Gil," she whispered back, full of feels.

lden up They stared into each other's eyes for the longest time and then he ran away, and she felt her body go completely limp.

"You never answered my question. Are you hurt?"

im Hurt, no? Stunned into silence? Oh, yeah.

air. "I—I'm . . ." She was about to say that she was all right, but was she really? Her world had been knocked off-kilter.

hurt? She had feelings for Gil.

Deepening feelings.

Big-time.

lbow, And when he scrambled to his feet and held out his hand to help her up, a wide, warm smile on his handsome face, Noelle knew she was in serious trouble. Because if Gil had the slightest inclination of taking her to bed, she would let him.

but Because she desperately needed to focus on her job, and it seemed the only way to do that was through scratching this sexual itch for Gil that simply wouldn't leave her alone.

for it.

At dusk, everyone who'd been playing flag football and hanging around

es warehouse headed to the tree lighting ceremony. The big event that official
is jaw kicked off Twilight's Christmas holiday season.

feelings Gil was thrilled Noelle wanted to come along.

smart Delphine and her husband, Luther, stayed behind to hold down the f
the Merry Cherub so Gretchen could attend as well.

On the town square, the atmosphere was festive with carolers dressed
period costumes strolling the streets and wishing everyone a Merry Ch
e was in a melodious singsong. Delicious smells filled the air from kiosks roa
chestnuts, frying funnel cakes, and spinning cotton candy. Shopkeeper
who'd opened just for the evening event, passed out free warm apple c
m who and nonalcoholic eggnog.

er Keyed up, Josie and Ebby held hands, and skipped along in front of
ing to group. Gil was happy that his daughter had made a new friend, and it v
thanks to Noelle's kindness. Ebby's father, Tyler, seemed grateful to b
invited along as well. He and Gretchen were discussing cooking. Tyler
trying to learn how to cook instead of just picking up something to go
opening cans for Ebby's dinner and Gretchen seemed to love giving hi
pointers.

novel Gil cast a sidelong glance over at Noelle, who walked beside him, h
aglow as she took in the sights. Seeing her bundled up in a cute pink sl
parka, her dark hair curling against her shoulders, Gil felt his pulse qui
Falling on her during their flag football game had knocked all commor
e? Her from his head.

She turned to him, her perfectly shaped lips shiny with pink lip glos
forgotten just how big Twilight does Christmas."

"We do go all out."

Noelle took a deep breath and closed her eyes, a beatific smile on he
up, a "I've missed this."

us Gil stared down at her. Did her lips taste like honey? He imagined th
l, by did.

"Dad! Dad! Hurry before all the good spots are gone!" Josie broke t
he only his reverie, rushing over to grab his arm and drag him toward the thirty
ly pine erected on the courthouse lawn.

"Oh, okay." Grinning, he held out his palm to Noelle. "Please take r
hand. I don't know if I can handle this much joy without help."

rd the Laughing, Noelle sank her hand in his as Josie pulled them like a pl
horse, Ebby dancing alongside them.

ly When they reached the tree, people parted, smiling at the exuberant children. A makeshift stage and scaffolding had been erected for the ceremony.

ort at “C’mon Josie, we’ve got a spot right here for you,” said an older man in his seventies. Earl and his wife, Raylene Pringle, were patrons of the Windmill. They rarely missed a show and had VIP seats. Dressed as Santa and Mrs. Claus, Earl waved them over. Raylene stood beside her husband, costumed as Mrs. Claus.

s, “We get to stand with Santa?” Ebby asked in awe.

ider “You do.” Earl patted his belly and ho-ho-ho’d. “Step right up here, young’un.”

their Ebby and Josie crowded closer. Gil and Noelle hung back, letting them have the best vantage point. The crowd thickened as more people arrived.

e “Do you remember that time you were trampled by the Christmas tree crowd and lost Baby Jesus from the manger?” Gil asked.

or “I didn’t until I came back to Twilight. You saved my life.”

m “I was so scared you’d gotten hurt.”

er face “Just my tender feelings. You made me feel so much better about losing Baby Jesus.” She smiled at him.

ki “Glad I could help.” He smiled back, feeling ten feet tall in the glow of the Christmas lights.

1 sense Mayor Moe Schebly climbed the stage and sauntered up to the microphone. “Welcome, welcome, Twilightites and visitors alike!”

s. “I’d His voice boomed out across the night that had grown chilly after sundown. People rubbed their palms together and breathed out frosty air. Mayor Moe wanted to put his arm around Noelle so badly he couldn’t think straight. He looked at her face that seemed too forward, especially in public for everyone to see.

ney “This year’s tree lighting is extra special,” Mayor Schebly went on. “For those of you who don’t know, Sienna and Sierra Buckhorn and their friends, Cody and Dylan Maxwell, won first place in The Tie’s essay contest. Their prize is to have their wedding planned right here in Twilight, by none other than Noelle Curry, the daughter of veteran actor Crescenda Hardwick and documentary filmmaker Clinton Curry. Noelle was part of our community for many summers when she visited her grandparents here when she was a child. Please, help me give a warm welcome to Noelle! Please come up on stage with us.”

ow Thunderous applause echoed throughout the town square.

“Did you know he was going to invite me onstage?” Noelle whispered to Earl.

Gil.

“I did not, or I would have given you a heads-up that he was going to do so.”

“Maybe The Tie put him up to it,” she said. “Pamela Landry, my person in the company, has been pushing me to promote, promote, promote.”

Moe waved Noelle and the two sets of twins up onto the stage. Mrs. Gil felt Noelle tense beside him. She didn’t want to do this. “Do you want me to go up with you?”

“Yes, please.” She looked so grateful it tugged at his heartstrings. No matter how self-confident she appeared, deep down inside she was still nervous.

The bystanders parted, letting them through as Gil escorted her to the stage. He had his hand on her wrist and could feel the hot pounding of her pulse. She really was uncomfortable in the limelight.

He heard her counting softly under her breath as they went up the stairs. *One, two, three, four . . .*

She might be nervous, but other than the counting, she didn’t show it.

Appearing poised and assured, Noelle smiled at the crowd. With polished aplomb, she regaled the crowd with the details about the upcoming wedding and The Tie’s involvement, then she quickly passed the mike to Sienna. Sienna launched into a spiel about how and why they’d entered the contest. Sienna said a few words, as did Dylan and Cody. When Cody was finished, he passed the mike back to Noelle.

“Anyone have questions?” Noelle asked the audience.

“Will Crescenda Hardwick be here for the wedding?” someone asked.

“No,” Noelle said. “My mother’s filming a movie in London.”

The crowd made a collective noise of disappointment.

“I’m going to turn this back over to Mayor Schebly,” Noelle said. “If you all are eager to decorate the tree. If you want to know more about the wedding, you can ask me or the twins whenever you see us around town.”

“Thank you, Noelle.” Mayor Schebly took over the mike. “Doesn’t it have the perfect name for our town?” Then he reached for the comical oversized switch that would turn on the tree. “Y’all ready to light this holiday for us?”

Amidst a chorus of cheers, Noelle reached for Gil’s hand so he could lead her from the stage. He loved how she trusted him to be there for her.

“Thank you for coming with me,” she whispered. “You made that so much easier.”

People elbowed closer to the tree and Noelle shifted nearer to Gil, n
o do room. Her hip brushed lightly against his side, and it was all he could c
to put his arm around her shoulder and pull her even closer.

int Mayor Schebly lit the Christmas tree as people oohed and aahed.
mote.” Tubs filled with ornaments had been set up around the base of the tr
Santa Claus Earl enlisted Gil and Noelle to help pass out decorations to
i want children so they could adorn the lower tree branches, while adult volun
climbed the scaffolding to reach the higher boughs.

o Josie and Ebby joined the throng of kids racing to find a place to ha
l shy. ornaments. Their enthusiasm was a joy to watch.

e As soon as Noelle grabbed an ornament to pass along, some excited
her snatched it from her hand. “Wow, this is a free-for-all.”

eps. “Yep, that’s the fun of it. Don’t you remember?”
“I do.”

Gil passed Noelle a puppet of Rudolph the Reindeer to give to the n
it. in line.

lished “Oops, his red nose fell off,” she said.

dding “Pretend it’s one of the other eight reindeers.”

a, who “You know how to think on your feet. Just like you did with me and
erra Jesus.” Laughing, Noelle gave the puppet to a little boy. “Here’s Danc

e gave Reaching out for the next ornament to pass along to another child, h
fingers touched Gil’s as he handed her a snowman ornament dangling
red ribbon. Static electricity crackled from her to him, and Gil felt a ho
d. sharp *snap*.

He felt a little breathless. Lie. He felt a lot breathless and sort of dizzy.

She looked up into his face and in that moment, they shared a sweet
I know connection. Gil stopped breathing altogether and watched as Noelle’s p
the dilated. He was feeling something powerful, and from the expression c
/n.” face, so was she.

she “What if?” she whispered.

ly Gil stared into her eyes, unable to speak.

big boy “What if what?” Benji Maxwell asked, popping up beside Noelle.

“Eep!” Noelle startled. “Tie a jingle bell around your neck, will ya?”

d help “Why? Then I couldn’t eavesdrop.” Benji grinned and waggled a fir
them. “Were you two telling secrets?”

o much “No!” they said in unison and sprang apart.

Noelle spun to the left, Gil to the right, each looking in the tubs for i

making ornaments to pass out, but all the tubs were empty. The tree was fully
do not decorated.

“Wow,” Noelle said. “That was fast. I thought it would take longer.”

“The night is still young,” Gil said. “Only seven thirty. I don’t have
ee. Josie to bed for another hour.”

o the “We were talking about going for hot chocolate and Christmas cook
iteers Benji said. “You guys wanna come?”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Noelle asked.

ing their “Me, Spence, Gretchen, Josie, Ebby and her dad, Tyler.” Benji got a
look on her face. “Or maybe you guys would like some alone time?”

child “No!” Noelle and Gil said.

“Well, come on then, the coffee shop is filling up fast, although the
went on ahead to grab us one of the big tables. Hopefully, the wait won’t
too long.” Benji started toward the coffee shop.

ext kid “You really want to go?” Gil asked Noelle. “Don’t feel obligated. You
bow out.”

“What? And miss out on a hot chocolate date with the best-looking guy
town?” Noelle teased. “Not on your life.”

l Baby He held his hand out to her and when Noelle took it, he knew things
er.” changed between them. He didn’t know how or when; he only knew that
er liked it.

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ornaments to pass out, but all the tubs were empty. The tree was fully decorated.

“Wow,” Noelle said. “That was fast. I thought it would take longer.”

“The night is still young,” Gil said. “Only seven thirty. I don’t have to put Josie to bed for another hour.”

“We were talking about going for hot chocolate and Christmas cookies,” Benji said. “You guys wanna come?”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Noelle asked.

“Me, Spence, Gretchen, Josie, Ebby and her dad, Tyler.” Benji got a sly look on her face. “Or maybe you guys would like some alone time?”

“No!” Noelle and Gil said.

“Well, come on then, the coffee shop is filling up fast, although the others went on ahead to grab us one of the big tables. Hopefully, the wait won’t be too long.” Benji started toward the coffee shop.

“You really want to go?” Gil asked Noelle. “Don’t feel obligated. You can bow out.”

“What? And miss out on a hot chocolate date with the best-looking guy in town?” Noelle teased. “Not on your life.”

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Chapter 14

Okay, was Noelle flirting with him?

If he wasn't mistaken, she'd just rubbed the toe of her boot against his ankle as they sat at a table across from each other at Perks, but maybe it was just an accidental brushing, and he was projecting his desires onto her. He didn't want to assume anything, because right now, his heart was jumping to all kinds of hopeful conclusions.

Gil grinned at her over the rim of his hot chocolate mug.

She lowered her lashes and angled a coy glance at him.

Nope, not an accident.

Noelle said something to Benji, who was sitting beside her. Benji laughed hysterically, but Gil missed what she'd said. He was too busy buzzing where her boot tip had touched his ankle.

Powerful urges overtook him, and he wanted to kiss her more than anything in the world. But his sister and his daughter were sitting at the table, as were other guests from the Merry Cherub. They'd ended up at three tables together when the Buckhorn twins and their fiancés arrived well. It was a festive atmosphere, filled with wedding talk and Christmas plans.

In the lively, crowded café, rich with the smell of ground coffee and freshly baked cookies, Gil breathed it all in and zeroed his gaze on Noelle's gorgeous face.

Her eyes glowed. She looked absolutely radiant. She cupped her chin in her palm, rested her elbow on the table, and leaned in toward Benji, mesmerized by her old friend's story.

He studied Noelle.

Her makeup was understated. Her lips a glossy pink. Her eyeshadow only a slightly darker shade than her skin tone. She knew how to present herself in a polished, yet natural way. A pleasing package. Her smile was relaxed and mischievous. She wore a fluffy red sweater sewed with gold threads that sparkled like Christmas itself.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, a casual, graceful gesture enchanted him. His teeth longed to nibble that sweet ear and taste her skin. Her laughter intoxicated him, high and melodious.

There. He felt it. Another gentle bump against his ankle.

Oh, she was playing footsie with him. Never mind that she had a plausible denial if he were to bring it up later. A rush of heat spread throughout his body.

She glanced at him, her eyes heavy-lidded, a little bit drowsy. A soft smile crawled across her lips and their gazes fused. In his heart of hearts, if it hadn't been surrounded by chattering people and the hissing of coffee machines he would have leaned across that table, pulled her close to him and kissed her until they were both senseless.

As a matter of principle, Gil tried not to cuss. He had a seven-year-old daughter in the house after all. But holy shit! He wanted Noelle so badly he could taste it.

Carolers came through the door singing "Jingle Bells" as they bunched around the counter to submit their orders.

"We should scoot," Noelle said. "Give the new arrivals a place to sit."

"Yes," Gil agreed. "It's bedtime for the little ones."

"Aww man," Josie said. "Why? Tomorrow isn't a school day."

"Because your father says so, Little Miss." Gil gave his daughter an affectionate grin and bopped her nose with his index finger. "Put on your coat."

"You too, Ebby," Tyler said.

"Since there's no school tomorrow, would you two like to have a sleepover?" Gretchen invited. "We could watch *Elf* and pop popcorn on the stove."

"Yay!" Josie clapped.

"Dad, can I?" Ebby asked Tyler.

"Wait, what?" Gil's eyes went wide. "I'm not prepared to host a

er was sleepover.”

nt “You’re not invited,” Gretchen said, looking from her brother to No
was and back again. “I’m hosting the sleepover, so you have nothing to do.
lden girls can sleep on the floor of my bedroom in sleeping bags.”

that Gretchen looked innocent as if the offer were spontaneous and caref
salty but something in her grin suggested she was playing matchmaker. Oth
why would she extend this spur-of-the-moment invitation, if not to free
her younger brother’s evening?

“Can I, Dad?” Ebby begged. “Please.”

usible “You don’t have any pj’s,” Tyler said.

his “Josie has lots of extra pj’s that Ebby could borrow,” said Gretchen,
problem solver.

t smile “All right then.” Tyler nodded. “I’ll pick her up in the morning, say
hey o’clock?”

Josie and Ebby squealed, joined hands, and jumped around the coffe
m, and shop.

“You sure you’re prepared for this?” Gil asked his sister.

ld “Easy-peasy.”

ly that “I’m picking up the tab for the table,” Gil said. “Happy holidays,
everyone.”

Amidst grateful thank-yous people pushed back chairs, got to their f
and slipped on their coats. It was so nice of him to treat.

d Gretchen looped her purse strap over her shoulder. “C’mon, girls. L
head back to the B&B.”

t.” Putting a palm on each girl’s head, Gretchen nudged them toward th
Noelle didn’t miss the exchange when Gretchen turned her head to giv
brother a wink as she left the building.

Most definitely the B&B owner was playing matchmaker.

our Gil helped Noelle with her coat, a gentlemanly gesture. He was an o
fashioned guy. It was quaint. It was adorable.

And it bothered her.

n the Not because she disliked his courtly manners, but precisely because
did. She loved them, in fact. And that brought up feelings of vulnerabi
She could put on her own coat, thank you very much. She could open l
own doors and pull out her own chair. She didn’t want or need to be h
onto a pedestal.

But when he zipped up her coat and put her knitted beanie on her he

gulped. Being treasured and cared for scared the pants off her.

elle He left cash on the table to cover the bill, along with a generous tip,
The then offered her his elbow. "Walk through Sweetheart Park to see the l

She shouldn't. It wasn't smart, but she felt helpless to resist. Linking
ree, arm through his, Noelle took a deep breath to steady herself. It was jus
erwise, walk, nothing more.

e up Out on the street, the crowd had thinned. The shops and kiosks were
closed, but people still strolled through the square and several groups v
entering and exiting Sweetheart Park, which was decorated with a lavi:
Christmas display.

the A sense of wonder lit Noelle up. It was so pretty here. Magical.

eight She shivered, not so much from the temperature that had dropped a
degrees while they'd been inside the coffee shop, but from the special
this day. She would remember it forever.

ie "You're cold." Gil released her arm to slip his hand around her waist
draw her closer to his body heat. "The wind's shifted directions. The
norther's coming in."

They walked in lockstep, hip to hip. It felt nice, this gentle connectio

"Look at that." Gil pointed at the inflatable North Pole village. "It's
feature this year."

reet, Santa Claus swayed in the breeze, almost as if he was waving, becko
et's them deeper into the park. "Winter Wonderland" played from the outd
speakers. It was wondrous indeed.

"Do you think your sister is trying to play matchmaker?" Noelle ask

ie door. "What?" Gil looked startled at the idea. "No . . . Do you think so?"

e her "She offered to host an impromptu sleepover for two seven-year-old
doesn't strike you as suspicious?"

ld- "Huh." Gil pondered that. "Maybe you're right. She has been buggin
about dating again. She's got a new fella even though she hasn't broug
around yet. She says it's too soon for them to meet each other's familie
my sister is happier than I've ever seen her. I guess she wants me to fe
she same. Do you suppose this is her unsubtle way of throwing us together

lity. "Yes."

ner "Do you mind?"

oisted Did she? "Do you want to date me, Gil?"

"Better question, do you want to date me?"

ad, she *More than anything.* "I'm only here for another month."

“Then it’s back off to Hollywood.”

and “All I can offer you is sex. Can you deal with that?”

ights?” “What are you suggesting?” He stopped walking, turned to face her,
g her put both hands on her waist.

t a “It’s been fun spending time with you.”

“I feel the same.”

! “You’ve got a nice life here. A wonderful daughter, and a business t
were you love. Despite all that you suffered you’ve come out of it with a gre
sh attitude. I’m proud of you and the life you’ve created for yourself, Gil
Thomas.”

“Ditto, Noelle Curry.”

few “It might not have the country music career you once imagined for
ness of yourself, but from my eyes, you’ve got it all.”

He met her gaze. “Not everything.”

t and The way he looked at her stole Noelle’s breath away. She gulped. Th
look sent shivers running down her spine. Unable to tolerate the full br
his stare, she glanced up at the night sky.

on. “Oh look! It’s snowing.” She pointed up at the gentle flakes slowly
a new to earth. The ground wasn’t cold enough for snow to stick, but that did
dampen her joy.

oning “Beautiful,” Gil said, but he wasn’t looking at the sky. His gaze was
oor locked on her.

This time, she didn’t look away. “We don’t get snow in LA.”

ed. “We don’t get it much here either. More often than not, any precipit
we get is ice.”

ls. That “I’m glad we’re here to see it together.”

“Me too.”

ng me He reached for her hand, and she took it. They stood like wide-eyed
ht him children staring up at the sky, watching the silent snowflakes settle ove
es, but park.

el the “Too bad it won’t stick,” Noelle said. “We could make snow angels.

?” “You look like a snow angel.” He reached up to brush away the sno
collecting on her hair.

His touch heated her, warm as an electric blanket. She closed her ey
tilted her head back, and stuck out her tongue to catch the snow and gi
as the thickening flakes landed in her mouth. It tasted like chilly air an
So much irrational hope.

“You look happy,” he said.

and She closed her mouth and straightened, again finding his gaze. There was something about him, something more than the brief history they’d shared. He possessed a quality that was as appealing as it was unexpected. Gil was comfortable in his own skin. He knew who he was and in Noelle’s world, as an actor, producer, filmmaker, and star, who were always pretending to be something or someone they weren’t, that was a rare commodity.

hat Impulsively, she kissed him, springing forward to lightly press her lips against his and then falling back.

“What was that?” He looked and sounded amused.

She pointed upward at the tree branch they were standing beneath.

“Mistletoe.”

“Aha,” he said. “A handy excuse. I’ll take advantage of it.”

hat He dispatched the minuscule distance between them, gathering her into his arms and kissing her.

unt of A long and lingering kiss that stirred yearning deep inside her. *This* was what she had been missing. All this time.

drifting *Gil*.

n’t His lips were firm, but his kiss was gentle. In it, she tasted the past and a promise of a future she didn’t dare dream of. Because she liked him. A lot. And she wanted to kiss him endlessly for hours and hours.

ation He was a good man who made her feel safe, and whenever she was with him she experienced a deep peace that she’d never felt with anyone else beyond her grandparents.

Gil reached up and cupped her face with both palms, deepening the kiss by touching the tip of his tongue to her lips.

er the Helplessly, she parted her teeth, inviting him to take things further. She was suspended in this fairy-tale moment. As if they were captured in a time capsule. Where past and future merged into this magnificent present.

.” Noelle allowed herself to revel in this sweet twinkling without any expectations or demands. She experienced his mouth, the heat and the moisture and the flavor of the peppermint candy cane he’d used to stir the chocolate.

es, The snow came down in quickening flurries, dusting everything around them in white. On and on they kissed, cherishing this special time in their budding relationship.

Finally, Gil broke the connection. “Whew.”

“Understatement of the month.”

e was “We’re getting soaked. Come on, let’s get in out of the weather.”

red. “Goodbye, snow.” She waved at the sky as Gil took her hand and pu
was her toward the park exit. The lights, obviously on a timer, winked off,
ld of them in snowy darkness. They made their way guided only by moonlig

to be Laughing, they rushed toward the Merry Cherub, hand in hand. It fe
something from a romantic movie. She wanted to bottle this moment a
lips to it in a snow globe to pull out and shake up for those future moments w
she felt nostalgic about this night. Tomorrow, she would wake up and
back to planning the Buckhorn/Maxwell wedding, but for tonight she
couldn’t get enough of this wintry allure.

When they reached the carriage house at the B&B, Gil hesitated at t
steps leading to the upstairs apartment. He looked as if he wanted to in
nto his her in, but she had no real idea what he was thinking.

This Sex would only complicate things. They lived in different states. Ha
different lifestyles. Different values. A romance couldn’t go anywhere
both knew it. But that didn’t stop her from wanting him.

What was wrong with a little fling?

nd the Well, for one thing, he was a good dad and he wanted to set an exan
lot. his daughter. She liked that about him. That he put his child first.

“I guess this is good night,” he said, but longing filled his eyes.

with “Yes.”

ie “I had a great time.”

“Me too.”

kiss, “Maybe we could . . .” His eyes never left her face.

A kiss She put her hand on the railing, aching to linger, to ask for another k
to get slicker. but the snow was coming down furiously now and the steps were only
to get slicker.

Noelle licked her lips.

Gil stared.

“I should go up.”

his hot “Yes.”

He wrapped his hand around her waist, tugged her closer.

und “Oh!”

ieir His eyelids lowered along with his head, and he covered her mouth
his in a kiss that was initially soft and gentle, but within two seconds, b
hard, hot, and demanding.

And *she* was the one who took them to that electric place.

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And *she* was the one who took them to that electric place.

Chapter 15

At the force of Noelle's return kiss, Gil felt all his resolve leave his body. A soft little moan escaped her lips and he was a goner. She nipped and licked her tongue teasing an invitation.

Take me.

Finally, panting, he broke the kiss. She was breathing just as fast and shallowly as he was.

"Your place?"

"Yes," she murmured and raced up the steps to the Roost.

Gil spared a glance at the B&B to see if anyone was watching. No one. As far as he could tell—all the blinds were closed tight—and he took her.

She waited for him inside the apartment, door thrown open, snowflakes blowing in . . . waiting. Her puffy lips glistened wetly in the entryway.

He stood in the darkness staring at her. She looked so damn beautiful and captivating that she took his breath away.

This was the time for him to come to his senses. Things were moving so fast. He wasn't accustomed to traveling at such dizzying speed. But that was the appeal, wasn't it?

She crooked her finger.

He took common sense, wadded it into a ball, tossed it over his shoulder, and flew across that threshold.

Noelle welcomed him with open arms, enfolded him into her embrace, and kicked the door closed with her foot. She kissed him long and hard, and she pulled back and stared straight into his eyes.

"Are we sure we want to do this?"

Gil meant to tell her no. He should have told her no, but he wanted her so much, even if only for one night. He would take any crumbs he could get.

“Noelle . . .” He opened his mouth, uncertain of what he was about to say, but he got no further.

“Shh.” She took hold of the front of his shirt and yanked him to her.

He did not resist. He hovered, her hand fisting the flannel in the middle of his chest as she searched his face.

Going up on tiptoe, she planted a hot kiss at the juncture where his neck and jawline met right behind his ear.

Gil shuddered. How had she gone so unerringly to one of his erogenous zones? Her busy little mouth rendered him mute. Gil closed his eyes, clenched his hands, tried to muster up the will to resist . . .

dy. A But he didn't want to.

cked, He wanted her.

Had to have her.

d She was as necessary to him right now as breathing. She nibbled his earlobe while one naughty hand slipped underneath his shirt, and she pressed her palm over his abdomen.

“Heaven help me.” He groaned.

“Pay attention.”

ne was “Bookworm, that's the problem. I can't think about anything *but* getting off after you into bed.”

kes “Good. Perfect. We have the same goal. Now, where were we?” She pressed those hot little lips on his throat and Gil stopped thinking altogether.

light. His body was fully erect in every way possible. It had been a very long time since he'd been this hard, if ever. Cradling the back of her head in his palm, Gil took over, sealing her lips, plumbing the sweet depths of her mouth, branding her with his kisses until he was certain she was as breathless as he. g fast. and addled as him. s part

Gil ached for her in a way he'd never ached for another. She represented his past—and dare he hope—his future? Was he wishing for too much? He was rushing down a merry path that could lead to nowhere but disaster?

“I've waited a long time for you,” Noelle whispered around the pressure of his mouth. “I've dreamed of this moment since I was a teenager.”

d then “Wh-what?” He paused, pulled back, and looked down at her.

“I used to have teenage wet dreams about you,” she confessed. “I never thought I'd actually get a chance to live out my fantasy.”

er so Slightly alarmed, he cupped her cheek with his palm and peered into
get. soft brown eyes. “Don’t put me on a pedestal, Noelle. I’m bound to fal
o say, “I’m not. That was the teenage me. I’m going into this with my eyes
open, Gil. I just want to enjoy this moment with you, ’kay?”

“Are you sure?”

idle of “Let’s don’t overanalyze it.” She paused. “Please. This is just fun. T
all. We’re grown consenting adults. We know how to protect ourselves
eck We’re allowed to enjoy each other’s bodies, no strings attached. I know
you’re a traditionalist and this loosey-goosey approach is probably rub
ous you the wrong way, but I want you. Here. Tonight. I hope that’s enoug

He *did* want more, but things were complicated. He had no right to a
them. She’d given him her terms. It was his choice to decide whether h
could abide by them or not.

“Deal,” he said, because the last thing he wanted was to leave witho
making love to her.

“I’m serious, Gil. Sleeping together changes nothing between us.”

laned “Got it.”

She hitched in a deep breath. “Whew, I’m glad we got that sorted.”

He kissed her quickly, a sweet enticing peck, and then peered down
He traced a knuckle across her chin and felt the soft thud of her pulse a
ting his skin.

“Gil,” she whispered, looking uncertain for the first time since he’d
e into her space.

gether. Dipping his head, he captured her mouth again, a tentative kiss that
ng the wild passion storming inside him.

his Her teeth parted on a gentle exhale, and she sank against his chest, c
hot her hands into fists as if to keep herself from ripping off his clothes. H
athless the same desperate need raging inside of him, but he was determined to
his time. He vowed to savor every minute, in case they never did this a

nted Noelle’s body heat seeped through his clothing, and he felt sweat po
? Was on his forehead and upper lip. He was so hard that he could think of no
but this woman and what he wanted to give her. Not just with his body
sure of with his heart as well. But she’d made it clear she did not want his hea

He could compartmentalize and keep his emotions tucked away. If t
what she needed from him, he’d give it to her.

ver Barely able to control himself, he took her hand in his and led her in
bedroom awash in angels.

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Noelle’s pulse jumped like a sprinter at the sound of the starting gun.

She was nervous, oh boy, so very nervous, but she wanted this man than she’d wanted anything in a very long time. From the moment she saw him strutting across the road in sexy Santa mode, she’d ached for this.

No, that wasn’t true. This night had been thirteen years in the making. Her teenage fantasy finally came to life.

He turned to her. “Are you absolutely sure this is what you want?”

One, two, three, four . . .

Counting away her fears, Noelle gazed deeply into his eyes and all she understood that he was just as nervous as she was. Knowing that eased her own anxiety. Even though this was just fun and games and nothing they did care about each other. No matter what happened, this was a good thing.

“I’m ready for this,” she said. “I’m ready for *you*.”

“Hell, yes.” His mouth found hers again and he gave her the most wonderful kiss that curled her toes inside her ankle boots. He seemed to know just how much pressure and heat to put into his kisses and she wanted more, more, more.

He slipped the sleeve of her top off her shoulder and lightly bit her shoulder her collar bone. He smelled of a manly cologne and pure, sexy Gil.

She threw back her head and let out a low moan.

A smug chuckle escaped him as his lips burned a trail of heated kisses. Her entire body softened, and she felt as if she were made of gelatin, wobbly and sweet.

“Look at me,” she whispered.

He raised his head, his lips shiny in the muted glow of the night-light. He reached for his shirt and button by button, *one, two, three, four, five, six*, slowly opened his shirt until she fully revealed the delicious muscles hidden underneath his clothing.

She traced her fingertips over his skin, drawing a shudder from him, then she peeled his shirt from his shoulders, and let it drift to the floor.

Once he was stripped bare to the waist, Gil stepped back. “My turn to remove something.”

He reached to unclasp the necklace cradled at her cleavage. Carefully he settled it on the bedside table, before turning back to plant hot kisses against

her throat.

And so they went, slowly undressing each other, marveling at what exploration uncovered.

more
'd seen He took off her top, his fingers tickling electrical impulses along her skin. She shivered again and buried her head against his shoulder, reveling in the sweetness as he softly kissed her temple.

g as “You are so beautiful.”

“I’m not. My mother tells me all the time I’m actually rather plain.”

it once, “I know she’s your mom, and you love her, but she’s also an asshole,” she said. “I hope that doesn’t offend you. You’re damn beautiful to me, Noelle Curry, and I don’t want to hear anything to the contrary, ever again. Go home.”

ased “Okay.” She thrilled to the fact that Gil found her attractive.

more, He wasn’t lying. His body gave him away. He was hard as a brick and his eyes were heavy with lust. She would take him at his word.

ood He wanted her.

And boy, did she want him.

o anted Once they were both fully naked, he took her by the hand and led her to the bed. Gil’s body did not disappoint. In the flesh, the man was just as magnificent as in her fantasies, if not more so.

skin at His blue eyes lit up. “God, you are so gorgeous. I feel like the luckiest girl on the planet.”

In that moment, maybe for the first time in her life, she truly *felt* gorgeous. And seen.

es. Her Fully seen for who she was. Not Crescenda Hardwick’s daughter, not Noelle Curry’s offspring, but simply Noelle. Overwhelmed, she blinked, fighting back the tears of joy. She was that moved, felt that connected to him. She would have to be careful. She was in deep.

it. She “C’mere.” He held his arms wide.

x . . . iding She stepped into the welcoming circle of his embrace and felt an incredible click, a sense of rightness, that feeling of homecoming again, all the stuff she’d missed now.

and He held her against him for the longest time. He speared his fingers through her hair and his breath was warm against her cheek.

to “You smell like heaven.”

This time, she kissed him.

y, he gainst With one arm, he reached out and pulled back the covers, while keeping his other arm securely wrapped around her waist. The sheets smelled of

fabric softener, floral and fresh.

their She slid over to make more room for him.

He turned on his left side and she on her right and they lay in the bed, gazing into each other's eyes, belly to belly, hip to hip, heart to heart.

in the "I could stare at you all night," he said.

"Hmm. I hope you do much more than that."

"I want to take our time. I want this to be good for you. For us both." He trailed a finger over her cheek. "I'm so glad you came back to Twilight," he said.

Noelle She felt his erection grow even harder. How was that possible? He was already granite. She felt her own body grow wet and soften, preparing for him.

and his Noelle ran her palm over his shoulder and down his arm, interlaced fingers with his, and raised his hand to kiss the back of his knuckles. She wanted him so desperately. Wanted him more than ever.

Pressing her hips forward, she egged him on, inviting him into the territory of physical love.

His calloused palm slid over her hip and curled down around to cup her butt. He spent an inordinately wicked amount of time caressing her body, the best man and teasing her with his touch.

While he did that, she licked his chest and nibbled at a nipple. He growled a phrase, but she couldn't quite make out what it was, but thought he said something along the lines of "Oh yeah, *that*."

But Clint He explored her with his fingers, seeking out what she liked and what she didn't, trying to find the rhythm that pleased her most. Reading her like an open book, his hands worked their magic, coaxing and teasing her arousal. His mouth took their kisses to a whole new level.

The entire universe dissolved into this room, this man, this sweet moment. Only the two of them existed as they clung to each other, hungry and desperate.

He wrapped his arm around her and rolled her onto her back, levering himself above her, bracing his weight on his forearms as he peered into her eyes. "Noelle, you are the most incredible woman I've ever known."

This man was not given to hyperbole. His compliment touched her core. She wanted so much to trust her growing feelings. In the dark of night, it was so easy to believe that they could have something monumental together.

But would it last in the light of day? No, she couldn't entertain that

thought. She'd set down the rules and she was sticking to them. This was about sex and games. Nothing more. It didn't need to be anything more.

d "Do you have protection—"

"Yes. In my luggage." She hopped out of bed, went to the closet, dug around for the condoms she kept in a zippered compartment, just in case, and tossed a packet to him and hurried back to bed.

"He He tore open the foil with his teeth.

t." Giggling, she helped him put the condom on, making it part of their foreplay, and then teasingly she kissed his sheathed shaft.

was He groaned. "I don't know how long I can last. It's been years since
for been with a woman. Not since Tammy Jo."

That pulled her up short.

her She wished he hadn't spoken his late wife's name, but she couldn't
he squeamish about this. Tammy Jo had existed, and he'd had a daughter
her. Reality was reality. Best to face that head-on.

meless "Why not?"

"I . . . It's . . ."

her "Because you were devoted to her?" Noelle asked. "Is that why you
ttom no lovers since her?"

"No, it's because I have a daughter. Whatever I do reflects back on her. I
oaned couldn't bring myself to introduce her to women with whom I knew there
aid was no future. I've had friends who've done that kind of thing after a fling
and when casual flings ended messily it affected their kids in negative ways.
at she just couldn't do that to my child."

e a Oh dear. This was some serious pressure. She was the first woman he
al, as had sex with in five years. She found it both touching and worrisome. "I
amory. putting too much pressure and expectations on this? On her. On them?"

"What does that mean about me?" she asked.

"It means I'm so very glad to be here with you. It means we don't have to
label this. It means we can just enjoy the night."

ig "Are you sure?"

o her "I can keep it light. I can keep things in check. I promise."

Disappointment enveloped her in melancholy arms as she *wanted* to
leaply. mean something to him despite her assertions to the contrary. Wanted
it was desperately. But she was so afraid to ask for what she wanted. So afraid
it wouldn't work out. Instead, she pretended she didn't want more.

A smart woman with this much doubt would get out of bed and run.

was fun or send him packing, but when it came to Gil, she was not smart.

Her heart led her. She couldn't have prided herself from his embrace if her house had been on fire. She was that attached to him.

She was going to get hurt, she could feel it in her bones, but she would take the pain. She accepted all that pain for one night of exquisite pleasure with her fantasy.

He kneaded her shoulder muscles moving up her neck, his fingers finding tender spots and then soothing them with steady, rhythmic strokes. His fingers were at her scalp, rotating circles through her hair. His touch felt so good, she moaned again and curled against him as his fingers massaged her neck. I've stroked, and caressed.

Gil kissed the pulse underneath her chin, causing her to throb all over. He nibbled the sensitive skin on the underside of his arm, and he shuddered against her.

They shifted and explored.

He licked the back of her knee, finding more places that caused her to writhe and groan. She ran her tongue over his body, giving as good as she got. They teased each other until they both reached a frantic pitch, perspiration. I've had breathing heavily, aching for release.

His thumbs brushed her nipples and she let out a hungry whimper. For Josie. I ever felt this much excruciating pleasure? She was overpowered, overwhelmed, and overcome.

"Take me, Gil. Please, make love to me now." She needed the abyss, a way to take away her fears and doubts.

"Yes, ma'am."

The way he was looking at her made her feel like the queen of the world. Was he? His eyes said he cherished her, admired her, respected her. How she loved to believe that. A pleasurable heat spread across her chest, into her neck, up her face to burn her cheeks.

She'd waited so long for this moment, most of that time unaware that she had even been waiting.

Slowly, he entered her body and she clung to him like a life raft, her fingers curling around his upper arms and pulling him more deeply into her. She sucked in a deep breath and closed her eyes, committing every movement, every whisper, every taste to memory.

She would never forget this encounter, no matter how long she lived. This moment where her dreams finally came true.

He was tender with her, easy and careful. Nothing rushed. Nothing

thoughtless. Every thrust considered and measured.

if the Gil was building something. Their dual pleasure his goal. Each stroke taking them further down this road to oblivion.

ild Each thrust and retreat created dizzying waves of pleasure that reverberated throughout her body. Crashing her senses. Wrecking her :
nding Pushing her higher and faster into the gathering vortex.

; “More,” she begged. She was panting, barely able to speak.

lt so “Easy, dear heart,” he said.

d, He sounded so wonderfully old-fashioned, a throwback to a gentler

er. She He was nothing like the men she knew in LA, fast and slick and

cosmopolitan. This man was salt of the earth, rooted and stable.

d It was a heady concoction for a woman who’d grown up without ma
roots or much stability.

to She threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled his head down t
she him, her lips plumbing his as he moved within her. She raised her hips
she meet his thrusts, urging him on, urging him deeper and deeper.

piring, “Don’t hold back,” she begged. “Let me have all of you. I want all c
now.”

had she It was as if her words were a match and Gil was gasoline. He was in
and he inflamed her, and they went up together.

; of his All control vanished. Ruining his careful efforts. They were wild thi
Animals in rut. Writhing, bucking, groaning.

world. Faster. Harder. He gave her every inch of himself. Sending her flyin
she feared she would never be the same again.

nged “Just let go,” Gil said, his voice garbled.

k, and His arms were around her, holding her, steadying her. It felt as if the
sprinting as fast as they could into the great unknown.

at she’d “I’ve got you. You’re safe. I’ll never let anything bad happen to you

Waves gathered. Rippled over her. The arcs of sensation intensifyin
tightening. *Lost*. She’d thought she was forever lost, but in his strong a
ide she was found—treasured, cherished, and cared for.

y And nothing else mattered.

l, this She let go then, fully releasing any need to control the outcome. Tha
when the spasms overtook her. Tore through her body, ruptured her mi
a million beautiful pieces. She fell, shattered, and seconds after, he foll
her into his own exalted release.

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Chapter 16

As Gil slept beside her, Noelle lay on her back staring up at the ceiling. His arms were banded across her waist, his head facedown in his pillow. She loved the feel of him anchoring her in place, holding her steady, making her feel safe.

Grinning, she felt tears leak from the corners of her eyes and slide into her ears.

Joy.

So this was what pure joy felt like.

She thought of the other men she'd been with. Losing her virginity faster than her friends, in college at twenty. A fumbling affair that ended quicker than it had taken to get undressed. She'd gone out with the guy a few more times, until Crescenda started flirting with him. Then there was a short fling with one of Crescenda's co-stars. She'd done that mostly to tickle her mother off. A sweet summer affair in Greece that ended the second she found out about his wife. And then, a one-night stand when she'd felt too depressed to be alone. That had been more poison than antidote. She'd had no lasting connections with any of those men. No deeper meaning. No lingering love.

A pretty empty love life when she thought about it.

And now, she was here with Gil. For the first time in her life, someone truly made love to her. This was so much more than sex.

And that terrified her. No matter how much she claimed this was just fun, it was not. She wouldn't walk away from this scot-free.

Gil stirred, tightening his arm around her and pulling her closer. "No, are you really here with me?"

"It's true. It's real. I'm here." She pinched her thigh under the cover

hardly able to believe it herself.

He turned his head and shifted, pressing his lips to her temple. “I fear you were a mirage. That this was a dream.”

“Me too.”

“You look so cute with your hair all wild and free like when you were a teenager.”

“Hey, I spend a lot of time and money smoothing out my hair.”

“But why?”

Why? Control. Her hair was something she could control. She put up her hand to smooth her mad curls, but Gil touched her wrist.

“Leave it,” he said. “Please. I love it when you’re easy and relaxed.”
Love.

One day, Gil had said the word *love* in conjunction with her, even if he was just talking about her hair. *Ulp*. Hope was a kite, flying off to the sun.

“What’s next?” He traced a finger down the length of her nose.

“Huh?” She startled. Before she’d invited him up they’d had a serious conversation about sex being nothing more than fun and games. Was he trying to change the rules on her now? And if so, was she happy about it?

Happy? Maybe. But panicky too. She wasn’t ready for this.

For him.

“With the wedding prep,” he said. “What comes next?”

“Oh. The wedding.” *Whew*. Except now disappointment filled up her chest along with the deep breath she pulled in.

“On Monday, we’re heading to Fort Worth to the nearest bridal shop to pick out the dresses.”

“Sooo,” he said. “That means you’re free for the entire weekend?”

“I have planning to do and a progress report to file for Pamela Landers.”
“The Tie.”

“Yeah,” he said. “And I have two concerts this Friday and Saturday but maybe we could hang out on Sunday?”

Did she want to encourage this? Her body said, “Oh boy, yes!” Her mind said, “Keep your distance.”

And her heart? Well, it lub-dubbed all the faster.

“No pressure,” he said. “Just wanted to throw that out there in case you had free time on your hands. Think about it and let me know.”

“Okay.”

He nodded, but she could tell he was disappointed, that he’d wanted

different answer. “You need time.”

red “I do.”

“Please understand that I don’t want to control you.”

re a For a woman who’d spent her life being controlled by her mother, his statement felt like freedom. Gil was putting his own wants and needs a For her.

“I wish we could stay wrapped in our little cocoon forever.” Gil sigh

“Me too.” She snuggled against his chest.

p a Gil kissed her, his hand moving slowly across her breast. She wrigg him, excited by the goose bumps his touch stirred.

’ She ran a palm over his chest, playing with the whorl of dark hair be his nipples. She traced her fingers over his honed muscles. He was in s ist terrific shape.

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing to me, woman?” He groan

“What?”

us talk “I think we’re going to need another condom. You okay with that?”

ange “I thought you’d never ask.” She flew from the bed, retrieved a seco condom, and raced back into his arms.

“Noelle,” he whispered as his mouth claimed hers.

r lungs **T**hey kissed endlessly, slowly discovering each other for the second ti night. Gil cradled her in his arms and stared down into her face. She’d) to looked more beautiful—vulnerable and scared but willing to take a cha On him.

He felt honored and so very lucky. “You’re amazing.”

ry at “You’re not so bad yourself, cowboy.”

He laughed. “I haven’t been a cowboy in a very long time.”

night, “Once a rodeo cowboy, always a rodeo cowboy.”

mind Her inquisitive fingers tracked from his chin, down his neck, to his c and even lower to the six-inch, faded scar along his left flank that was visible in darkness. Goose bumps spread over his skin at her tender tou

“What happened here?”

you “Brazos Buckeroo.”

“Who?”

“One ornery Brahman bull.”

a “Ouch.”

“That’s when I quit the rodeo.”

“Understandably.” She shivered. “So glad I wasn’t around to see the long was your recovery time?”

is
side. “Three months. That’s when I went all in on music. My guitar skills improved during my recovery and music saved my sanity.”

“I’m glad you found your true path.”

ied. “You found yours too. Planning weddings suits you.”

“You think so?”

led into “Oh, yeah. It uses all your best skills—organized, resourceful, detail oriented.”

etween “Speaking of . . .” Her fingers left his scar and skated lower still. “L
uch stay on task. I need more kisses.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

ied. They kissed. Everywhere. He branded her breasts with his lips, and moved lower and lower, discovering exactly what caused her to quiver which places made her quake, and what drew keening noises from her nd gorgeous pink mouth.

“That’s it, Noelle. Let me know what you like.”

“I like you,” she said, turning the tables on him, flipping him onto h as she straddled his body and gazed down into his eyes.

He caught his breath, in awe of her.

me that
never
ance. Then she gave as she good as she’d gotten. Her mouth was as thrill s as his, nibbling, tasting, on a seek-and-find mission that left Gil with h rolling back in his head as her daring little tongue explored the hardest him.

The minute her lips went around his erection, Gil’s world splintered didn’t expect her to draw him into her mouth, but once he was there, h rejoiced at the feel of her warmth on his skin.

hest,
barely
ich. She took him with unrestrained gusto and Gil lost his mind. She dro to places he’d never traveled, and he quickly came undone. When she’ finished with him, he lay panting and fisting the covers, struggling to f himself again.

“Bookworm . . . that was . . . you were . . . there are *no* words.”

She gave a self-satisfied laugh.

“Pretty proud of yourself, huh?”

“Extremely.”

“Hahaha. We’ll see what happens when I flip the script.”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

it. How “Your turn.” He gave a roguish laugh and staked her on the bed, using his body to pin her spread-eagle against the mattress. Next, he kissed her lips really and deep before he roved his way down her body.

She writhed against him and called him all manner of sweet names and a few dirty ones as well. He found her most responsive spot and plied his tongue there. She went wild. He teased and tempted, dragging things out making her beg.

l “More.” She gasped. “Please, *more*.”

et’s He did things with his tongue, extending her pleasure, coaxing her to wriggle and buck against him.

“You are a wicked, wicked man.”

“No more wicked than you.”

then She tasted so good—rich and sweet. He couldn’t get enough of her. ; responded with noises and squirms to every lick, touch, kiss, caress. She was incredibly receptive. Her body highly attuned and sensitive.

“I’m gonna take you someplace special, Noelle.”

“Ready and waiting, big guy. Prove it.”

is back “Remember, you asked for this.” He went down on her with dedication born of love and reverence; all he wanted to do was to please her and make her feel as good as she’d made him feel.

seeking And when she came, shuddering convulsively against his mouth, he is eyes prouder of himself than he’d ever felt in a very long time as more song part of poured into his head and it became a lullaby, rocking him to sleep.

. He e Sated and happy, Noelle lay in Gil’s strong arms, awash in the afterglow.

ve him d She’d opened herself up to him in a way she’d never opened herself to anyone before. Not just her body, but her heart as well. Happy, she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

ind When she awoke again sometime later, she yawned, stretched, and rolled across the bed for Gil. Her hand fell on empty sheets. Sitting up, she pulled her hair from her eyes and looked around the room.

She cocked her head, listening for him, wondering if he was in the bathroom, but then her nose caught the scent of coffee, bacon, and eggs. She threw back the covers, got up, put on a bathrobe, and wandered into the kitchen.

“Morning,” Gil greeted her from his place at the stove.

ng his “Where did you get ingredients for breakfast? I didn’t buy anything.”
ong “Slipped over to the Merry Cherub before Gretchen got up and raided
fridge.” He grinned like a pirate who’d stolen treasure.

and a “Just to cook breakfast for me?”
s “Yes, ma’am.”
ut, “You’ve outdone yourself, Mr. Thomas.”
“After last night, you deserve all the pampering in the world.” He set
up a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and a cup of strong coffee. ‘

o She plunked down at the small breakfast table. The food looked deli
“I didn’t know you could cook.”
“I’m a single dad. I’ve developed many nurturing skills.”
“What time is it?” She yawned and wondered where she’d put her p
She “Seven forty. I have to leave.”
ie was “You’re not going to eat with me?”
“Can’t. Gotta get Josie and take her for a dental appointment, but rel
enjoy your breakfast.”
“I could come with you.”

ion “Nope. I’ve got this.” He leaned over and kissed the top of her head
nake “And when you come back? What happens then?” She hated that sh
it. She didn’t want him to feel obligated to spend time with her.
felt “Josie and I are gonna get a Christmas tree. We put ours up the day
; lyrics Thanksgiving. It’s tradition. And you’re invited.”
It sounded wonderful. Gil looked optimistic and they’d most certain
an awesome time, but as she watched him go, Noelle couldn’t help fee
like the clock was ticking on their romantic fling.

ow.
up to
sed her “You sure look happy this morning,” Delphine greeted Gil as he walk
through the front door of the Merry Cherub to pick up Josie from her
eached sleepover.

ushed It was only then he realized he’d been humming “All I Want for Chri
Is You.” He paused, and grinned at the older woman. “You know what
happy.”

s. She “Good on you.” Delphine gave him a thumbs-up.
e “Where are Gretchen and Josie?” he asked.
“Parlor.” Delphine nodded.

What was once the parlor in the old Victorian now served as a TV and game room for guests. He found his sister braiding Christmas ribbons in her hair as they watched cartoons together.

“Ebby’s gone home?” he asked.

“Tyler just picked her up.” Gretchen drew a comb through Josie’s hair which was the same color as her late mother’s.

Gil felt a twinge of sadness that Tammy Jo hadn’t gotten to watch their daughter grow up, but regrets wouldn’t take the shine off his happiness. “Sit.” His mind kept returning to his private time with Noelle.

“Thanks, sis, for hosting the sleepover. Much appreciated.”

Gretchen met his gaze and her eyes lit up. “Did it give you the time needed?”

“It did. Thanks.”

“Maybe you can return the favor and look after the B&B for me on Sunday? I’d like to visit Jubilee.”

“And your mysterious new boyfriend?”

Gretchen gave a *Mona Lisa* smile and shrugged.

“Sure. Consider it done.” So much for his idea of spending Sunday with Noelle, but maybe she’d help him B&B-sit.

“Did you have fun with your sleepover?” he asked his daughter, who sat on the couch beside Gretchen.

“Brilliant!” Josie turned her head to grin at him. “I like Ebby.”

“Whoa, kiddo, stop wriggling or you’re gonna have crooked braids,” Gretchen said.

“I’m glad you’ve found a new friend.” Gil put a hand on Josie’s shoulder and gave her an encouraging squeeze. After that nonsense with the mean girls, he was thrilled Josie had found someone nice to play with.

“Me too!”

“All done.” Gretchen put the finishing ribbons on Josie’s braids.

“Go get your things. You’ve got a dentist appointment.” He tapped the top of her head.

“Yuck.” Josie stuck out her tongue.

“Scoot.”

She took off after her belongings and Gil turned to Gretchen. “Hey, thanks for last night. I know Josie enjoyed it.”

“You’re welcome.” Gretchen eyed him. “How was your evening with Noelle?”

nd He grinned. "Fabulous. Exceptional, actually."
in Gretchen held up her crossed fingers. "Here's hoping. I do like Noel
"Me too." He felt his smile slip. "I'm just . . ."
"Just what?"
air, "Well . . ." He rubbed the toe of his boot against the geometric patte
the rug. "I'm afraid I'll end up hankering for someone who can't stick
eir around."
s. His Gretchen sent him a chiding glance. "Enjoy the holiday and don't w
about forever. Right now is good enough."
"That's what's going on with you and the fellow in Jubilee?"
you "Time will tell."
"Oh we're a pair, aren't we?" Gil laughed. "The Thomas kids lookin
love in all the wrong places."
"Is that what you're doing?"
He met his sister's steady gaze and spoke aloud the fears in his hear
want to believe I'm not, but there's a distinct possibility I'm gonna get
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He grinned. “Fabulous. Exceptional, actually.”

Gretchen held up her crossed fingers. “Here’s hoping. I do like Noelle.”

“Me too.” He felt his smile slip. “I’m just . . .”

“Just what?”

“Well . . .” He rubbed the toe of his boot against the geometric pattern of the rug. “I’m afraid I’ll end up hankering for someone who can’t stick around.”

Gretchen sent him a chiding glance. “Enjoy the holiday and don’t worry about forever. Right now is good enough.”

“That’s what’s going on with you and the fellow in Jubilee?”

“Time will tell.”

“Oh we’re a pair, aren’t we?” Gil laughed. “The Thomas kids looking for love in all the wrong places.”

“Is that what you’re doing?”

He met his sister’s steady gaze and spoke aloud the fears in his heart. “I want to believe I’m not, but there’s a distinct possibility I’m gonna get my heart broken.”

Chapter 17

After Gil left, Noelle did her best to keep her mind on her work. She had her wedding bible opened on the kitchen table, tabulated and color coded, and she was busy making a list of things she needed to double-check.

But her concentration kept slipping as her mind endlessly wandered to the best night of her dating life. Her teenage fantasy had come true and no matter how much she told herself she wasn't invested in the outcome, she was lying.

In passing, Gil had mentioned something about shopping for a Christmas tree, but he hadn't confirmed it and she didn't want to hang her hat on it. She would act cool, unbothered, and let things play out naturally.

And if he kept his distance and honored her request for a no-strings-attached affair? Well, okay. She'd had fun and that was the point.

Finally, she managed to nail down her concentration and slipped into a stream of her workflow. Several minutes later, a knock on the door yanked her back to the present and she sprang up from her chair, breathless and hopeful.

She raced to the door but paused to collect herself. *Chill*. It probably wasn't Gil. He had things to do, a kid to look after. He didn't have the time to hang out with her.

Oh ick, was she feeling sorry for herself? Crossing her fingers, Noelle went up on her toes to peek through the peephole.

It was Gil!

He'd come back.

Thrilled, she threw open the door, ready to fling herself into his arms and saw Josie standing behind him.

“Hey.” He smiled at her, his blue eyes soft and inviting.

“Hi.”

“Can you go Christmas tree shopping with us now?”

“Yes. Let me get my coat.”

They drove out to Joe Cheek’s Christmas tree farm, which was packed with customers this lovely Friday after Thanksgiving. Gil introduced her to Joe, who was a friend of his; Joe’s wife, Gabi; their five-year-old son, and Joe’s teenage daughter, Casey, from another relationship.

Noelle liked Gabi instantly and when Gabi told Noelle that she was originally from LA, they got into a big city versus small town discussion.

“I left LA for this one and never looked back.” Gabi smiled and put her arm around her husband’s waist.

ad the “Don’t let her fool you.” Joe winked. “She had an adjustment period
and “Mainly because the town rolls up the carpet at nine P.M. I was used

back prepared. I wouldn’t trade my life here for anything in the world.”

nd no “Ditto.” Joe leaned down to kiss his wife’s head.

she Aww. They were such a sweet couple. If Noelle lived in Twilight, she
could see herself becoming fast friends with Gabi, who was just a couple
years older than she was.

stmas that. “We’re here for a tree!” Josie said. “We want the bestest one you have.”

“Whatcha looking for?” Joe asked. “Virginia pine? Leland cypress?
Carolina Sapphire?”

o the “Dad?” Josie asked, her eyes uncertain as she slipped her little hand
her father’s.

iked “We’ll just take a look around,” Gil said. “If that’s okay.”

d “Sure, sure. Do you want to chop your own?” Joe asked. “We have chainsaws
and axes you can borrow, or I can come cut it for you.”

7 “Brought my own equipment,” Gil said, pulling gloves from his pocket
time to opening his jacket to reveal a small hatchet dangling from his tool belt.
A
little thrill went through Noelle. She had a thing for men who were good with
le tools.

“Great.” Joe winked. “Make yourselves at home.”

They wandered through the rows of trees, looking for the perfect one. Noelle
skipped ahead of them, humming under her breath as she ran a hand over the
s . . . Christmas trees she passed by.

“She’s happy.” Gil nodded at his daughter. “She’s had a tough time

school lately. There are a couple of girls who've been picking on her for having a mother."

"Oh," Noelle said. "The wretched little beasts."

Gil laughed and the jovial sound lit her up inside. "I'm sure the girls have their own issues of their own, but it hurts to watch your kid bump up against life's thorny thistles."

J.D.; "I can't imagine how tough that is."

He shrugged. "It's part of her growth. I wish I could Bubble Wrap her and carry her around on a pillow, but I've got to let her learn on her own."

Noelle smiled at him. "You're a good dad."

"I try." He jammed his hands into the pockets of his shearling jacket. "I'm terrified of screwing this up."

"I'd be worried if you weren't terrified. Raising a kid is a huge 24-7 responsibility."

"Yeah, but she already has one huge strike against her. Losing your mother when you're a kid does a number on you, no two ways about it."

Noelle wasn't sure why she did it, other than Gil looked like he could offer some reassurance, but without even thinking, she slipped her arm around his elbow and leaned in close to him.

He stopped walking. She could see the pulse at his throat throbbing against her own. She paused beside him.

"Noelle . . ."

"Yes?" She turned her body to face him and tilted her head up. They met.

"Are we doing the wrong thing?"

What did he mean by that? She studied his face, trying to get a read on him, but his expression was noncommittal.

He disentangled his arm from hers and she felt a pang in the center of her chest. She stepped back. Breathing room. They both needed breathing room.

"Dad! What about this one?" Josie disappeared behind a row of trees. They followed her, Gil's question left hanging in the air. They found themselves staring up at a beautifully shaped tree.

"You have a good eye," Noelle said. "This one is balanced, symmetrical. Excellent job."

Josie blushed and hopped from foot to foot. "Cut it down, Daddy."

"You sure this is the one you want?" Gil asked.

Josie nodded. "I'm certain."

or not “Okay then, stand back.” Gil put on his gloves, took out the hatchet, bent to chop down the tree Josie had picked. The ping of his axe rang across the Christmas tree farm.

; have As they watched him work, Noelle noticed Josie’s jacket was thin and
's was shivering. Yes, partly from excitement, but the kid was cold and to
wound up to say something. Noelle took off her own jacket.

“Here, put this on.”

er and Josie accepted the jacket and slipped her arms through the sleeves. Noelle
crouched in front of her to pull up the hood and the zipper. The sleeves
too long, and Josie’s little hands disappeared inside them.

t. “But “Thank you,” Josie said through chattering teeth. “I was cold.”

“I noticed.”

“But now, *you’ll* be frozen.”

mom “No, I have an extra-thick sweater.” The wind was breezy, but she’d
be chilled herself than have Josie suffer. “I’ll be just fine.”

The beaming grin Josie gave her warmed Noelle inside out.

ld use “Thanks for looking out for her.”

nd his Noelle straightened to see Gil had finished chopping down the tree and
was staring at her with such admiration in his eyes that her heart skipped
as fast beat.

“I should have gotten her a heavier jacket.”

“Glad I could help.”

r gazes “Here, you take my jacket. I’ve worked up a sweat and I’m hot.”

on *Yes you are*, she thought as he took off his jacket and draped it around
shoulders. She slipped her arms inside the sleeves. He stuck the hatchet
his tool belt and bent to heft the fallen pine onto his shoulder.

Her heart flopped into her throat. Holy smokes, the man was sexy as

of her “Josie?” Gil glanced around for his daughter.

room. She’d been right there with them. Where had she gone? Noelle grimaced.
s. She been so busy ogling Josie’s hot dad, she hadn’t been paying attention
d Josie the girl.

“Did you see where she went?” he asked.

rical. Shaking her head, she stepped through to the next row of trees. A couple
few years older than Gil, were eyeballing trees, but there was no sign of
Josie.

“She’s not in that row.”

“She knows better than to go off on her own.” His forehead wrinkled

and set the tree back down on the ground. He raised his voice. “JoJo, where
out you?”

No answer.

and she “Darn that kid,” he muttered. “Stay here in case she comes back. I’ll
do look for her.”

“Try not to panic. She couldn’t have gone far.” Even as she tried to
reassure him, she felt her own anxiety building. Yikes. Parenthood was
Noelle stressful.

is were *One, two, three, four . . .*

Gil disappeared through the rows of trees lined up like regimented soldiers
and even though people were walking all around the Christmas tree far
this moment, with no one else in her line of vision, she felt a strange
sensation she’d experienced quite often as a child. As if she were all alone
in a rather the world, belonging nowhere and to no one.

“Psst, Noelle.”

She turned to see Josie poking her head out from behind a Christmas tree.
Why was she hiding?

and “Here she is, Gil,” Noelle called out.

ed a “*Shh.*” Josie put a finger to her lips. “I don’t want *her* to see me.”

“Who?”

“Josie, Josie, Josie.”

From the thicket of Christmas trees between the rows, stepped a girl
Noelle’s age. She spoke with an exaggerated vocal fry and slightly
and her mispronounced Josie’s name, calling her *Jo-zee*. The girl was dressed in
it into latest designer clothing and sported a stylish asymmetrical haircut. Back
radiated off her self-satisfied smirk.

is hell. “Well, well, well, if it isn’t the girl that locks herself in the cloak closet.”

Josie cringed and leaned against Noelle, who wrapped her arm around
aced. Gil’s daughter, letting her know she wasn’t alone. How many times had
ion to Noelle faced a mean little bully by herself? More than she could count.

The girl sank her hands on her hips, raked her gaze up and down Josie.
“It’s rude not to say hello.”

ouple, a Josie’s body language changed immediately. Her shoulders slumped
of gaze dropped, and she toed the ground with her sneaker. Ducking her head
she mumbled, “Hello, Silvey.”

Instantly, Noelle knew this was the mean girl who’d been pestering
her as his daughter.

e are From behind Silvey, another girl emerged. She was dressed as a carbon copy of her aggressive friend and went to stand behind Silvey. Clearly Silvey was the ringleader, and this girl was her minion.

l go “Look what I found creeping around the Christmas trees, Tabby,” Silvey said to the other girl. “A skink.”

Tabby lifted her hand in a half wave at Josie.

s Silvey batted the girl’s hand down. “Don’t wave at her, Tabby.”

Tabby clasped both hands behind her back and hung her head. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

oldiers Noelle stepped closer to Josie and stared down the bratty Silvey. Envy churned inside of her as old memories she didn’t want to face flashed through her memory. She’d been in Josie’s shoes, bullied because of who her name was.

“Did you need something?” Noelle asked.

s tree. Silvey tossed her head, raised her chin, but couldn’t hold on to Noelle’s gaze. “We just came to see what Jo-zee was doing here.”

“What did you think? Buying a Christmas tree like everyone else, at the record,” Noelle said, putting on a smile as false as the one flitting across Silvey’s pretty face, “she pronounces her name *Jo-see*. In the future, please address her that way.”

about the girl’s eyes. The little Pop-Tart was used to running roughshod over people.

in the Well, the buck stopped here. Noelle took a step toward Silvey. “You’ll get my message, right? From now on, you’re treating Josie with kindness and respect. No more calling her names. No more taunting her. No more bullying her. Got it?”

nd The girl’s pupils widened, but she stood her ground and even curled her upper lip into a sneer. Oh, she was used to running her household. No one cared about it. Her parents had abdicated their responsibility.

ie. “What business is it of yours, lady?” Silvey challenged.

l, her Josie came over and slipped her hand in Noelle’s. Noelle squeezed it, letting her know she had her back.

read, Shooting Noelle a grateful look, Josie lifted her chin, stared Silvey down and said, “It’s her business ’cause she’s gonna be my new mommy.”

Gil’s

bon
,
Gil walked up behind Noelle and his daughter. He arrived just in time the tail end of the conversation.

ilvey
This was a whole new wrinkle. Last night, they'd convinced each other their fling was casual, no strings attached, and he'd been willing to go with that because it was what Noelle wanted.

y," she
Now his daughter had thrown a wrench in things, and he was faced with reality. He'd told himself Josie wouldn't be affected by the casual arrangement he'd formed with Noelle.

otions
He'd been wrong.

hrough
Dead wrong.

nother
He shouldn't have gone to Noelle's apartment last night. Should have high-tailed it out of there when she'd thrown her door open and invited him in. But the night had been so special and Noelle's sweet kisses so compelling he'd allowed himself to get swept away by his bodily urges.

le's
It had been a mistake. That was clear now.

id for
No matter how wonderful they'd made each other feel, this wasn't going to end well and now, not only would he get his heart broken, but so would his daughter.

ver
lease
"You girls go on back to your people." Gil stepped between Noelle and Josie and the other girls. "And you have good weekend."

owed
Silvey looked as if she wanted to say something tacky but thought better of it. She shrugged and tossed her head. "C'mon, Tabby. Let's get out of here."

i did
Rolling her eyes at Gil, Silvey turned and led Tabby through the rows of trees and out of their line of sight. He was about to say something to Josie when he saw his daughter's gaze was locked on Noelle.

ess and
allying.
"Are you mad at me?" Josie asked Noelle.

her
"Why would I be mad?"

doubt
"Because I lied and said you were gonna be my mom."

"While I don't endorse fibbing," Noelle said, "anything is possible."

"Like you could be my mom in an alternate universe?"

"Yeah." Noelle smiled. "Like that."

t,
"Thank you," Josie said. "It was kinda fun pretending you could be my mother."

lown,
Noelle's eyes softened. "It's my pleasure."

"Let's get this tree loaded," Gil said.

Ten minutes later, they were in the truck headed home. Josie in her driver's seat in the back, Noelle in the passenger seat, filling the cab with her

to hear sophisticated cologne. After her kindness to his daughter, Gil wanted to whisk Noelle back to the Roost, carry her to the bedroom, and show her how much he appreciated her.

her along Again and again and again.

with But that couldn't happen. For one thing, they had a Christmas tree set out of the back of his pickup and an excited seven-year-old who couldn't wait to decorate it. Plus, he needed to have a heart-to-heart with his daughter soon as possible. He had to dispel whatever fantasy she was cooking up about Noelle potentially becoming her new mother and set the record straight.

He pulled into the driveway at the B&B and killed the engine.

re him in. "I've got a couple of calls to make," Noelle said with her hand on the handle. "I had a really fun time with you guys this morning. Thank you for inviting me."

ling, Had she read his mind?

going to it strengthened Gil's resolve. He had to make sure his daughter wasn't too invested in Noelle.

and "We can't decorate it right away anyway," Gil said. "I've got Derric's guitar lesson at noon. He'll be here any minute."

"Aww, man." Josie made a face.

etter of "The decorating will keep until tomorrow. I still have to get all the boxes down from the attic. Now give Noelle her jacket back and say thank you for me while I unload the tree."

v of Josie but "Thank you," Josie said, unbuckling her seat belt and handing Noelle her jacket back to her over the front seat.

"You're very welcome." Noelle's smile was so tender it tugged at Gil's heart. She took off his jacket and left it draped over the middle console. "I'll love to help decorate the tree whenever you're ready."

"Yay!" Josie clapped her hands.

"Scoot on into the house, kiddo," Gil said. "I'll be in with the tree in a jiff."

my "Kay." Josie seemed to have gotten over her disappointment. She hopped out of the truck and went skipping up the sidewalk to the cottage.

Gil turned to Noelle, who looked so self-contained sitting in the passenger seat beside him. "Thanks for intervening with Silvey."

booster "I've been bullied a time or two myself," Noelle said. "Kids sometimes have chips on their shoulders when your mom is famous, but I suppose

o everyone has to deal with bullies at some point in their lives.”

r just In that regard, Gil had been blessed. He’d been privileged and while or two some swaggering cowboy had tried to pick a fight when he was rodeo circuit, he’d never been bullied in school. He hated that it was ticking happening to his daughter.

n’t wait “Silvey shouldn’t be mistreating Josie, but I bet if you look closer, S r as is dealing with something unpleasant in her own life and she doesn’t h p about skills or emotional maturity to handle it and she’s taking it out on Josie t.

“Yeah.” Gil nodded. “I agree.” The cab of the pickup was cooling o after he’d cut the engine. “I do think we should talk about what Josie s e door those girls.”

1 for “No need.”

“You’re not upset that she said you were going to be her new mothe They were turned toward each other in the front seat. Her body was orn that shoulders drawn in, and she’d fisted her hands in her lap.

getting “We shouldn’t make a big deal of it. She said it as a defense against Silvey’s taunts. I don’t think she believes it. She did apologize to me f k’s lying.”

Gil blew out his breath and stabbed a hand through his hair. “I’ll tall her. Make sure she understands what she said was wrong.”

roxes “Go easy on her, okay?”

ou “Of course.”

“What about us?” she asked, her voice low.

e’s “Um . . .” He didn’t know what to say.

“I mean, we don’t want to encourage Josie to think that you and I m il’s “No, no. You’re right.”

l. “I’d Noelle cleared her throat and tried to smile but her lips sank back do soon as she’d tipped them up. She crinkled her nose. “Maybe we shoul _”

1 a “Right. No more of what we did last night.” He said it as if he agree inside he felt empty and sad.

opped “I probably shouldn’t help you decorate the tree either. We don’t wa encourage Josie’s fantasies.”

senger “Probably not.”

“We’ll just go back to being friends.”

nes “Friends,” he echoed, even though that was not what he wanted.

most “I had fun last night, and I’ll remember it for the rest of my life.” A

bittersweet smile crossed her face. She reached over and put a hand on
a time wrist. "But your child comes first."

on the "Yes," he said.

"There's nothing more important to a child than a parent who is alw
there for them. A parent who has their back no matter what. Josie is a l
ilvey little girl. You put your child's welfare before everything else and for t
ave the love you to pieces."

." Then she hopped from the car and raced up the steps to her garage
ff fast apartment, leaving Gil feeling as if he'd lost something important.
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bittersweet smile crossed her face. She reached over and put a hand on his wrist. "But your child comes first."

"Yes," he said.

"There's nothing more important to a child than a parent who is always there for them. A parent who has their back no matter what. Josie is a lucky little girl. You put your child's welfare before everything else and for that, I love you to pieces."

Then she hopped from the car and raced up the steps to her garage apartment, leaving Gil feeling as if he'd lost something important.

Chapter 18

“We gotta have a talk, kiddo.” Gil stood in the doorway of Josie’s room, scented the air with the pine needles still clinging to his clothes after he hauled the Christmas tree into the living room.

Josie popped out her earbuds. She was lying on her stomach on her bed, swinging her legs in the air and watching children’s TV programming on her tablet computer.

“Can you turn off the show? We need to discuss what happened at the Christmas tree farm.”

“Okay.” She closed her computer and swung her legs around so that she was sitting up.

Gil came over to ease down on the mattress beside her. “I want you to understand that Noelle is only in our lives for a brief time. She can’t be your new mom.”

“I know.” Josie hung her head. “I shouldn’t have lied to Silvey.”

“It’s more than that, sweetheart.” He cupped her chin in his palm and gently brought it up until she was looking at him. “I don’t want you to be building some happily-ever-after fantasy in your head about the three of us becoming a family.”

Josie squirmed away and dropped her gaze. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you to get hurt when it doesn’t work out between me and Noelle.”

“But Dad,” she said. “What if it *does* work out?”

“It can’t. Noelle lives in Los Angeles. She’s only in town to plan the Buckhorn twins’ wedding. After that, she’ll be gone.”

“What if she moved here?”

“She has a business in LA. She has a house there. Friends and family.”

“Oh.” Josie sounded disappointed. He was almost too late to keep her from getting invested. Then she perked up. “What if we moved to LA?”

“Honey, love takes time. You can’t make sweeping life changes for someone you just met.”

“But Aunt Gretchen said you knew Noelle when you were teenagers. Maybe you can throw a coin into the Sweetheart Fountain, and you’ll fall in love again like Jon Grant and Rebekka Nash did.”

“For one thing, Noelle and I were never boyfriend and girlfriend. We were just neighbors and that was only when Noelle came to visit her grandparents. For another thing, you do know that story about throwing a coin into the fountain is just a fable, right? It isn’t real.”

“But Jon and Rebekka really did meet at the river at twilight and fall in love all over again. We learned that in history class.”

“That part is true but wishing on a coin is made up.”

“Like Santa.” Josie pulled a face.

“Like Santa.”

Last year, that smarty-pants Silvey had been the one to spoil the innocence of the entire first grade class when she’d announced Santa wasn’t real. To anyone who believed in him was a stupid baby. Gil cringed, remembering when Josie had come home crying and he’d had to tell her Silvey Zuckerman was right.

“So there’s no chance that Noelle—”

He had to nip this fantasy in the bud. “No chance at all, sweetheart. Sorry.”

Josie’s lower lip trembled. “Now Silvey’s gonna call me a liar.”

“Well, you did lie to her.”

“I know.” She hung her head.

“I understand why you did it, but there are consequences for our actions.” Josie pounded her forehead with her palm. “I’m a dumb, stupid liar.”

“No, no.” He pulled her into his arms and rocked her against his chest. “You are not dumb. You just made a mistake. There’s nothing wrong with making mistakes as long as you learn from them and do better the next time. Did you learn something?”

Josie nodded. “Yeah. You shouldn’t lie.”

“That’s right. A lie will get found out eventually and lying keeps you from being close to other people.”

y.” She cocked her head. “How’s that?”
er from “Because you’re showing them a false self. People can’t get to know
real you as long as you’re lying to them.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“I’m not the one you need to apologize to.”

s. “But I already told Noelle that I was sorry.”

fall in “Not just Noelle,” he said. “You need to tell Silvey that you lied.”

He could see her mental cogs whirling. She was trying to get out of
e were confessing to Silvey and he didn’t blame her. The girl was bound to m
arents. Josie’s life miserable over it. Conflicted, he didn’t know what to do.

ie “Could you just take my iPad away?” Her eyes beseeched him.

If she was willing to negotiate away her most prized possession, Jos
l in really didn’t want to face Silvey. All the more reason he had to force th
issue. Parenting was damn hard. It would be so much easier to lock up
iPad for a week than make her apologize to her enemy. Honestly, he w
he could do that.

“No,” he said. “The punishment must match the crime. Telling the t
ocence the only antidote to a lie.”

and “If you married Noelle, it wouldn’t be a lie.” Her eyes pleaded with
ing let her off the hook. “She’d be my mom then.”

er was He kept his tone gentle. “I tell you what, when you go to school on
Monday and tell Silvey the truth, I’ll go with you. She can’t say or do
anything mean to you with me standing there.”

I’m Josie slanted her head and peeked at him through a heavy lock of ha
had fallen over her face. “But what if she’s mean after you leave?”

“Then you’ll ignore her, like we discussed before.”

Josie whimpered and drew her knees to her chest.

“It will be okay. I promise. I’ve got your back. Always.”

ions.” “All right. I’ll do it.”

” “Good girl.” He gave her a tight hug. “I’m so proud of you.”

st. “Even though I lied?”

with “I’m not proud of the lie, but I’m proud of how you’re taking
: time. responsibility for your actions. That’s what makes you a good person,
A tear rolled down her cheek. “I’m sorry I did wrong.”

u from “Honey, you’re going to make mistakes. That’s how you learn. Wha
matters is that you take responsibility for your mistakes and do what yo
to make amends. Once you apologize to Silvey for lying to her, it’s ov

forgotten, and we won't mention it again."

✓ the "Kay."

"I love you."

She squeezed him hard. "I love you too, Daddy."

His big, stupid ego swelled up, pleased with himself. He'd navigated a little bump in the road without too much trouble.

But what was he going to do about his growing feelings for Noelle?

ake

"It's okay," Noelle said to her reflection in the mirror as she brushed her teeth before bed. "You knew when you invited him in last night that it was only temporary. It's fine. Really it is."

ie

ie

her

ished

She'd stayed busy to keep from thinking about what had happened at the Christmas tree farm and spent the rest of the day working on wedding arrangements, sending in an updated report to Pamela Landry at The Times, listening to Gil's guitar student stumble through a thoroughly wretched version of "Free Bird" for an hour.

ruth is

him to

Then later, she'd listened to Josie's giggles and Gil's baritone as they decorated their Christmas tree. She felt a bit sorry for herself, so she started wearing earbuds and sloughed off work, watching an old romantic comedy on her laptop, which just ended up making her feel even worse.

"Look, it was just sex," she said to herself in the mirror as she brushed her teeth, rinsed, and spat. "No big deal. Let it go."

ir that

And yet, she had four more weeks in this town. Four more weeks living upstairs from Gil and working with him on the wedding reception. For weeks of this intense yearning eating her up inside.

She shouldn't have slept with him. It had been fun. More than fun. It had been thrilling and a pleasure, and she wanted more.

A lot more.

That was the problem. The addiction. The need for him. Was this how Crescenda felt whenever she jumped on the rollercoaster of love?

Josie."

Ack! Was she turning into her mother? Letting the fulfillment of a teenage dream crack her heart wide open?

it

ou can

er,

Her mind scrambled, trying to find a way out, a solution that would let them be together. Short of her giving up her career and moving to Twickenham, she didn't see how that could happen. And besides, she was way jumpier than a gun. Gil might not be interested in anything more than a fun time. Just

because Josie was building daydreams about Noelle being her mother, didn't mean she should fall prey to the idea.

Even though they had a shared history of sorts, she and Gil barely knew each other as grown adults. She would not be like her mother and jump blindly into relationships.

But wasn't that stubborn resistance to the idea of true and lasting love the thing that had kept her alone all these years?

What if she opened her heart to possibilities? What if she stopped worrying about being like her mother? She wasn't Crescenda. Maybe she *could* love without it ending badly if she just dared to take a chance. Maybe she could have what Grammie and Grampie had had. She shared their DNA as much as she shared her mother's.

Why was she so terrified of getting hurt? What if it worked out?

Her heart fluttered, full of hope.

But what if it didn't?

He didn't see Noelle for the rest of the weekend. She didn't come into his office space where he'd made room for her at the Windmill, and he felt awkward every time he looked at that empty card table.

And yet he couldn't bring himself to take it down.

He'd been too forward by setting it up, assuming too much. His motivation had been pure, but he'd overstepped. Now he felt as if he'd been behind the eight ball with her all along with no way to win. Was she just too afraid to love?

Why did he care so much?

That was the vital question.

Why? Because he couldn't stop thinking about her, couldn't stop feeling if everything was coming unraveled just as it was getting started. He'd punished Noelle for his daughter's lie, breaking things off with her for her sake. He'd been unfair, but he hadn't seen any other way around it.

So he stayed away from her. Resisting the urge to climb those stairs and knock on her door after he'd put Josie to bed. He averted his gaze from her apartment whenever he came and went. She was hiding out and he wouldn't get in her way.

On Monday morning, when he went to wake Josie for school, he found her in bed, doubled over and clutching her stomach.

it “My tummy hurts.” She moaned.

new He had no doubt she was in pain, her fear and anxiety over facing Si
o willy-wrong, Gil took her temperature. 98.6.

 “Your temperature is normal, kiddo.”

ve the “It *hurts*.”

 “I’m sure it does. Do you feel like eating breakfast?” he asked.

orrying “No.” She moaned and pulled her pillow down over her face.

fall in “Are you going to throw up?”

she “Maybe.”

A just Nerves could make a kid throw up as easily as a virus and he didn’t
to discount her feelings and emotional upset. “Do you want me to get y
cool cloth?”

 “Uh-huh.”

 Gil went to the bathroom, dampened a washcloth with cold water, w
out, and came back to sit on the bed beside Josie. Gently, he wiped her

the “I know you’re not faking. I know your stomach hurts, but once you
t like a past telling Silvey the truth, it’ll get better.”

 “I can’t, Daddy.”

 “You can. I’ll be right with you.”

 “It really, *really* hurts.”

ives “If you don’t go to school today, you’ll just have to do it tomorrow.”

d the She peered up at him, looking so pale and miserable it kicked him ri
d to the heart. “I know.”

 “Come on then. Get up and get dressed and let’s get this over with.”

 Feeling wretched that he had to teach her this life lesson, Gil peeled ba
covers and coaxed her out of bed.

aling as Half an hour later, they sat in the truck outside Jon Grant Elementary
Josie’s looked less pale, and she’d stopped clutching her stomach, but her littl
was bobbing up and down uncontrollably. Dang it, why did raising kid
to be so complicated?

and “Here’s how we’re going to handle this,” Gil said, hoping to reassur
1 her daughter by being calm and in control. “We’re going to Principal Whit
uldn’t office, tell her what’s happened at the Christmas tree farm, and ask her
Silvey to the office so you can apologize.”

ind her They needed neutral ground for this encounter, and he wanted to kn
Silvey off-balance.

“When Silvey gets there, I’ll explain you got the wrong impression about my relationship with Noelle, and that you’d like to apologize to Silvey for physically bending the truth.”

“Okay.” Josie stared down at her lap and fiddled with the zipper on her jacket.

“That’s my girl.” Pride for his daughter pushed hard against his chest. They’d get through this, and their relationship would be stronger for it.

As they sat in Evelyn White’s office, along with her executive assistant Marjorie, the principal listened to their story without comment, then she spoke on the PA system and asked Silvey to come to the office.

A few minutes later, Marjorie ushered Silvey through the door. She seemed breathless and a little panicky. Gil would have felt bad for her, but the minute she laid eyes on Josie, her upper lip curled into a sneer. Gil put his hand on his daughter’s shoulder, letting her know she wasn’t alone.

“What’s going on?” Silvey asked, sinking her hands on her hips. “Do I need to call my lawyer?”

Good grief, the kid was outrageous.

Principal White, obviously used to hearing things like this from Silvey, ignored the part about the lawyer. “Josie has something she wants to say to you.”

Silvey tossed her head. “Well, I don’t want to hear it.”

Gil nodded at Josie, who got to her feet and stood eye to eye with Silvey. “I made a mistake at the Christmas tree farm.”

Silvey folded her arms over her chest. “Oh, yeah?”

“I told you Noelle is gonna be my mommy, but that’s not true.”

“I knew it!” Silvey pumped her fist and her eyes narrowed with nastiness. “I knew you were lying.”

Did the girl have to sound so hateful?

Josie cringed, but she stood her ground. “I fibbed and I’m sorry for it.”

“Such a liar!”

Gil fisted his hands on his knees, and it was all he could do not to rise from his chair and loom over the girl who’d been tormenting his daughter.

“Silvey,” Principal White said sharply. “There will be no name calling. Josie has apologized and now you will accept her apology.”

“In a pig’s eye.” Silvey snorted.

“Silvey Zucker, if you don’t want detention, tell Josie you accept her apology,” Evelyn White said.

about "Fine." Silvey rolled her eyes. "I accept your apology."
for "And Josie." Principal White swung her gaze to Gil's daughter. "If y
her locking yourself in the cloak closet. Got it?"
st. "Yes, ma'am," Josie mumbled and hung her head.
"Now, I want you both to shake hands."
ant, chipper, but Josie was the first to offer her hand.
ie got Begrudgingly, and only after Principal White pointedly cleared her t
Silvey shook Josie's hand.
girl "Josie," Evelyn White said. "Tell Silvey you won't lie to her again."
except "I won't lie again." Josie pumped the other girl's hand.
put a "Now, Silvey, tell Josie you won't make fun of her for not having a
mother."
o I At that, Silvey jerked her hand back, gave an odd little cry, and ran t
the office. Principal White nodded at Marjorie, who went after the chil
Josie's eyes widened. "What happened to her?"
ey, Principal White sighed and met Gil's eyes. "Normally, I wouldn't ta
ay to about other students when they're not in the room, but I think it's impo
for you to know where Silvey is coming from. Maybe it will give you l
more compassion for her. Besides, it's public knowledge. Silvey's mot
lvey. abandoned the family last month, and her father has filed for divorce a
custody of Silvey. That's why she's been picking on Josie. The school
counselor says Silvey can't bear her own pain, so she's been projecting
y glee. her own loss and she's trying to make herself feel better."

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“Fine.” Silvey rolled her eyes. “I accept your apology.”

“And Josie.” Principal White swung her gaze to Gil’s daughter. “If you have any problems on the playground, come speak to me instead of hiding or locking yourself in the cloak closet. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Josie mumbled and hung her head.

“Now, I want you both to shake hands.”

Josie and Silvey both looked as if they’d rather put their hands in a wood chipper, but Josie was the first to offer her hand.

Begrudgingly, and only after Principal White pointedly cleared her throat, Silvey shook Josie’s hand.

“Josie,” Evelyn White said. “Tell Silvey you won’t lie to her again.”

“I won’t lie again.” Josie pumped the other girl’s hand.

“Now, Silvey, tell Josie you won’t make fun of her for not having a mother.”

At that, Silvey jerked her hand back, gave an odd little cry, and ran from the office. Principal White nodded at Marjorie, who went after the child.

Josie’s eyes widened. “What happened to her?”

Principal White sighed and met Gil’s eyes. “Normally, I wouldn’t talk about other students when they’re not in the room, but I think it’s important for you to know where Silvey is coming from. Maybe it will give you both more compassion for her. Besides, it’s public knowledge. Silvey’s mother abandoned the family last month, and her father has filed for divorce and full custody of Silvey. That’s why she’s been picking on Josie. The school counselor says Silvey can’t bear her own pain, so she’s been projecting her bad feelings onto other students who don’t have mothers. She sees in them her own loss and she’s trying to make herself feel better.”

Chapter 19

Noelle avoided Gil. She waited for him to leave the B&B before she went for her breakfast, peeking out the window to watch him and Josie go about their business.

“You’re being a creeper,” she muttered and closed the curtain, but in honesty, she didn’t trust herself not to cave whenever she was around him, so she stayed away.

Ten days after she’d come to Twilight, Noelle left town for the first time since she arrived, riding with the Buckhorns to the nearest bridal shop in Worth. Vanessa drove. Noelle rode shotgun and the twin sisters sat in the back bickering about whether they should dress alike for the wedding or not.

Noelle and Sierra thought matching wedding gowns would look best in pictures, but Vanessa and Sienna lobbied for personal self-expression. Almost every time Noelle had seen the twins together, including now, they’d been dressed in matching outfits, so she didn’t quite understand the hesitation, but it was their wedding. They could pick out whatever dresses they wanted as long as it didn’t exceed The Tie’s budget.

This was not a hill she was willing to die on.

At the bridal shop, the perky consultant, Becky, met them at the door with two mimosas and everything went downhill from there.

Noelle refrained from drinking—she was on the job after all—but Vanessa and her daughters were up for free drinks and after the third round of mimosas, things started getting dicey.

“I understand that you’re in love with chiffon,” Noelle said as Sierra twirled in a summery frock. The dress was at the top end of their budget, but she still needed to find some wriggle room for the addition of the groom’s attire.

cake. “But it’s sleeveless.”

“I have great arms.” Sierra flexed her biceps. Indeed, she was buff.

“Keep in mind, this is December. You’ll freeze at the reception unless you wear a jacket. The ceilings in the music hall are just too tall to keep the temperature above seventy degrees.”

“A jacket would look really clunky,” Vanessa said.

“And it’s an added expense and this dress maxes out your budget as well.”

“I’m warm natured.” Sierra smiled sloppily. “It’ll be fine. Besides, we’ll be dancing all night long.”

“I do love the chiffon. I want it too,” Sienna said.

Finally, the twins were on the same page. Noelle breathed a little easier even as Sierra stumbled in her twirl and almost crashed into a rack of clothes. The sharp-eyed consultant rolled the rack out of harm’s way.

“Oopsie.” Sierra giggled.

“That *is* a gorgeous dress,” Sienna said. “I think I do want us to dress like that.”

Noelle made some salient points about how much more cohesive we’ll look in photographs.”

“I’m sorry,” Becky said. “We only have the one dress in that style.”

“The wedding isn’t until Christmas Eve. How long will it take for another dress to get here from your supplier?” Noelle asked. Even with the holidays figured into the mix, shipping shouldn’t take a month.

“You don’t understand. It’s a discontinued dress. We can’t reorder.” Noelle looked apologetic.

“Could you check and see if any of the other stores have it in stock?” Noelle asked.

“I can do that.” Becky bebopped over to her computer to check inventory at sister stores.

Secretly, Noelle was glad there wasn’t another dress to match. Otherwise she’d have to find a place in the budget for wedding jackets. Despite Sierra’s assertions that she’d be fine, Noelle had checked the average Christmas temperature for North Texas, and it was a high of fifty-seven and a low of thirty-seven degrees. If they wore the sleeveless chiffon, they’d have to wear some kind of coverup, no way around it.

“There’s a size zero at the South Lake store,” Becky said, eyeing the six twins. “And there’s absolutely nothing else at any of our other locations.”

“We’re already dieting,” Sienna said. “I could try to get to a zero.”

“In four weeks?” Vanessa shook her head. “That’s just not healthy.”

“Besides,” Sierra said. “I don’t want to be the fat one!”

“Why don’t you look at other dresses?” Noelle asked. “Taffeta is gross you winter. You’ll rustle as you go down the aisle and everyone will hear you coming.”

“Eew!” Sierra and Sienna said in unison.

“Scratch taffeta. How do you feel about satin?”

“Too slippery,” Sienna said. “I don’t want Cody to slide off me.”
Noelle didn’t bother to ask for edification on that topic.

“How about brocade?” Becky brought over a gorgeous brocade gown
Sierra stuck out her tongue. “It looks old lady.”

“It’s our wedding,” Sienna said. “We wanna look hot.”

“How about crepe?” Noelle said. “It drapes more like chiffon but it’s warmer.”

“Ooh,” Becky said. “We just got in some designer gowns in crepe. I’ll go get them.”

“Finding the perfect wedding dress is a process,” Noelle reassured the brides. “If we can’t find something here, we’ll drive to Dallas. You will have the dresses of your dreams. I promise.”

Becky returned with the crepe dresses and the twins were at least willing to try them on. Noelle crossed her fingers and held her breath. She and Vanessa sat on the settee and waited for the twins to reappear.

“They’re very nervous,” Vanessa said, polishing off her third mimosa.
“That’s to be expected.”

“Not just about the dresses.”

Noelle glanced over at the older woman. “What about? Maybe I can alleviate their concerns.”

Vanessa winced. “You can’t.”

“Give me a chance.”

Vanessa hissed through clenched teeth. “See, *you’re* the thing they’re nervous about.”

“What?” Noelle blinked, blindsided. “Me? Why?”

“They can’t get past the fact that you don’t believe in love.” Vanessa bit her bottom lip, leaving crimson lipstick stains on her overly whitened teeth.
For heaven’s sakes. She thought they’d put that behind them. What a mess she’d made. “Vanessa, I—”

“Mom!” Wearing the crepe wedding dress, Sienna rushed over to where Noelle and Vanessa were sitting.

“Oh honey, the dress is gorgeous. I think you’ve found the one.” Vanessa stood up.

“No, no, listen to me.” Sienna wrung her hands. “It’s Sierra. She’s locked herself in the bathroom and won’t come out.”

Vanessa jumped up and ran for the bathroom. Noelle followed.

“What’s happened?” Noelle asked Sienna.

Sienna stared at her as if Noelle were a fly she found swimming in her soup. “*You*,” she said. “You’re what’s happened.”

“Me?” Perplexed, Noelle pressed a hand to her chest. Vanessa stood on the other side of the bathroom door and met Noelle’s gaze. “What did I do that did something wrong, then I can fix it.”

“No you can’t!” Sierra said from inside the bathroom.

Simultaneously, Vanessa and Noelle turned to look at Sienna.

“After we tried on the crepe dresses—they’re a big ‘no,’ BTW, that material shows *every* lump and bump—Sienna spied a gown on the sale rack and just had to try it on. Seriously, I tried to talk her out of it, but . . .” Noelle shrugged. “Here we are.”

Oh no, what had Sierra done to the dress? Fear catapulted into Noelle’s mind. *One, two, three . . .*

The same thought must have occurred to Becky, who quickly shed her usual people-pleasing demeanor. “If she’s messed the dress up, she’s paying for it.”

“Sienna, no matter what’s wrong, we can make this right.” Noelle tapped on the door. “Please let me in.”

Sobs came from the other side.

Becky narrowed her eyes, folded her arms, and tightened her glare. “I’ll pay for a ten-thousand-dollar dress.”

The boohooing intensified.

Noelle raised her eyebrows at Becky. “That’s not helpful.”

“Honey, this is Mom,” Vanessa said. “Please come out.”

“I—I can’t.” Sierra blubbered on the other side of the door.

“Why not?” Vanessa asked.

“I’m stuck.”

Becky pointed at Noelle. “Ten thousand dollars.”

“Message received.” Noelle held the consultant’s stare. “If the dress is damaged The Tie will pay for it.”

“That’s not coming out of my girls’ wedding budget!” Vanessa folded her arms over her chest and shifted her weight onto her right hip. A mirror

nessa of Becky who was leaning to the left.

ocked “No, no.” It would be coming out of Noelle’s paycheck. She slowed exhalation, letting the air out in segments, *eight, seven, six . . .* While it wasn’t a huge amount of money to her, it would be a lifesaver to her father’s charity for disadvantaged children. But what bothered Noelle more than the loss of money was the damage to her reputation.

ier “You’re jumping to conclusions. The dress could be just fine,” Noelle said. “Let’s all take a deep breath and calm down. Nothing to get upset about. We know what’s going on.”

? If I She turned her back to Becky and Vanessa, leaned her head down and knocked softly on the door. “Sierra, let me in.”

“Just you.” Sierra whimpered.

“Just me.”

clingy “Why doesn’t she want me?” Vanessa asked Sienna.

l rack “Boundaries, Mom.”

Sienna Vanessa scowled but held her tongue.

le’s The bathroom door cracked open, and Sierra’s red-rimmed blue eyes peeked out. She waved Noelle inside. “Get in here.”

Sierra slammed the door closed.

ier Locked it.

for it.” Noelle slipped past the panicky bride. It was pretty crowded in that cramped bathroom between Sierra, Noelle, and the poufy ten-thousand-dollar wedding gown the bride-to-be had on.

“What’s happened to the dress?” Noelle asked, bracing herself for the worst. “That’s worst.”

“The zipper is stuck.” Sierra turned to reveal her back and the zipper hanging halfway up her dress.

“And?” Noelle stepped closer, careful to avoid treading on the train.

Sierra turned back to face Noelle. “Dylan wants to call off the wedding.”

“What? Why?”

Sierra plunked down on the closed toilet lid and burst into tears. “Be careful of you.”

They were back to that. What on earth had she done?

is Noelle plucked tissues from the box on the sink, crouched in front of Sierra, being extra-careful where she placed her feet.

ed her A knock sounded at the door.

image “What’s going on in there?” Vanessa asked.

her minute.”

“Sierra, honey, it’s going to be okay. Mom loves you.”

favorite “What will I do?” Sierra said. “Not only has Dylan broken my heart
n the Mom and Sienna will flip out.”

le said. “Don’t worry about them right now.” Noelle put a hand to Sierra’s v
le said. “How did I cause a rift between you and Dylan?”

it until “Dylan says you jinxed us because you don’t believe in love.”

ad mean by jinxed?”

“He says ever since you got to town and started planning the wedding
can’t stop thinking about how every day will be just like the day before
up, go to work, eat, sleep, sex, rinse, and repeat.”

“And his life isn’t like that now?”

s “Well . . .” Sierra dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose. “It is, but ri
now he has the option to walk away, to take off on any adventure he w
a moment’s notice.”

small and needed to take time away from wedding prep, should she encourage
wedding Sierra to just give Dylan some space to work things out?

“And he’s tying his unhappiness to my arrival in town.”

ie “Yes. He says he feels so much pressure from the wedding planning
process.”

r “Dylan needs a good swift kick in the ass,” Vanessa called from the
corridor.

ing.” from the door!”

“Fine.” Vanessa heaved an exaggerated sigh.

ecause “I don’t hear footsteps walking away,” Sierra called.

Stomp, stomp, stomp. Vanessa stormed off, leaving no doubts that h
feelings were hurt.

f “Oh no,” Sierra said. “She’s pissed.”

Since she’d been in Twilight, Noelle had felt a little jealous of the tv
and their close relationship with their mother, but she was beginning to
the appeal of Crescenda’s hands-off parenting style.

Independence.

“First things first.” Noelle rose to her feet. “Let’s get you out of that wedding gown and then we can talk about Dylan.”

, but “Okay.” Sierra sniffled, got up, and turned around again so Noelle could work on unsticking the zipper.

wrist. Noelle dipped her head to get a better look at the jammed-up dress.

“I’m sorry if I’m being difficult,” Sierra said.

oes he “No more so than any other bride a month before their wedding.” Noelle worked the zipper, sliding back the piece of material the teeth had gotten caught on.

ing, he “Really?”

e. Get “Really. This is totally normal.”

“So this kind of crisis happens with every wedding?”

“Cold feet is very common.”

ght “What percentage of couples break up at this point?”

ants at “Honestly, less than one percent and when they do call it off, it’s always for the best.”

r to “I don’t want to call off the wedding . . .” Sierra’s voice clotted. She would be crying again, her shoulders shaking.

l ennui “Shh, shh,” Noelle said. “It’ll work out.”

ge “You don’t know that!”

“I do,” Noelle said with authority at the same time she gave a sharp tug, freeing the zipper and pulling it all the way down. The gown was just freed.

Just as she did, Noelle’s phone dinged. She pulled it from her pocket and read a text from The Tie representative, Pamela Landry.

Call me. Now!

way “I’m going to let you get dressed,” Noelle said. “Come out when you’re ready and we’ll talk about Dylan.”

“Thank you.”

er Noelle eased around Sierra, and stepped out into the corridor, steeling herself. The hall was empty, thank heavens. She wouldn’t have Vanessa, Becky, and Sienna breathing down her neck when she called Pamela.

vins Hitting the contact number for Pamela Landry, Noelle brought the phone to her right ear and plugged her left ear to block out the murmur of another conversation seeping in from the bridal showroom.

) see “Hello, Pamela?”

“What in the devil is going on in Texas?” Pamela asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I just got a frantic phone call from the Buckhorn twins’ mother. Vanessa says you’re a jinx.”

Noelle closed her eyes and let the air slowly leak from her lungs. Grief. “Vanessa is a little reactive. We had an issue, but I’m working to resolve it. I—”

“We’ve sunk a hundred grand into this wedding, Noelle. It needs to go down without a hitch.”

“One of the grooms has cold feet and his bride locked herself in the bathroom. Clichéd, I know, but—”

“No excuses. We can break you as easy as we can make you. We took your chance on an upstart because of who your mother is. If you let us down, we’ll be back for you.”

“Is that a threat, Pamela?”

“It’s a promise, Curry. You’re the Wedding Whisperer, for heaven’s sake. Get in there and whisper that bride into wedded bliss or else!”

She was

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Chapter 20

Gil walked through the back door of the B&B without knocking. He n knocked. The Merry Cherub was his home. He'd gone inside to tell Gr what had happened at school with Josie and Silvey and to get a feminin on things.

What he hadn't expected to find was his sister lip-locked with Ebby father.

At the sound of the back door snapping shut behind him, Gretchen a Tyler jumped apart.

"Whoa." Gil put up both palms to block his vision and stepped back sorry."

Gretchen smoothed down her clothes and patted her hair into place. "Um . . . um."

"I'm gonna go." Tyler spun on his heels and headed for the front do hollering over his shoulder as he went, "I'll call you later."

"What's going on?" Gil asked his sister.

"What do you think?"

"You and Ebby's dad?"

She gave him a coy smile. "Uh-huh."

"What about that cutter in Jubilee you were dating?"

Gretchen's smile deepened. "Tyler is the cutter."

Stunned, Gil pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and plunked d "Why didn't you say something before?"

"Ebby's still reeling over her parents' divorce. Tyler and I are taking slow. We didn't want to complicate things for her."

It sounded like his own conflict. "Wow."

Gretchen sat down across from him. She bit her bottom lip and look uncertain. “Be happy for me.”

“I am. I’m just caught off guard. Was this a covert way of inviting Tyler and Ebby to Thanksgiving dinner?”

“Do you really think I’m that manipulative?” Gretchen looked hurt. “I told Tyler about the craft event. I didn’t know he was taking Ebby for a walk. And I surely didn’t know you and Noelle would befriend her and ask her and her dad to dinner.”

“So it was just a lucky coincidence.”

“You don’t know how surprised I was when you walked through the door with them.” Gretchen grinned. “And thrilled. I got to spend Thanksgiving with my boo and his girl. Isn’t it awesome that Ebby and Josie get along?”

ever “Pretty cool.”

Gretchen “Please don’t say anything to anyone about Tyler and me. Ebby doesn’t know about us yet. We thought it was best to wait to tell her until we know for sure we’re gonna last.”

’s Gil’s mind immediately went to Noelle and how his relationship with her had affected Josie. “Believe me, I get that.”

nd “Are you and Noelle having issues?”

“It’s . . . not easy.” Knowing his story might help her navigate her relationship with Tyler and his daughter, Gil told her about what had happened between him and Noelle.

“That’s tough,” Gretchen said. “Thank you for sharing. I won’t repeat it.”

or, “I know you won’t.” He smiled at his sister. “I really am happy for you. Thanks. I hope you and Noelle can work things out.”

Gil shook his head. “I’m not holding my breath. As you’re finding out, things are complicated when you have kids.”

“So complicated.” Gretchen got a faraway look in her eyes as if she was deep in thought, then blinked and met his gaze. “But love is worth the wait, don’t you think?”

Gil spread his hands. “I don’t know.”

own. “Don’t give up on Noelle because things are difficult,” Gretchen said. “You two are good together. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you so engaged with life. Other people have noticed too.”

3 things “Really? Who?”

“Derrick, Delphine, Josie.”

“Josie?”

ed “She told me you smile more since Noelle moved in.”
“That kid of mine . . .” He grinned. “She’s pretty perceptive.”
Tyler “Very. She keeps you on your toes.”
“Keep that in mind with Ebby. She could be picking up on more than
“I just know.”
sure. “Point taken. No more indiscriminate kissing in the kitchen.”
Ebby “Hey, I just thought of something. If you and Tyler end up getting married,
Josie and Ebby will be cousins by marriage.”
“Oh, that would be fun.”
the door “They’d both love that.”
ing “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Gretchen said. “While Tyler is a
big?” guy, he’s got a lot of healing to do.”
“Don’t we all?” Gil asked, thinking of Noelle.

sn’t
now

Blackballed.

h her Her worst fear. Pamela Landry had threatened to blackball her from
Tie—the biggest clearing house for wedding planners—if she didn’t fix it.
She had to make this right or she’d be stuck planning weddings for
Crescenda’s friends and acquaintances for the rest of her life and her dream
of independence from her parents’ sphere of influence would be over.

Hauling in a deep breath, Noelle powered down her phone, stuck it in
at it.” pocket, and went to do what she did best.

you.” People please.

ut, Squaring her shoulders, she walked back to the showroom. Becky was
busy steaming wrinkles out of the dress that Sierra had tried on. Vanes
into her fourth mimosa. Noelle would have to drive them back to Twilight
Sierra was on the settee sobbing, Sienna on her knees in front of her twin
patting her hand and passing her tissues after she discarded another one on
big pile at her feet.

was First, to deal with Becky.

d. Noelle walked over. “Is the dress okay?”

so Becky gave her a thumbs-up.

“Thank you for your patience during this stressful time,” Noelle said.
“You’ve been invaluable.”

Becky looked surprised that she’d been complimented, gave a quick
and a friendly nod.

The easy part was done. Now to tackle the bull by the horns. Noelle pushed up the sleeves of her faux leather jacket and moved to where Vanessa sat in a chair looking disgruntled.

n you “Thank you for calling The Tie’s attention to my gaffe,” she said with a tinge of sarcasm.

Vanessa tensed, got a haughty look on her face, and the vein at her temple pulsed visibly. “You—”

Noelle held up a stop sign palm. She wouldn’t allow the woman to get on her. There was already so much tension in the showroom, a couple other customers, leafing through the dresses, shied away from them and their group worried looks.

“I was blind to my own faults, and I made some mistakes with your daughters. That’s totally on me. Thank you for holding me accountable.”

Vanessa looked totally taken aback. Her jaw dropped and her narrow eyes popped round. “I . . . er . . . you’re welcome?”

The “If you could give me your car keys so I can drive us back to Twilight you can enjoy all the mimosas you want.”

x this. Without another word, Vanessa surrendered her keys.

reams “Thank you.” Noelle pocketed them. Two down, two to go. The solution here wouldn’t be so easy as ingratiating herself.

in her She took the empty spot on the settee beside Sierra, who was still so sore that her shoulders shook. She waited until the young woman’s crying slowed and then she said, “I’m sorry this has happened.”

“I texted Cody,” Sienna said. “And told him our engagement is off the table.”

“What?” Ah crap. Noelle shifted her gaze to the twin on the floor.

as sa was “How can I marry Cody when his brother has treated my twin so shabbily?”

in, to the Noelle bit back a sigh. Pamela Landry would not be happy. People had warned her the Buckhorns were not easy to deal with, but she’d had a lot of Crescenda and her ilk. She was accustomed to impulsive, passionate people who were prone to overreacting. She could and would find a way to fix this.

l. The best antidote for drama was a calm demeanor and open curiosity. It didn’t matter what she thought or how she would personally handle a situation. Perception was everything and the Buckhorns perceived her as a threat to their happiness. It might not be rational to her mind, but it was theirs.

: smile

Hauling in a deep breath, Noelle counted down her anxiety from *eig* anessa *seven, six, five . . .*

The door to the bridal shop flew open with a loud *bang*. Everyone in the showroom jumped.

The Maxwell twins barged in, Cody leading the way. He made a beeline for Sienna. Head down, avoiding Sierra's gaze, his twin brother hung back.

Sienna leaped to her feet. "Cody! What are you doing here? You're supposed to be at work."

"How can I work when my life is falling apart?" He shook his cell phone at her. "What was this text all about?"

"You didn't have to come all the way to Fort Worth. You didn't have to leave work." Sienna pressed a hand to her heart.

"My marriage is at stake. You expect me to sit back and do nothing here to fight for you," Cody said. "For us."

"We're not married," Sienna said.

"No, but we're gonna be." Cody stepped closer to the settee, his full attention on his bride-to-be. "I don't care what's going on with Dylan and Sierra. This is about you and me. We started going out before they did."

"I asked you to marry me first. Just because we're twins doesn't mean Dylan and I are joined at the hip. I'm separate from my brother, and you're separate from Sierra."

"Yay, Cody." Noelle stayed silent. She'd learned if you gave things time and space they would often work themselves out on their own.

"Do you love me, Sienna?" Cody asked.

"More than anything in the world."

"More than your allegiance to your twin sister?"

Tears shining in her eyes, Sienna nodded.

"C'mere." Cody opened his arms.

Sienna flew into his embrace.

He kissed his bride-to-be passionately, right there in the bridal shop showroom. The other customers and Becky gawked. Someone murmured "Aww."

Noelle shifted her gaze to Sierra, who'd stopped crying and was peering red-eyed at Dylan. The other Maxwell twin had his hands jammed into his pockets and was intently studying his cowboy boots.

Sienna stood up. "Dylan."

Cody and Sienna separated, but Cody kept his arm around Sienna's shoulder.

Sienna stood up. "Dylan." Cody and Sienna separated, but Cody kept his arm around Sienna's shoulder.

ht, As a unit, they turned to stare at Dylan.
In fact, everyone was staring at Dylan.

1 the “Could you please look at me?” Sierra asked.
Slowly, Dylan raised his head and met Sierra’s weepy gaze.

eline “Why did you come here?” she asked.

oack. “Cody made me.” He stared down at the floor again.
“Oh.” Sierra’s bottom lip trembled. “I thought you came for me.”
“I told him he needed to man up and tell you in person that he wants
hone at Cody scowled at his twin. “You don’t break an engagement over a text
Sienna gasped, winced, and brought her fingers to her lips. “I guess
e to that to you, didn’t I?”
“You did,” Cody said. “But I forgive you because I know you didn’t
? I’m it. You were just taking up for your sister.”
“Did you mean it, Dylan, when you told me you didn’t want to marry
Sierra asked and moved closer to him. “Are you telling me you don’t love
anymore?”

and “I love you,” Dylan mumbled.

. I “Then why are you calling off our wedding?”

ylan “Too much pressure.” Dylan hunched his shoulders.

eparate “In the text you said it was because you were scared that marriage would
get routine and boring. Why would you think that?”

ne and “I dunno.” Dylan shrugged.
“Tell her the truth, man,” Cody said. “Tell her the real reason why you
spooked.”
Dylan’s head popped up and his dark-eyed gaze drilled straight into
as he pointed a finger. “Because of *her*.”
Good grief. Noelle kept her expression as neutral as she could. Why
she such a boogeyman to these people?
“Did you know her mother has been married and divorced five times
Dylan said. “And it’s three times for her dad. It’s true. I looked her up
internet.”

red, “My parents’ track record with marriage has nothing to do with me,
ring Noelle said. “And even less to do with you.” While that was completely
his Noelle knew she couldn’t erase superstition with logic.
“Face it,” Dylan said to Sierra. “She’s jinxed and she’s planning our
wedding. What if, because of her, you and me don’t last?”

waist. Yeah, blame the wedding planner. How would she fight this? How could

she convince Dylan she was not a jinx? How could she please both Par Landry and the couples in front of her and salvage her career? Frantica Noelle's mind leafed through the viable solutions, but came up empty.

"You told me Noelle doesn't even believe in love. That's at the root problem. What kind of person doesn't believe in love and yet becomes wedding planner? Something's off." Dylan glowered at Noelle. "I don't know her."

"I did." Everyone was staring at her now, waiting to see how Noelle would react. "I did it myself."

"I did it myself." What? Did the guy think she went around intentionally sabotaging weddings for kicks? His mindset made no sense to her.

"I mean it." *Quick, think of something.* She had to dig her way out of this, or her career was on the rocks.

"I mean it?" "What if we got a new wedding planner?" Sierra asked.

"I mean it?" "Marriage is a huge risk." Dylan plowed his fingers through his hair clear to Noelle he was using her as an excuse for his own cold feet and couldn't admit it to Sierra. "Love is a gamble. Who says we're gonna last?"

"Me," Sierra said. "I do. I say we'll last."

"I mean it?" "But how can we last when a jinx is involved?" Dylan glared at Noelle again as if she possessed some magical marriage-busting powers and was gleefully using them against him and Sierra.

"I mean it?" "Oh," Noelle said, grasping at straws, searching for any reasonable way to fight back against Dylan's nonsense. "Wait, where did you get the idea I don't believe in love?"

"I mean it?" Noelle "That's what you told us at the Windmill the first day you arrived," she said.

"I mean it?" "No, that's what I told *Gil*. You just overheard it." Noelle had no idea where she was going with this as her mind scrambled for anything that would get these two back on the same page.

"I mean it?" "Are you saying you *do* believe in love?" Looking hopeful, Sierra brought her hands to her heart.

"I mean it?" Noelle had snagged their attention. Great. Now what? "Absolutely, I do. I truly believe in love."

"I mean it?" "Then why did you tell Gil that you didn't?" Vanessa asked.

"I mean it?" Noelle didn't want to lie. She wasn't a liar. Unless you considered her a liar she'd been lying to herself all these years. Fine. She wouldn't lie. *One, two, three . . .* Noelle gulped and told them the truest thing she knew.

nela "Because I've been in love with Gil Thomas since I was thirteen years
lly, old."

"So you lied to him and said you didn't believe in love because you
of the love with him?" Vanessa asked, eyes narrowing. The woman had a
a suspicious nature. "That doesn't make any sense."

't trust "It was silly. It was foolish. It was irresponsible, and I never should
said it when there was a chance a client could overhear me."

defend "That's true," Vanessa said. "But *why* did you say it?"

In for a penny, in for a pound. She had to get this double wedding back
track, or her career was a dumpster fire. Blowing this gig with The Tie
forever stain her reputation and limit her future options.

career Noelle kept talking, watching their faces. "I wanted Gil to fall in love
me and I was terrified if he knew I loved him my desperation would ch
him off. I had no choice but to play it cool and pretend I didn't care. I
: It was weird, right? I've been carrying a torch all this time for a guy who'd
l just even noticed me."

ast?" "So why didn't you just tell us the truth after Gil went to pick up his
daughter that day at the Windmill?" Vanessa asked. "Why not set the r
lle straight right then and there?"

was "I didn't know you guys well enough, and I didn't trust the Twilight
grapevine. I didn't want the truth getting back to him," Noelle said, ma
way to up an explanation on the fly and praying it would work.

that I "I think it's romantic." Becky, the bridal consultant, sighed.

"Really?" Sienna said. "You're not just saying that to convince us?"

Sierra "Really." Noelle nodded.

ea "You were just playing it cool with Gil, when you actually believed
love all along?" Sierra asked.

ould "I was." Noelle grinned. "And it worked too. Gil and I have been se
each other."

rought "That's wonderful," Vanessa said. "I'm so happy for you. Gil is a gr
guy."

I "Thanks." She felt like she needed a shower after compromising her
but she'd done what she had to do to save her job.

ow "Could there be a wedding in the wedding planner's future?" Becky
giggled. "I love it!"

, two, "You hear that, honey?" Sierra beamed at Dylan. "Noelle *does* belie
love. She's not a jinx. Our marriage isn't doomed because she's the on

ars planning our wedding. It's gonna be okay."

're in Dylan gave Noelle the side-eye. "But how *do* we know she's not just saying that now to keep her job?"

"That's easy enough to find out," Cody said. "We'll just ask Gil the time we see him."

have "I'll text him right now." Dylan pulled out his cell phone.

Ah crap. From the frying pan into the fire.

ack on "Dylan," Noelle said sharply, trying to derail the young man from talking to Gil until she'd had a chance to talk to him. "Now that you don't have a reason to would blame, you need to face your own fears. What is it that *you're* so darn afraid of?"

re with Looking cowed, Dylan stuck his phone back in his pocket. "I'm scared I'm not going to work out."

mean it "Let's talk this through," Noelle encouraged. "Why do you fear your marriage might fail when you and Sierra are so much in love?"

Dylan swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "My uncle Ted is wrecked since his wife ran off with her personal trainer last month and I record him to raise Silvey on his own. I've never seen Uncle Ted so out of control. Last night, he was literally sobbing on our mom's shoulder. He's normally self-confident. I mean if Uncle Ted and Aunt Yvonne can't make it, will I be making can?"

"You're related to Silvey Zucker?" Noelle raised an eyebrow. Twili was so darn small. Everyone seemed related to everyone else, by marriage not by blood.

"Uncle Ted is our mother's younger brother," Dylan said. "I admire him so much. To see him devastated is a punch in the gut. He had everything now it's all gone."

eing "I'm scared too, baby," Sierra said, taking Dylan's hand. "Nothing is guaranteed. But I'm not like your aunt Yvonne. I'd never run off and leave you. For one thing, Sienna would kick my ass if the thought even crossed my mind."

self, "I would do it too." Sienna nodded.

ve in Everyone laughed, but Sierra only had eyes for her groom. "I believe in you, family. I believe in love. And I believe in *you*, Dilly Bar. There's no reason to be afraid. Sienna and Cody have our backs. Our parents do too. We're as close as you can get to a sure thing. Can you take a chance on us? Because I believe love is worth the risk."

Dylan gazed into Sierra's eyes. His shoulders sagged and he looked relieved. The guy had had a crisis of faith. All he'd been looking for was some reassurance that his life would turn out okay.

"It's okay to have doubts," Noelle said. "Perfectly normal. In fact, give yourself credit for being able to express those doubts rather than tamp them down or hide from your emotions."

"Seriously?" Dylan asked.

"Seriously," said everyone in the room in unison.

Dylan took Sierra's hand. "I'm so sorry, Pookie-Bear. I was a jerk. I'm scared. I thought Noelle was the problem, but I can see now I was using her as an excuse. Can you forgive me?"

"Yes!" Sierra flung herself into Dylan's arms and he covered her face with kisses.

"Well," Vanessa said. "I guess we're back to finding the perfect wedding dresses. Becky, bring me another mimosa."

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Chapter 21

“You gotta help me.” Noelle burst into Gil’s office at the Windmill looking as if she’d had a near-death experience.

Her normally smooth hair had frizzed in the rain, giving her a mass of bushy curls just as it had when she was fifteen. Her skin was paler than normal and her eyes were huge. She panted, her chest rapidly rising and falling.

He pushed off from the beanbag chair, having kept it for his seat, hoping against hope she’d come use the office. His comfy office chair was waiting for her if she ever gave it a chance.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I’m in big trouble.” She pulled up her bottom lip between her teeth and interlaced her fingers, and brought her hands to her heart.

“How can I help?” he asked without a second’s hesitation. Noelle needed help. He was there for her. End of story.

“I know it’s a whole lot to ask—”

“Say the word. Anything.”

“I need you to lie for me.”

That pulled him up short. He stepped back, only then realizing he’d gotten so close to her. “Lie?”

“Forget I asked.” She wrung her hands. “I shouldn’t have asked. You’re an honorable guy. You don’t lie.”

“Lie about what?”

Her gaze landed on his mouth and then slowly tracked up to meet his. “Dating me.”

“Wait. What? Whoa.” He held up both hands.

She shrank back and he realized his gesture made her feel embarrassed.

The last thing he wanted was to shame her.

“I’m sorry.” She looked so flustered. Nothing like the confident woman who’d walked into his office that first day with the Buckhorns. “I have the right to ask you to lie for me.”

“No,” he said, aching for her. More than anything in the world he wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her until they both forgot their names and wouldn’t lie for you.”

“I understand.” She knotted her hand and settled her fist against her stomach. Her shoulders slumped and she turned away.

She looked so sad. So sunk that he blurted, “I won’t lie, Noelle, because it’s true. I want to date you. Not just for sex, but to see if you and I . . .” He paused. “If there’s a real chance for us.”

Looking “Wh-what?”

“I like you. A whole lot. And I think you feel the same way about me.” Her soft brown eyes grew even wider. “Y-you do?”

It was usual, “Yeah,” he murmured and covered the space between them until they were mere inches apart.

She stood before him, trembling. Hell, he was trembling too.

“But you said . . . after that mess at the Christmas tree farm with Silas—what about Josie?”

“I’m at war with myself, Noelle. I want to be a good dad, but also I want to be with you too. I don’t know the right thing to do. I’m making this up as I go along. I’m floundering.”

“Thank you for your honesty.”

“But when it comes to Josie . . . I’m not ready to let her know.” He was thinking about Gretchen and Tyler and how they were keeping their relationship quiet until they were certain they stood a real chance of working it out.

“I understand,” Noelle said. “You want to keep Josie out of this until you and I can figure out what’s going on between us.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re scared of getting hurt.”

“Hell, yeah.”

“So am I. These feelings—”

“Are pretty overwhelming.”

“Yep.” She moistened her lips, looking as terrified as he felt.

He reached up, fingers splayed, and cupped the back of her head in his hand.

nan palm. His fingers speared through her cascade of curly hair, holding her
: no place. Gil lowered his head and kissed her. A sweet, gentle kiss that brought
a smile to her face and lit up her eyes.

anted “What’s happening?” she whispered, placing her palm flat against his
and gazing up into his face.

. “I “I’m kissing you.”

“No, I mean between us.”

“I don’t know. Can we just be in the moment?”

“I—” The pulse at her throat fluttered wildly.

ause He couldn’t wait to plant a kiss there, feel her heat beneath his mouth

” He “Say yes.”

“I want to, but . . . nothing’s changed. I’m leaving town in less than
month and there’s Josie to consider. We have to be adults about this. There’s
e.” a lot of risk here.”

“So much for no strings attached, huh?”

y were “I screwed up. I forced your hand. I should have kept my mouth shut
that it’s out in the open, we have to deal with our feelings.”

vey . . . “And that’s a horrible thing?” Gil’s stomach was as jittery as if he’d
downed a case of energy drinks in one sitting.

Moaning, she dropped her head into her palms, hid her face from him

want to Gently, he wrapped both hands around her shoulders and held her up
as I go finally peered up at him. “Why did you want me to lie for you?”

“I got into trouble with the wedding.”

“Tell me.” He guided her to sit down in the desk chair parked behind
paused, card table desk. Once she was settled, he moved the beanbag chair close
plopped down in front of her. “I’m all ears.”

orking Bit by bit, she told him what had happened in the bridal store and why
she’d been forced into telling the Buckhorns her business. He hated that
l you been put on the spot, but he was glad she’d had to admit she had feelings
him. Glad he could admit the same for her.

“Yeah,” he said. “Dylan and Cody are both pretty superstitious. But
more so than Cody. It’s part of the reason our band broke up. Dylan had
nightmare about the biggest gig we’d ever book. He considered it a bad
and dropped out of the event. That caused a lot of problems and the tension
between us built. It was also during the time Tammy Jo was battling
postpartum depression and I just couldn’t handle that kind of stress both
his home and on the job. So I pulled the plug on the band.”

er in “Right when you were on the verge of breaking through.”

ought a “Who told you that?”

“Gretchen. She says it’s too bad you never got a chance to really see is chesty you could do in the music world.”

“Breaking up the band was the right decision.” As hard as it had been to end the band, he had no regrets about his decision. It had given him precious time with Tammy Jo and their new baby and that’s what had mattered most to him.

h. “It made a difference for Josie. Your daughter is a wonderful kid and I don’t want to do anything to keep her safe and happy. That’s why this is so hard. We need to do what’s right for her,” Noelle said.

a He was so grateful that they were making progress, even if he still wasn’t sure where they were headed. Gil rested a hand on her knee clad in sexy black leggings. “Why did you really come back to Twilight?”

She blinked. “What do you mean? I’m here to plan the wedding.”

it. Now “Benji told me you were the final round judge of the essay contest. You could have picked any of the other entries and yet you chose the Buckle Up. Was their essay that much more compelling than the others? Was it similar to the identical twins marrying identical twins thing or did you have ulterior motives in selecting them?”

ntil she Her gaze met his. “The twin thing was a factor, but you’re right. The essay, while good, wasn’t the best of the best.”

“So Twilight did sway your decision.”

d the Noelle shrugged. “Maybe. I was nostalgic for the town. I did have a lot of wonderful memories here and I missed my grandparents.”

hy “Then why did you wait to return? Why not just come back for a visit before now?”

at she’d She seemed stumped by his question. “I—I don’t know.”

gs for “I think you do, deep down inside.” He moved his hand from her knee and placed it over her chest. He could feel her heart thundering beneath his palm.

Dylan “You think I came back because of you?”

id a “No.” He shook his head. “I think you came back to find *you*. I think you’ve spent too many years living in your mother’s shadow, doing whatever she wanted you to do, trying your best to please her and never quite accomplishing that goal. I think you lost a piece of yourself when your grandparents died, and I don’t think you’ll ever be able to fully love anyone but Noelle, until you know who *you* really are.”

She looked at him as if he'd shot an arrow straight through the bull's eye of her heart. "I don't know if I ever will know that. Can you accept me what don't?"

This wasn't about him. He cared about her either way. This was about Noelle and how she put things in tidy little mental boxes, compartmentalizing her life to keep from facing some unpleasant truths. But he couldn't tell most what she needed to mend herself; she had to figure that out on her own.

Gil couldn't take his eyes off Noelle. The woman stole his breath. More than she ever had before. Looking at her set his desire in concrete. He had to get close to her. Be with her.

Love her.

There. He'd acknowledged it.

He wanted Noelle. Not in some distant future way. But now. Today. It wasn't reasonable. He knew that, but he couldn't quell his desire.

Her soft pink lips formed into a tender smile, interrupting the rhythmic heart. She was so gorgeous, and the moment felt over-the-top romantic. His hopes were leading him down a merry path that he was hungry to follow.

Instead of answering, he got up off the beanbag chair, went to the desk, unlocked it, then came back, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her for a moment that was worth.

air

Head whirling, Noelle drank him up, hungry for his kiss, his touch, his distinctly Gil scent.

He grappled for the hem of her sweater and tugged upward. She raised her arms like she was in a stickup, and he peeled the sweater over her head, taking the blouse underneath with it and tossing the whole package of clothing over his shoulder.

Dazzling pulses of pleasure throbbed through her body, burning through any resistance as his pliant lips captured her lips again.

He dispatched her bra, unhooking it with one hand, then kissing the top off her shoulders, first one and then the other. He paused to kiss her neck, taking his time. Panting, she sagged against him. Next, he bent and pulled her boots, followed by her leggings and panties, stripping them down in a smooth move, slipping them over her feet until she was standing buck naked in front of him.

Reaching over, he swept everything off his desk, except for his computer.

s-eye which he pushed as far against the wall as he could. With a low-throated growl, he turned back, picked her up, and settled her on the sturdy desk.

The wood was cold against her bare butt and instant goose bumps sprang up on her legs and arms. She sucked in air through clenched teeth, her body aroused in a way it hadn't ever been before. Being naked while he still dressed made her feel both vulnerable and oddly powerful.

"You are so damn gorgeous," he said, his voice raspy and thick. His forehead darkened; black dots surrounded by sky blue irises soothing as a still wanted mountain lake. "I could look at you forever."

"I hope you'll do far more than that."

He shook his head, his smile deepening as his gaze roved over her. She was exposed sitting there in front of him, but the reverential way he was looking at her took Noelle's breath away.

She studied his face, his expression of awe. He was losing his heart to her as she was to him. It was scary and complicated, and she had no idea if it would work out or if they would end up shattered.

All she knew was that she'd never felt this way about anyone else. It was so appealing, the way his fiercely proud gaze took her in. He'd told her all he had feelings for her. She'd been in love with him since she was thirteen. She'd told herself it was a crush, lust, hormones, chemistry—and of course that was all part of this, sure, but her feelings ran far deeper for this man grown-up Gil.

He made her feel special, feminine, desirable . . .

Loved.

Was it really true? Was Gil Thomas falling in love with her? The shy bookworm across the street?

Her heartbeat sped up. She grasped the front of his Western shirt and pulled him to her, then she yanked on the shirt, popping open all the straps. Well, she was shy no more.

He shrugged off the shirt.

With shaky fingers, she traced the honed muscles of his fine body, the way she'd ached to do that first day when he stripped off his Santa suit for the Polar Plunge.

She reached for the snap on his jeans. He took two condoms from the pocket of his Wranglers and tossed them on the desk beside her.

"You're prepared," she said. "Cocky."

"No, hopeful." He smiled down at her and pressed his forehead against

ed hers. "I wished we might do this again."
k. "You told me we shouldn't."
rang "Yeah, well, I say a lot of stupid things."
entire "Duly noted." She giggled and pulled his zipper all the way down.
e was He took over, shucking his pants in one quick movement that removed
boxer briefs along with his jeans.
pupils And then she got a gander at his fully naked body and for a second,
heart stopped beating. She thought she'd never have the joy of seeing him
without clothes again and this was her first time seeing him nude in
light of day. His striking handsomeness stole all the air from her lungs.
She felt He hooked a finger underneath her chin and tilted her face up, so she
oking to stop looking at his most impressive parts and stare into those endless
"How are you doin'?" he asked.
to her "I'll be doing much better when you stop yacking and start getting back
f it "Yes, ma'am," he said and picked her up without warning.
She let out a whoop, both of joy and surprise. He sat down on the desk
t was where she'd just been, scooted back a bit, and settled her in his lap. He
r he were on either side of his waist, his impressive penis jutting right in front
n. her.
urse, He leaned back, propping himself up on his elbows, watching her. It
ature, scandalous being naked in his office during the middle of the day.
Scandalous and hot as hell.
She leaned over his muscular body, found his lips, and kissed him with
his erection jumped and pulsed between them. While she kissed him, he
y little reached up to cup one of her breasts in his palm, lightly strumming his
over her nipple.
d Her body heated, softened, getting ready for him.
laps. He broke their kiss to trail his mouth over her neck, burning hot kiss
down her throat to the pulse pounding at the hollow, sucking and nibbling
and teasing and driving her right out of her mind.
he way While his hand, oh his wicked, wicked hand, went exploring right between
the her quivering thighs.
His index finger gently touched her most sensitive spot, easy and careful
ie back Rubbing in just the right way, with just the right amount of pressure with
calloused fingertip. The hands of a musician. He knew just how to play.
nst She couldn't wait anymore. She grabbed for a condom on the desk, pulled
the package open with her teeth, and then rocked back against his raised

thighs, and leaned down to kiss the head of his shaft before rolling on to a condom.

“You’re a devil.” He gasped.

“And don’t you forget it.” She laughed, delighted over being in control. His eyes crinkled at the corners and his lips curved into a smile that was as hard as a punch. It was such a happy smile. Filled with joy and glee.

She lowered her head, pressed a million open-mouthed kisses over his chest, his nipples, his belly and beyond, inching closer, ever closer to the full place where she most wanted to go.

“Noelle,” he murmured.

She stared down at him beneath her, breathing hard, hearing the hammering of her heartbeat in her ears. He thrilled her in ways that no one ever had. She made love to him with her mouth, her teeth, her tongue. Her breath stalled in her throat. This moment felt weighted somehow, special.

His shaft was rock hard, growing harder beneath her mouth.

“C’mere,” he said, holding his arms out to her. “I want to kiss you at your knees.” Their mouths met, crashed, crushed, caught fire. Stoked and burned. Flaming high and hot. A blister. A blaze.

“Babe, I can’t stand it anymore. I gotta have you. Please, ride me,” he begged.

How could she turn down such a heartfelt request? She craved his body like water. Slowly, she slid down over his shaft and they sighed in unison while she settled in, taking him to the hilt.

And when she started to move, he called out her name, arching his hips and pushing more deeply into her.

Just as frantic as he was, she closed her eyes so she could concentrate on rotating her hips, flying up and down, swaying side to side. Unplanned wild rhythm. She was simply following where her body, and his cries of pleasure, led.

She was close. So very close. But she wanted to pace herself, to control when he did. She bit the inside of her cheek, trying her best to hang on to control. Her chest felt tight, her body tense and ready for the explosion she knew was coming.

He angled his hips, responding to her change in pace. Giving her so much damn pleasure, meeting her needs as she met his.

And just when she thought she would shatter, Gil stopped moving. “Noelle.”

the Opening her eyes, she peered down at him, trying her best to focus.
what?"

 "Nothing," he said. "I just needed to say your name."

rol. "Oh you!" she cried, frustrated that he'd derailed her drive to the fin
hit her and she started back up again.

 Out of control, wanting all of him, right there, right now, she ground
his hips against his, taking him with her.

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 Then she was there, hollering, "Gil, Gil, Gil," as they went over the
together, tumbling headlong into their dual release.

 She collapsed against him, and he folded his arms around her. They
one the desk, panting and breathless, shivering and shuddering against the
Her of their joining. This wasn't a casual thing. It was serious and they'd p
ial. the point of no return.

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gain." tight, pressed his mouth against her ear, and whispered, "What happen
 next?"

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Opening her eyes, she peered down at him, trying her best to focus. “Wh-what?”

“Nothing,” he said. “I just needed to say your name.”

“Oh you!” she cried, frustrated that he’d derailed her drive to the finish, and she started back up again.

Out of control, wanting all of him, right there, right now, she ground her hips against his, taking him with her.

He called her name again, this time deep and guttural, raw and needy.

Then she was there, hollering, “Gil, Gil, Gil,” as they went over the edge together, tumbling headlong into their dual release.

She collapsed against him, and he folded his arms around her. They lay on the desk, panting and breathless, shivering and shuddering against the power of their joining. This wasn’t a casual thing. It was serious and they’d passed the point of no return.

Panic took over her then and she wanted to squirm away, but he held her tight, pressed his mouth against her ear, and whispered, “What happens next?”

Chapter 22

How easy it would be to declare herself madly in love with Gil Thomas and shout it to the world.

Unfortunately, life didn't work that way. Not if you were a sensible person. You couldn't just live for yourself, responsibilities be damned. That had been her parents' way and Noelle's childhood had been a mess because of it. Actions had consequences.

Gil had a child. Life wasn't so simple that they could just dive headfirst into their feelings. Josie had already suffered enough, losing her mother and grandparents to a tragedy.

Plus, Noelle had a wedding to pull off. Until the job was finished, she didn't have the luxury of telling Gil she was in love with him, even if she had just done her best to show him.

"We need to be careful," Noelle said. "This is new. We don't know what it's going to be. I think we should keep it quiet for now."

Gil pulled on his jeans. "What about the Buckhorns and the Maxwell family? They need to know we're dating."

Noelle made a face. If the two sets of twins hadn't forced her hand, she wouldn't be here in the first place. Wouldn't have learned Gil had feelings for her too. "Well, obviously, they have to know about us."

"If they know, the whole town is gonna know."

That was true.

"Josie is my main concern. If things don't work out between us, she'll be so confused." Noelle wriggled into her leggings.

"You're right." He nodded. "We are in a fix. I just made her apologize to Silvey this morning for telling her you were going to be her new mother."

At the idea of being Josie's mom, wistful longing shot through Noel it was much too soon to be thinking along those lines.

"What are we going to do?" Noelle put on her bra and scooped her bra and sweater off the floor.

"Play it by ear?" Gil snapped his shirt closed.

"Be cool around Josie."

"But here at the office?"

"As long as we lock the door." Noelle buttoned her blouse and grinned. "All bets are off."

"And when the wedding is over and it's time for you to go back to L Gil worked his feet into his boots.

"Let's take it one day at a time, okay?" She tugged on her sweater and smoothed down her hair.

Now that she was sated and had saved her job, her old fears of adult commitment crept back in. They'd gone out on a limb. This was scary. With each husband, Crescenda had sworn it was true love, that *this* husband was The One she'd been searching for. That they would live together forever and ever. Then a year or two later, her mother would become dissatisfied or disillusioned with the man, divorce him, and start the process all over again. For her entire life, Noelle had resisted that willy feeling of falling headlong into love, and now it was upon her. She felt like a damsel tied to the train tracks as a speeding locomotive headed straight toward her.

"Can we do that?" she asked, hearing anxiety lace her voice.

"Yeah, sure. That'll work." Gil didn't seem happy about it.

"What is it?"

Gil shrugged. "I dunno. Feels like you're backpedaling."

"Not backpedaling," she denied. "Just being cautious."

"Stewing," he said.

"What?"

"You're letting your fears get the better of you."

"And you're not afraid?"

"Hell, yes," he said. "But you're worth the risk, Bookworm."

The way he was looking at her, eyes shining with admiration and respect sent chills shivering up her arms. Was true and lasting love within her?

Gil pulled her to his chest and kissed her, long and sweet and passionate. "What we just did together was special. With you, I feel whole again."

le, but “Oh, Gil.”

louse “I know you’re scared. I’m scared too, but love *is* worth the risk, and I want to risk everything with you.”

ied. Three joyous weeks passed. Twenty-one spectacular days spent at the Windmill with Gil as they worked side by side in his cozy little office, twenty-one sizzling nights when he would creep upstairs to Noelle’s apartment while Josie slept below. They’d make wild, passionate love then he’d slip back downstairs, his daughter none the wiser that he’d be gone.

nd Noelle had asked the Buckhorns and Maxwells to keep quiet about her romance with Gil and once they’d confirmed with him that they were in an item—the superstitious buggers—they seemed to have lived up to the word. Neither Noelle nor Gil had been approached by anyone asking about their relationship status.

happily It turned out, sneaking around was *hot*.

lert the The only downside was that she was left with an empty bed, but even though she didn’t want to admit it, she liked a little distance. That sweet solitary time to herself quelled her fears of being overwhelmed by her feelings.

like a After the meltdown at the bridal store, everything with the wedding was back on track and things had been glitch-free ever since. Pamela Landi praised Noelle for calming the Buckhorns and Maxwells and apologized for being so harsh with her over the phone. All was well.

t On December 18, one week before Christmas and six days before the Christmas Eve wedding, as Noelle lay in Gil’s arms after a rousing round of enthusiastic sex, he gathered her close, kissed her temple, and held her for a long time. Neither one of them spoke about what would happen after the wedding. They’d figure it out when the time came. For now, they were simply enjoying each other’s company.

spect, “Your work is really gearing up with the wedding so close.”

reach? “Mmm-hm,” she murmured, tracing her fingers in the whorl of dark hair on his chest.

nate. “Not much spare time.”

“Sadly, no.”

“Too busy to carve out a couple of hours on Friday night?”

d I “I’m sorry, but that’s the night of the bachelorette and bachelor parties
also the day Pamela Landry and the videographer arrive. I need to be on
in case something goes awry.”

“Oh.” He sounded disappointed.

and She found his hand in the darkness and interlaced their fingers. “The
parties don’t start until nine. Is this something we can do earlier in the
evening? Maybe I could spare an hour.”

and “Yes, that’s perfect timing. Our time slot is from six to seven.”

een “Time slot for what?”

“I won the lottery,” Gil said.

“Pardon?”

ier “Oh, not the Powerball or anything.” He laughed. “I won the living
ndeed globe lottery. It was Josie’s main Christmas wish . . . well, besides a man
heir for Christmas and she knows *that’s* not happening.”

bout “Um . . . okay.”

“I should explain.”

“Good idea. Dare I ask what’s a living snow globe?”

n “It’s a portable ice rink. They install it on the courthouse lawn every
at, four days before Christmas. Over the rink they mount a transparent plastic
dome.”

got “To help keep the ice from melting?” They didn’t have an ice rink when
y had she visited her grandparents, but that was thirteen years ago.

ed for “That’s how it started, but it looked so much like a snow globe that
even creatives in this town drew inspiration and now they’ve turned it into a
e snow globe winter wonderland.”

nd of “Trust Twilight to come up with something no one else has thought
for a Noelle chuckled. She loved her adopted hometown.

he “They install blowers that shoot out fake snow and swirl it around, so
it looks like you’re skating inside a snow globe. Everyone really gets into
it.

Of that, she had no doubt.

hair at “There’s always a theme. This year, it’s Teddy Bears on Ice. Professional
skaters dress up as teddy bear mascots and there’s a snow globe cam, so
people from around the world can watch it live online.”

“That sounds impressive,” she said. “And expensive.”

“It’s worth it. Next to the Dickens Festival, the living snow globe is
town’s biggest money-maker of the season.”

“That sounds adorable. I can’t wait to see it. What’s the lottery part?”

ies. It's "Folks are able to join the professional skaters on the ice if they dress thematically, but because of limited space, you have to enter the lottery in hand hope you get picked and can make it during the time slot you're given. supercompetitive."

"Wow and you won tickets! That's wonderful. Josie's going to love much."

"I've got three tickets for Friday evening. I entered it for me, Josie, and Gretchen, but Gretchen has her annual cookie club party that night and can't make it. I was hoping you could go instead."

"Josie didn't want to ask Ebby?"

"No, she specifically asked me to invite you."

snow "Really?"

ommy "Really."

"Do you think it's okay for us to go out in public together?"

"It's at Josie's request."

Her heart tripped. "I would love to come."

He rewarded her with a kiss. "That's great. You're gonna love it."

year Now all she had to do was work out how to slip away from the wedding prep for an hour on Friday evening before the bachelor and bachelorette parties. It would be touch and go, but she'd do what she could to pull it when

the **O**n Thursday night, when Gil slipped up to her apartment after he put the whole to bed, the baby monitor he used to keep tabs on his daughter while he upstairs with Noelle tucked into his back pocket, he was carrying a shopping bag.

of." "I got you something."

to it "Oh?" Noelle asked, greeting him at the door in a terry cloth robe with nothing on underneath. "What is it?"

to it." Gil handed her the bag. "For tomorrow night when we go skating."

sional Noelle opened it to find a green sweater with a red teddy bear quilted on the front, along with embroidered red lettering that said, I ♥ YOU BECAUSE YOU LOVE ME SO MUCH. Her heart caught. Was Gil professing his love? Or was it just a

She looked up at him.

the He grinned. "Do you like it?"

," "Aww! Gil, I love it! Thank you. How fitting." She'd been wondering if she was going to dress for the teddy bear-themed skating event.

ss “Not too corny?” He looked anxious.
y and “It fits the theme, and it goes perfectly with the outfit I have planned
It’s “That’s why I got it. They were selling them at a kiosk outside the ice
rink.”
it so “I need to thank you properly for your gift,” she said, opened her roll
let it drop to the floor.
and In ten seconds flat, Gil scooped her into his arms, carried her to the
l she bedroom, and they spent the next hour having a jolly good time.

They made plans to meet at the snow globe at six on Friday evening. The
afternoon arrival of Pamela Landry and the videographer delayed Noel
gave them the rundown on the upcoming wedding activities, got them
ensconced in their rooms at the Merry Cherub, recommended a few places
where they could go for dinner, and then hurried to the Roost to get ready
for her skate date.

ling After she was dressed, barely able to contain her excitement, she rushed
te from the Merry Cherub to the courthouse lawn. Shoppers, tourists, and
t off. headed home from work packed the town square. By the time she reached
the snow globe ice rink the courthouse clock was striking six.

Tonight, by going out in public, she and Gil were practically announcing
the world at large that they were a couple.

Josie She spied Gil’s smiling face standing out among the throng. He wore
was baseball cap with Yogi Bear on it and a Yogi Bear sweatshirt. He spotted
opping raising his hand to wave at her. Giddy, she rushed over, skipping around
people as if she were Josie’s age.

“Hi!” she greeted them.

ith “Noelle!” Josie wrapped her arms around Noelle’s waist and hugged
tight. “You came!”

“Of course I did.” Noelle hugged her right back. She smiled so hard
d on cheeks hurt and when Gil put his hand to her lower back to guide her in
MARY ice rink, she breathed in his woodsy scent. She’d never forget the way
a shirt? smelled tonight.

A refreshing blast of frigid air greeted guests as fake snowflakes whirled
around them inside the ice rink. Noelle thought about the night real
ing how snowflakes had fallen in Twilight. The night Gil had first kissed her.

The professional skaters in teddy bear costumes weaved in and out a

the other skaters who, for the most part, like Noelle, wore teddy bear sweaters, or teddy bear print shirts or teddy bear baseball caps. All major bears were represented, from polar bears to grizzlies to koalas.

It was bear-a-palooza.

“Yay!” While watching the skaters on the ice, Josie twirled, the flared skating skirt she wore over white leggings whirling around her. She looked adorable in a fluffy pink teddy bear-themed sweater and a headband with bear ears on it. “Isn’t this fun, Daddy?”

“So glad you’re happy, baby girl.”

“I’m not a baby!”

“You’re right. You’re not. Let’s go rent our skates.” Gil smiled after his daughter as she skipped ahead of them and he slipped his hand around Noelle’s waist.

“Size five and a half, right?” Gil said as he ordered their skates.

“You remembered.”

“I remember everything about you, Bookworm.”

Once Josie had her skates on, she took off without them, hollering, “Ya, wouldn’t wanna be ya.”

“That kid.” Gil chuckled.

“She’s spunky. You’ve got your hands full with that one.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Ma’am?” A girl about Josie’s age hovered nearby with her parents. She was clutching a notebook and pencil in her hand.

“Yes?” Noelle said brightly.

“Can I have your autograph?” the little girl asked.

“Why would you want my autograph?”

“‘Cause you’re making that beautiful wedding.”

“Where did you hear that?”

The girl grinned. “Josie and I are in the same class and you’re all she talks about.”

“Certainly.” Noelle smiled at the girl. It was the first time anyone had asked for her autograph. People had asked if she could get her parents’ autograph for them hundreds of times, but no one had ever wanted her.

She wasn’t going to lie. It was a satisfying feeling.

After the little girl broke the ice, others started coming over. Some for autographs, others to ask about the wedding and her parents.

Gil tolerated it for a few minutes, but then he stepped in. “Folks, No

came to skate—I'm sure you can appreciate that. You can approach her in any manner of later."

The crowd that had started forming around her dispersed.

"Thanks," she told Gil. "I didn't know how I was going to get out of here."

"You need a bodyguard."

Oh heavens, that sounded horrible.

The two of them went out onto the ice together but didn't hold hands because of Josie, even though Noelle wanted to hold Gil's hand more than anything. She had self-control. She could keep her hands to herself. They were taking things slow.

She and Gil skated underneath the live-streaming camera installed throughout the town, and just as she zoomed past the lens, the blowers blasted a fresh wave of foam snowflakes into the air.

The crowd let out a collective sigh as the snowflakes danced and swirled along with the skaters. From the speakers came "Waltz of the Snowflakes." Noelle had to admit the effect was impressive. She wondered what it looked like to the folks watching on the live feed.

Josie skated up to them, her little face aglow. "Noelle, isn't this awesome?"

"Is this your first time skating inside the snow globe?" Noelle asked.

"Yes," Josie said, "and I love it."

"Me too."

"It is special," Gil said, his eyes drilling into hers.

Noelle giggled as the faux snowflakes settled over her. She ran a hand through her hair to dislodge a clump of them.

"You look like a fairy snow princess," Josie said.

"So do you."

Grinning, Josie twirled.

"You're really good," Noelle said. "Where did you learn how to ice-skate?"

"Grandmaw taught me." Josie curtsied.

"Mom takes her to the rink in Fort Worth every Christmas when she and Dad come to visit," Gil said. "She started her off young."

"Grandmaw and Peepaw are coming to see me tomorrow," Josie said. "I can't wait."

"That's nice."

"Mom taught me and Gretchen to skate too." Gil turned and skated

r backward.

“Oh, now you’re just showing off,” Noelle said.

“I wanna do that.” Josie tried to turn, wobbled, and almost took a spill that.” Noelle reached out to steady her before she tumbled.

“You need a few more lessons first, kiddo.” Gil executed a backward figure eight.

s “Will you teach me?” Josie asked.

han “I want to learn too,” Noelle said.

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“Skaters, please leave the rink,” Moe Schebly requested.

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irled “A show?” Josie twisted her head around. “What kind of show?”

kes.” “Shh.” Gil held out his hands, one to Josie, the other to Noelle, and looked together, the three of them skated to the exit that led to the changing area where the other skaters had assembled to watch what was happening on the ice.

“Daddy.” Josie tugged on Gil’s hand. “I can’t see.”

her. Gil bent and scooped his daughter up, putting her on his shoulders and stepped to one side, making sure he wasn’t blocking anyone else’s view of what was happening on the ice. Noelle loved how considerate he was.

nd He held on to Josie’s ankles. Her skates rested against his chest. The skater had to be poking into him, but he seemed unfazed.

Noelle scooted closer to father and daughter, making room as more skaters came in off the ice. Once everyone had left the rink, the Teddys skated around the rink, falling into formation to create the shape of a heart.

“Daddy, let me down,” Josie said, her tone of voice sharpening.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Silvey Zucker’s here.” Josie spat out the name as if she had something distasteful in her mouth. “I’m ready to go now.”

and

d. “I

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Chapter 23

“Is Silvey still giving you trouble at school?” Gil asked, concerned about his daughter. He wished he knew what was going on in that little brain of hers.

Josie shook her head. “She leaves me alone now.”

“Then there’s no problem?”

Scowling, Josie folded her arms over her chest. “I didn’t know she was gonna be here.”

“We’re not going to let that stop us from having fun, are we?”

Josie looked from him to Noelle and back again. Her cheeks pinked. Gil wondered if his daughter was thinking about that day at the Christmas tree farm when she’d embarrassed herself.

“No,” Josie mumbled.

“C’mon.” He took her hand. “Let’s go skate. I’ll teach you both how to do a figure eight backward.”

Josie didn’t move.

“What is it?” Gil asked.

“Can Noelle wait here?” Josie asked.

Clearly, the poor kid was self-conscious about having told Silvey that Noelle was going to be her new mommy. He wished he could tell Josie that her dream of a new mother was a possibility, but this thing with Noelle was still too new and neither one of them were impulsive people. That kind of commitment would take time and the long distance between them could be a deal breaker. He just didn’t know enough yet to tell his daughter about his feelings for Noelle. Heck, he hadn’t even told Noelle yet that he was falling head over heels in love with her.

Gil shot Noelle a half smile. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Go have fun.”

Gil winked at her, and she rewarded him with a soft smile. He took her hand and guided her out on the ice, just as Silvey and her father entered the rink.

Noelle enjoyed watching father and daughter together. Gil was such a dad and so patient with Josie.

More people came up to her and asked for an autograph and several minutes passed before she looked up again.

On the ice, Silvey and her father skated up to Gil and Josie. Gil had an exchange with Silvey’s dad. She noticed the two girls barely looked at each other. Josie glanced over her shoulder in Noelle’s direction.

out his
hers.

Noelle smiled and waved.

Quickly jerking her gaze away, Josie did not wave back.

She wasn’t offended. She understood the girl’s embarrassment.

was

Gil and Josie came off the rink. Josie plunked down some distance away from Noelle and started unlacing her skates while Gil came to sit beside her.

“What’s up with her?” Noelle asked.

and
was

“She says her feet hurt, but I think it’s just an excuse because Silvey was here.”

“Ouch!” Noelle crinkled her nose. “She’s still pretty sensitive about what happened at the Christmas tree farm.”

to do

“She is.”

“What did Silvey’s dad say to you out on the rink?”

“He asked me if you were seeing anyone.”

“What?” Noelle hadn’t even met Ted Zucker. Why was the man asking about her?

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d be a
his
alling

“He’s ready to date. He doesn’t like being single and he’s eager to find Silvey a new mom. He’s heard about you from his nephews and thinks you’re hot.”

“He moves fast. His wife just left him.”

“Some people aren’t good alone.” Gil studied her face.

“What did you tell him?”

“That you were headed back to LA on Christmas Day.”

“And that’s it?” Disappointment carved a hole in her stomach. He didn’t tell Ted that she and Gil were an item?

“What else was I supposed to say?”

Josie’s *That you’re with me. That you’re dating me. That I’m your girlfriend*

d the They stared at each other. People were streaming around them, going and off the ice, chattering about how much fun they were having. They just a few feet apart, but to Noelle it suddenly felt like a thousand miles

good Ted Zucker skated up and came off the ice. He wasn’t a bad-looking an overgrown frat boy kind of way, but he couldn’t hold a candle to Gil

“Hi,” Ted said, thrusting out a hand and ogling her openly. “I’m Silve’s dad.”

a short She held her breath, waiting for Gil to intervene, to give Ted the bum’s each and tell the man she was with him.

But Gil said nothing.

Not knowing what else to do, Noelle shook Ted’s outstretched hand to meet you, Ted.”

“I run the GMC dealership here in town. My nephews are Cody and Maxwella her. Maxwell. You’re Crescenda Hardwick’s daughter. Love your mother’s movies.”

“Thanks.”

is “You might have heard, I’m newly divorced. Well, technically not divorced yet, but I’m working on it.”

what “Good for you . . . I guess.” Noelle shot a look over at Gil to see if he was going to say anything to Ted about the two of them dating, but Gil was looking at her. He was frowning and scanning the ice rink.

“Is something wrong?” she asked Gil.

ing “Do you see Josie? I lost her in the crowd and those confounded snowflakes are making it impossible to see her.”

“She was right here,” Noelle said. “Taking off her skates.”

ind Gil searched the area, but Josie was nowhere in sight. He swung his you’re to the concession stand. Maybe she’d gotten a hot chocolate, although as he knew, his daughter didn’t have any money for refreshments.

Panic flared icy cold across his skin. He started across the spongy mat flooring, forgetting he still wore his skates, and almost lost his balance flailed, grabbing onto the railing that separated the rink from the changing area.

idn’t Noelle wrapped her hand around his wrist. “We’ll find her.”

“Maybe she’s with Silvey,” Ted said.

d. Gil already wanted to smash the guy's face in for coming on to Noelle. He didn't want this jackass getting involved in his business. Besides, the last person Josie would hang around with was Silvey.

7 were "Josie," he called, fear slamming hard into his chest and bubbling up s. his throat. "Josie!"

3 guy in What kind of father let his seven-year-old wander off because he'd l il. too busy fretting over a woman? His ears burned and his heart was a w iley's racing in circles around his chest.

ng. "We'll find her," Noelle repeated, tightening her grip on his arm. She it with absolute certainty. "She's probably just gone to the bathroom."

s rush "You think she's in the bathroom?" Gil asked. Yes, yes. That made "Most likely." Noelle smiled gently. "I'll go check."

"I'm going with you."

. "Nice "To the ladies' room?"

"I'll stand outside."

Dylan "Where are the bathrooms?" Noelle glanced around the crowded sn s globe. The blowers were kicking up so much faux snow and the crowd so thick it was hard to see across the rink.

"The portable toilets are outside," Ted said.

"That means she left the rink." The self-assurance in Noelle's voice slipped.

ie was "Let's go." Gil grabbed Noelle's hand.

in't "Our skates. We've got to change our shoes."

Gil cursed loud enough that heads swiveled. Normally, he would ap for losing his cool in public, but manners be damned, his daughter was missing.

"Skaters from the six-to-seven-P.M. slot, it's time to leave the ice so next group can enjoy the snow globe," came the announcement over th gaze system.

as far People had come in and were sitting on the bench where they'd left boots and Ted Zucker was in their way too.

at "Scoot," Gil commanded.

. He Wide-eyed, both Ted and the other people moved over, letting him a ing Noelle sit down. Gil clawed at the laces, desperate to get the skates off feet.

"Slow down," she whispered. "Stay calm."

"Easy for you to say. It's not your kid who's missing."

lle. He Noelle drew back.
ast He was lashing out at her when she only wanted to help, but he coul
seem to rein in his fear. “I—I’m sorry.”
o from “It’s okay. I get it.”
Silvey came into the changing area and went over to Ted. “Can we g
een pizza?”
hippet, “Have you seen Josie?” Gil asked her.
“No.” Silvey shook her head.
ie said “Did you say something mean to her?” Gil asked.
“I didn’t even talk to her.” Silvey jutted up her chin. “You can’t bla
sense. on me.”
“No one’s blaming you, honey,” her father said.
Gil felt as if he was about to implode. Normally, he was an easygoir
but when it came to his daughter, all bets were off.
“Odds are that Josie is absolutely fine.” Noelle tried to smile, but it c
ow reach her eyes.
l was She was right. His daughter was well-known around town. Friends a
neighbors would look out for her. He’d taught her what to do in case sl
lost. She had her tablet—
Yes! Her computer. He could track her. Why hadn’t he already thou
that? He tugged his cell phone from his pocket, checked the app that tc
her location. She was right outside, near the portable toilets.
“She’s okay. I’ve got her on my app.” He felt all the air leave his lun
ologize he slumped against the wall.
Noelle picked up the skates he tossed aside and took them to the ren
counter along with her own skates. He owed her a better apology after
the located Josie.
ie PA She came back from the counter with their coats, which she’d retriev
from the coat check. She handed him his shearling jacket along with Jo
their jacket as she pulled on her own coat. Gil clutched Josie’s coat. His bab
was out there in the cold with no coat on.
“This way,” Noelle said, guiding him past the people streaming into
nd changing area to take off their skates. Several people greeted her.
his Gil stared at the phone screen, willing Josie to stay put, but the track
showed she was walking away from the ice rink. “She’s on the move!”
“Coming back toward us?”
“No, she’s headed away.”

“Don’t panic. We’ll get her. It’ll be all right.” She sounded so sure of herself, but to Gil, it felt like empty promises.

They exited through the turnstile as a fresh batch of ticketed skaters in through the entrance. Gil’s nerves stretched like overly tuned guitar strings. His gaze was glued to the cell phone screen and the blip that was his daughter as Noelle tugged him across the courthouse lawn. His ankles ached from where the skates had been strapped and he had a hollow feeling carved deep into his belly.

“Josie!” he hollered.

Shoppers turned to stare at them. Gil was running now. Noelle hurried to catch up with him. They blasted past the Windmill. There weren’t any concerts this weekend because of the wedding reception on Sunday night. A walking tour group from the Friday night ghost tour were passing by. A bubbly tour guide, Brandy, told the tourists about Twilight’s spooky past.

“Brandy,” he called. “Did Josie come by here?”

“Yes,” Brandy said. “She was running like Jesse James’s ghost was on her heels and she was headed toward Sweetheart Park. She might have been crying. I called to her, but she ignored me.”

“Thank you,” Gil hollered over his shoulder and kicked up the pace. Noelle matched his tempo, staying right with him, step for step.

They raced through the park, past strolling couples holding hands, past Christmas displays and the Sweetheart Tree, Gil’s gaze trained on the phone screen.

“She’s stopped,” he said.

“There she is.” Noelle pointed through the darkness aglow with Christmas lights.

Josie stood on the edge of the Sweetheart Fountain, her eyes closed, her palms pressed to her chest as if she was praying. Then, as Gil and Noelle headed toward her, she reached in her pocket, took out a coin, and tossed it into the water.

“Young lady!” Gil barked. “What did you think you were doing, running on your own? You know better than that!”

Noelle didn’t blame Gil for being upset. His child had gone missing and any parent might get emotionally dysregulated over something like that, but she never seen him looking so freaked out.

of Josie turned toward them and jumped off the fountain.
came without us?" Gil grabbed hold of his daughter's hand. "Why did you leave the ice
as his "Daddy," Josie said, staring up at her tall father. "I *had* to go."
felt "But why?"
ear Josie shifted her gaze to Noelle. "Because Silvey's dad was talking t
Noelle and Silvey said Noelle was gonna be *her* mommy, not mine, an
to do something to stop it."
ring to "So you threw that coin I gave you into the fountain," Noelle said. "
made a wish for your father and me to be together."
ght, but Josie nodded. "Aunt Gretchen said you were in love with my daddy
you were young, the same way Rebekka Nash loved Jon Grant. I thoug
as the maybe I threw a coin in the fountain my daddy would love you back an
ast. could really, truly be my mommy."
on her "Oh sweetheart," Noelle said. "Things just don't work like that."
n "Daddy, why can't you love Noelle? Why can't she be my mommy?"
Gil pulled a palm down his face and let out a long sigh. He looked h
and when he raised his eyes, his face was blank. She had no idea what
thinking. Did he blame her for Josie's behavior? She was certainly bla
herself. She shouldn't have given the girl that coin. Had no idea why si
ast the done that other than Josie had admired it.
phone "Come on, Josie," he said. "Let's go home. It's time to get ready for
"Daddy, are you mad at me?"
"We'll talk about it later."
istmas "Did I do something wrong?"
"Yes, ma'am. You went off without telling me where you were goin
and "I'm sorry."
Noelle "There will be consequences. We'll discuss your punishment later."
ed it "Yes, sir." She ducked her head, her little voice so forlorn.
Gil put his hand on Josie's shoulder and guided her toward the park
Noelle wasn't sure what to do. She wanted to follow them, but she nee
ing off go check on the preparations for the bachelor and bachelorette parties.
"Gil."
He turned back toward her. "Yes."
. Any "Should I come with you?"
it she'd He gave a curt shake of his head. "No. This is my problem. You've
work to do and I need to take care of my kid."

She stared at him. She'd never felt so uncertain in her life. What was she thinking? Was he upset with her? Bombarded by self-doubt and unwelcome feelings, she stood there, looking at him with pleading eyes. This felt like a monumental rift. Like something they couldn't overcome and yet, she had no idea what it was that she'd done to put that murky expression into his cold blue eyes.

"Noelle!"

She turned to see Pamela Landry and the videographer coming toward her. And the videographer was filming the beautifully decorated park.

"Go. Do your thing," Gil said and propelled his daughter toward the entrance. Before Noelle could say anything more, Pamela rushed over. "This is so freaking cute! I can't tell you how happy I am you picked the Buckhorn essay as the winning entry. This place will look magnificent on camera! Despite that little hiccup with the Buckhorns at the bridal shop, I think this will be our best wedding contest yet!"

"That's nice," Noelle said, her gaze still fixed on Gil's back as he arrogantly walked away. His shoulders were slumped, and he looked defeated. She knew she couldn't help feeling like she'd blown everything up.

The truth was, no matter how hard she tried to tell herself she was immune to the romantic mythology of Twilight's lore, she absolutely was not. She had fallen for Gil Thomas all over again. Loving him just as hard now as she had at fifteen. She'd tried to convince herself she could play it cool and keep her heart safe, but it simply wasn't true.

She'd gotten hurt and she'd hurt Gil and Josie in the process. Best to just bow out. Leave them alone and do what she'd come to town to do.

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Chapter 24

“Are you absolutely bonkers?” Gretchen stared at Gil as he sat at the table toying with the napkin holder and looking glum. “You’re ending the best thing that’s happened to you in ages?”

Using the sideboard as a folding table, he pleated the linen napkins into triangles. After putting Josie to bed, he’d come inside with the excuse of helping Gretchen prepare for the next morning, but she’d seen straight through his ruse and asked what was bothering him.

“Dude, you light up whenever Noelle walks into the room.”

“I do?”

“Please don’t tell me you’re that dense. She can’t take her eyes off you either.”

Gil rubbed his forehead with two fingers.

“Talk to me. What is going on inside your head that you want to break up with her?”

“Technically, I can’t break up with her because we were never really together.”

“Please. You didn’t tell people you were together. It’s not the same as I’ve seen you sneaking up those stairs every night for the last three weeks.”

“Much like you and Tyler?”

“Leave Tyler out of this.”

“You’re not telling people about him. How is that any different?”

“Because we *have* decided to let people know about us. He and Ebb are coming over for dinner tomorrow so they can meet Mom and Dad.”

“Hey, I’m happy for you.”

“Invite Noelle to come to dinner too.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I have to end things with her. It’s already gone too far.”

“Because she lives in LA?”

“That’s one reason, yes. Long-distance relationships don’t work.”

Gretchen rolled her eyes. “You could figure that out if you really wanted to. There’s something more going on.”

“Well, yeah, there’s Josie. She’s too attached to this idea of Noelle being her mother. If things don’t work out, she’ll get her heart broken.”

“Like she hasn’t already? If you married Noelle, then she would be your mom. Not really seeing the problem. Seems like a win-win to me.”

Gil shook his head. “It’s not that easy.”

kitchen “Dumbass,” Gretchen muttered, putting the ingredients for overnight oatmeal into the crockpot and closing the lid.

n neat of “Things are just getting too complicated. Ted Zucker was trying to get out and people were swarming around her asking for her autograph. It’s not that much.”

“You mean you got scared.” Gretchen grabbed a sponge and started scrubbing the counter that was already clean.

“Why do you care?”

“Because these last few weeks you’ve been the happiest that I’ve seen you since Josie was born and it’s all because of Noelle.”

“Look, Gretch. There’s no way this could work out. Best to stop this now before Josie and I get even more invested.”

ak up “So what are you teaching Josie? If things are challenging, don’t bother trying?”

y That pulled him up short. His sister made a good point. “Noelle and I come from different worlds.”

thing. “That’s only an obstacle if you let it be one.”

eks.” “My life isn’t my own. How could I ask Noelle to give up what’s most important to her in order to be with me?”

“Shouldn’t Noelle be the one to decide that?”

“You don’t get it. You don’t have a kid.”

y are “Nope, you’re right, I don’t.” Gretchen tossed the sponge in the sink and raised her arms. “It’s none of my business. I’m just the built-in babysitter.”

“Hey, that’s not fair. I do plenty around here to help.”

“I’m not complaining about your work ethic, and I love getting to help you.”

raise my niece, but I'm concerned about her welfare too. She needs a n
Gil."

Gil thought about what Josie told him she wanted for Christmas and
cringed. He finished folding the last napkin, got up, settled his arms ov
chest, and leaned against the sideboard. "I appreciate everything you d
nted me and Josie, Gretchen. I don't tell you that enough."

"I'm not looking for validation. I want you to be happy. Noelle mak
being happy. Why not get over your resistance? What's at the core of it?"

"That's really none of your business, is it?"

Josie's "Ouch. I suppose I deserved that."

"I do value your opinion, Gretchen, and I'll give your advice some
thought, but I'm hoping you can respect my decision. If I decide it's be
it Josie and I keep our distance from Noelle, please accept it."

"You're a hard nut to crack, little brother." Gretchen untied her apr
ask her hung it on a hook beside the door. "But I'll stay out of your love life."
s too

"Thank you," he said.

He left the Merry Cherub and went across the backyard to his cottag
Pausing at the door, he looked up at the overhead apartment. Noelle w
gone soon, and their short-lived affair would be over.

It was for the best, really. Noelle simply didn't belong in Twilight.
en you

Two more days.

Noelle had two more days to get through and she could go back to h
having done what she came to Twilight to do. Successfully put on a do
ther wedding for The Tie and forge a new path for her future. And yet, now
I come she was on the cusp of achieving her goal, it felt like dust in her hands.

She couldn't stop thinking about Gil, the incident with Josie, and the
desperate feeling that they'd lost something important tonight.

Sighing, she watched the grooms-to-be and their friends whooping i
their bachelor party in the Silver Dollar Saloon on the west side of the
square while the bachelorettes celebrated at Fruit of the Vine to the noi
where they were having a bottling party to bottle and label their own w
the wedding reception.

Finally, she worked up the courage to text Gil. Can we talk later? It's impo
ter."

She waited. No answer. Most likely he was tucking Josie in, reading
bedtime story. Trying not to feel slighted, she stuck her phone back int
elp

nother, pocket. Time to head to Fruit of the Vine and check on the bachelorette.
Her phone buzzed and her heart leaped. She yanked it from her pocket. Her hopes were dashed. Not Gil.

er his Pamela texted: Get over here. We got a problem.

o for What now? Noelle hustled over to Fruit of the Vine and found Sienna in tears. Her sister, Benji, Vanessa, and bridesmaids surrounded her. Pamela stood off to one side while the videographer filmed everything.

“What are you doing?” Noelle asked Pamela. “Why are you filming?”

“Hey, drama sells, and I know you’ll fix this.” Pamela shrugged. “I have faith in you.”

Noelle suppressed an eye roll and went over to where Sienna sat next to the table where empty wine bottles and labels were lined up next to the bar machine. “What’s happened?”

Sienna dropped her head in her hands. “She’s gone!”

“Who?”

“Heidi.” Sienna wailed. Heidi was Sienna’s maid of honor.

“She’s dead?” Noelle’s hand flew to her throat.

“No, she’s not *dead*,” Sierra said. “She eloped to Hawaii with some guy she met on the internet two months ago.”

Oh whew! Thank God, Heidi was okay.

“What are we going to do?” Sienna wrung her hands. “Where can we find a maid of honor on such short notice?”

“Give me a minute.” Noelle’s mind whirled, as she leafed through her life, workable solutions.

“Could we just have one maid of honor?” Pamela asked.

Noelle had already thought of that and quickly discarded the idea. “I don’t want to mess up the symmetry. The whole thematic concept was twin brides for everything.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Pamela chuffed. “What if we cut one of Sierra’s bridesmaids and use her counterpart as Sienna’s maid of honor?”

“That’s not fair!” Sierra protested. “Why should one of my friends get sidelined because Sienna’s maid of honor eloped?”

“Does anyone know someone who could stand in for Heidi?” Noelle asked.

Vanessa hissed in her breath through clenched teeth. “It’s so last-minute.”

“What about cousin DeeDee?” Sierra suggested.

“She’s three inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than Heidi. There

the party. way she could fit into Heidi's dress, not even with alterations," Sienna
met and "Anyone else?" Noelle asked.

"Everyone we want in the wedding is already in it." Sierra drummed
fingernails on the table.

Ma in Pamela eyed Noelle. "What about you?"

Ma in Pamela "Me?" Noelle pressed her palm to her chest.

"You're about the same size as Heidi."

this?" "That's a really good idea." Sienna perked up.

have Noelle suppressed a groan. "You guys, I'd be happy to do it, but I'll
busy behind the scenes—"

met to a "I can do all that," Pamela said. "There's not much difference between
talking being a wedding planner and managing The Tie. The job is the same. Most
things run smoothly. Besides, being maid of honor will only take a couple
hours from your other duties."

Everyone was staring at Noelle.

Great.

guy "Noelle, you're Sienna's maid of honor. Problem solved." Pamela cried
loudly. "Now, chop, chop, that wine won't bottle itself."

she find **I**t was almost midnight by the time the parties were finally over, and Noelle
had finished cleaning up, but Gil had never texted her back.

Pamela and the videographer had already gone back to the B&B. She
hadn't even
have walked over with them, but her heart was still heavy over what had
happened with Josie, and she made an excuse to linger.

It The streets were silent as the owner of Fruit of the Vine locked the car
behind them. "Do you need a ride?" she asked Noelle.

"The walk's not that far."

maids "You sure? It's cold out."

"I'll be fine."

get "Suit yourself." The woman headed for her vehicle.

Once she drove away, there was not another soul around. Even the
incessant Christmas music had stopped playing although the string lights
by the
courthouse were still on. Noelle started walking.

nute." Gil still hadn't texted her back.

's no Her mind came up with a dozen good excuses. He'd silenced his phone.
He'd forgotten to charge it. He'd left it in another room. He'd fallen

said. asleep . . .

But her doubts and fears weren't buying it. They poked at her, mean and relentless. *He doesn't want to hear from you. He's ignoring you. Wise over.*

She'd intended to go back to the B&B, but that's not where her feet were. Huddled against the wind, she pulled up the hood on her coat and for twenty minutes. As she wound her way through the familiar neighborhood, a mist rolled in off the lake, covering her in the deepest of the blackest of nights, the streetlamps obscured by the thickening fog.

It was the lowest she'd felt since coming to Twilight. She felt utterly hopeless. There was no way she could have a happily-ever-after with C. Forever love just wasn't in her DNA. She might as well face facts.

The darkness had become so intense, so overwhelming, she wondered perhaps she'd died and just didn't know it, and yet, she kept walking, one foot after the other, moving forward in the soup of her own despair.

Why had she thought coming back to Twilight was a good idea? Why had she thought it would save her? She wished now she'd picked someone else as the winner of The Tie's contest instead of the Buckhorn twins who had paid a high price for her nostalgia.

At last, she arrived at her destination. In the darkness, the house was nothing more than lumpy shadows. The little bungalow that had once been her salvation.

Grammie and Grampie's home.

She wished her mother hadn't sold it. Wished she could move here and live in this little town that had once been more home to her than any place she'd ever lived with Crescenda.

She stood there, tears streaming down her cheeks, feeling so much grief she could hardly bear it.

"Oh, Grammie, Grampie, I miss you so much," she whispered into the night. "How did you do it? How did you make love last a lifetime?"

Her grandparents never talked badly about her mother, but after Crescenda's fourth marriage broke up and she'd sent Noelle to stay with them for a few weeks until she could sort herself out, Noelle remembered hearing Grammie mutter to Grampie when she thought their granddaughter wasn't listening, "If Crescenda could just open her heart to the idea that true and lasting love is so much more than fast-beating pulses, breathless whispers, roses, and sonnets, if she could just stay in one place long enough

to get the lesson, then she could have what she's desperately searching
and Noelle had forgotten all about that until now. Could she draw inspiration
up. It's from her grandmother's advice for her mother? Was she just as closed

Crescenda, but in a totally different way?

took It was a startling thought. Had she used disbelief in romantic love as
walked to keep her safe from her mother's chaotic infatuations? Gone in the op
direction. Rejecting love because her mother embraced it so haplessly?
dark, Gobsmailed, she sank down on the frigid ground.

A car came down the road, headlights cutting through the foggy darkness
and that's when she saw it.

Gil. A The "for sale" sign in the front yard.

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to get the lesson, then she could have what she's desperately searching for."

Noelle had forgotten all about that until now. Could she draw inspiration from her grandmother's advice for her mother? Was she just as closed off as Crescenda, but in a totally different way?

It was a startling thought. Had she used disbelief in romantic love as a way to keep her safe from her mother's chaotic infatuations? Gone in the opposite direction. Rejecting love because her mother embraced it so haplessly?

Gobsmacked, she sank down on the frigid ground.

A car came down the road, headlights cutting through the foggy darkness and that's when she saw it.

The "for sale" sign in the front yard.

Chapter 25

After his talk with Gretchen, Gil stewed, second- and third-guessing her. He stayed up until midnight, waiting for Noelle to come home. He had texted her back because he wasn't sure what to say. Even though it was late, he planned to sit down with her and lay it all out. His feelings, his fears, his hopes, his dreams. It was time to stop holding back.

He'd made that mistake with Tammy Jo, trying to be the big strong guy, and keeping his emotions bottled up when he should have been open and honest with her. If he had, maybe she would have been happier.

Gil had made that mistake in his marriage, but he'd learned his lesson. Communication was key and he'd been holding back with Noelle, afraid of scaring her off.

Well, the time had come. She would be leaving on Monday. It was now or never.

They were on the precipice of something important. He was falling in love with her—oh, who was he kidding, he was already in love with her—he had to know where he stood. If she was serious about this relationship, he needed to know and he needed to know it now, before his daughter got more invested than she already was.

Heartache might lie ahead of him, but so might the greatest happiness of his life. He was ready to take the risk. Ready to lay everything on the line for her.

He hated seeing his kid hurt, and if Noelle didn't feel the same way about him that he felt about her he had to end this thing tonight. He'd waited long for a half-hearted romance. He had to know that she was all in. Because he sure as hell was.

So, he checked on Josie, found her sleeping soundly, then went to the garage to finish the song he'd been writing for Noelle, and he waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Knowing her responsibilities to the wedding might have kept her out late, he finally gave up and went to bed. His parents were coming in tomorrow and he was picking them up at DFW Airport at nine. His talk with Noelle would have to wait. Both of them had so much going on with the wedding, he didn't know when they'd find the time for a private talk.

As unsatisfactory as it felt, he'd just have to bide his time.

It was two A.M. by the time Noelle got back to the Roost. She'd been woken up around Twilight, thinking about her parents and grandparents, her life and career, and what a different kind of future might look like.

The day would be utterly hectic as she put the finishing touches on the wedding prep and prepared for her last-minute duties as Sienna's maid of honor. The rehearsal dinner was that night, and she wouldn't have a minute to spare.

Noelle dropped into bed exhausted and immediately fell into a troubled dream where she was being chased by a nameless terror. She woke up in a sweat and reached for her phone, flopped back on the pillow, and held her chest. *Please*. She turned it on.

Gil hadn't texted.

She felt tears leak from her eyes and run down into her ears. Oh, she was making herself miserable.

Unable to go back to sleep, she got up, made coffee, pulled out the wedding bible, and started going over her to-do list.

At dawn, she heard the door downstairs open. She jumped up from the table, raced to the door, threw it open, and flung herself down the stairs.

Gil was halfway to his truck parked in the side driveway.

"Gil!"

He stopped.

She was breathless, heart slamming against her chest.

He turned.

She came closer.

They stood staring at each other.

ie “Hi,” she whispered, hoping so many things. The wind was whipping through her pajamas, but she barely noticed.

“I waited up for you, but I guess you had a late night.”

“Oh.” She blinked. “You did?”

t extra “You texted that you wanted to talk.”

She gulped. “You didn’t answer me back.”

k with “I figured you were busy.”

is “I was.”

“I just sent Josie into the B&B for breakfast. I’m headed to the airport to pick up my parents or I’d stay and talk now.” He didn’t smile.

She couldn’t get a read on him. “Go, go. It’s okay. We don’t have to do this.”

walking “Do what?”

in LA, “Drag things out. We had a wonderful time. I’ve loved every minute I’ve gotten to spend with you and your family. Thank you for a wonderful time.”

he Gil winced.

. of A reaction! Hallelujah.

oment “That sounds like goodbye.”

“No,” she said. “Not yet. We still have today and tomorrow.”

led “One of those days is a wedding and Christmas Eve and the day after that you’ll be on a plane back to LA.”

bathed “I will.”

ld it to He looked as if he might say something, but at just that moment a black SUV pulled into the driveway behind his truck and two older people got out. It had been over a decade since she’d seen them, but Noelle recognized the couple right away.

It was Gil’s parents, Jim and Marcie Thomas.

“Mom! Dad! I was just on my way to pick you up.” He turned toward them, his arms outstretched.

he Leaving Noelle behind.

“Surprise!” Jim and Marcie said in unison and embraced their son in a family hug. “We couldn’t wait to see you, so we changed our travel plans. We caught an early flight, and grabbed an Uber. Where’s Josie?”

“Grandmaw! Peepaw!” Josie came flying down the steps of the B&B to get her share of hugs and kisses.

Noelle stood off to one side, watching the loving reunion, and trying to feel left out. This wasn’t her family. She should go.

g “Noelle?” Marcie Thomas, wearing a comically ugly Christmas sweater, raised her head and startled as if seeing her for the first time. “Little Noelle Curry? Is that really you?”

“Hi, Mrs. Thomas.” Feeling awkward and out of place, Noelle lifted her hand. “Hi, Mr. Thomas. Merry Christmas.”

“Oh, my goodness, it’s been too long.” Without hesitation, Gil’s mother covered the distance between them and scooped Noelle into her arms as if she was one of her kids.

ort to Once Marcie was done hugging her, Jim came over to pump her hand. “Well, look at you, Noelle Curry, all grown up.”

o do “Good to see you again, sir.”

“Don’t sir me. I’m Jim to my friends.”

o I’ve Gretchen trotted out of the house, wiping her hands on her apron and her embraces and kissing started all over again.

ime.” Noelle watched Jim open the back door and usher his wife, daughter, and grandchild inside while Gil went to pick up their luggage from the Uber driver.

r that, “Noelle?” Jim held the door open. “Are you coming? Fair warning, Marcie’s making her breakfast tacos and they’re the best you’ll ever put in your mouth.”

“I can’t. I’ve got work to do.”

ack “Noelle’s planning the Buckhorn twins’ wedding,” Gretchen said. “They’re getting married tomorrow.”

ot out. “On Christmas Eve?” Marcie said. “Oh, that will be fun.”

l the “Aah, come on,” Jim coaxed. “You gotta fuel your body. Can’t send her off on an empty stomach.”

“Dad,” Gil said. “Let her go.”

rd *Let her go.*

o a Noelle mumbled a quick goodbye and raced back to the Roost feeling worse than she had when she’d come bursting out of the apartment. Work was pretty darn crappy indeed.

ans,

B to **F**or the rest of the day, Noelle managed to block Gil out of her mind. I mean, because she had so much work to do, she had no time to think about anything else, which was exactly how she wanted it.

g not to At one point during the rehearsal dinner, a bedraggled Pamela Land

ater, looked at her and said, “You’re like what? The spawn of the Energizer
oelle and Mary Poppins? I didn’t know one woman could smile so much and
such earnestness.”

l a Noelle just gave her a dazzling grin as she steered a drunken Buckh
relative to the restroom just before they heaved.

ther “Truly,” Pam said. “You are the Wedding Whisperer. Your instincts
is if she uncanny.”

“Nah,” Noelle said. “I just had parents who partied.”

id. “Well, appreciate the skills you learned. They’ve served you well.”

“Nice to know something good came from it.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’re extraordinary.”

d the “Thank you for the compliment,” Noelle said. It was nice to know si
would have a career once this was all over, even if her love life was fal
apart. But she wasn’t getting cocky. She had a wedding to get through.

; and Anything could go wrong and ruin it all.

er

it in **G**il, on the other hand, couldn’t stop thinking about Noelle. He went a
with his parents and Gretchen as they took Josie to several Christmas e
including story hour at Ye Olde Book Nook, where local children’s au
Sarah Walker did a reading of her newest book, *Santa and the Magic
Christmas Cookie*. They went on a scavenger hunt and took Josie to se
and ended the day with a shopping trip.

l you There were no other guests booked at the B&B for the Christmas we
besides Pamela Landry, the videographer, and Noelle, and they would
all evening. So, Mom played the piano while they all gathered around
sang Christmas carols. Later, they all piled into the parlor, and had pop
and soda while they watched *Elf* and *A Christmas Story*, a Thomas fan
holiday tradition.

ig high They did all the stuff he normally loved. It was sweet, it was touchin
was heartfelt, and Gil was utterly miserable. He kept wishing Noelle w
there to enjoy the festivities with him. But she was not and when it wa
to go to bed, she still hadn’t come home.

Mostly

anything **T**he weather on Sunday, December 24, was crisp and cool with clear s
perfect day for a winter Christmas Eve wedding.

ry

Showtime. Noelle was in her element. She’d spent six weeks prepar

Bunnythis. The wedding was scheduled for four in the afternoon, and Noelle
d with at dawn, packing the bridal emergency kit bags and gathering the bride
details for the photographer—garters, shoes, wedding bands, bouquet.

orn Then she was on the phone checking in with the brides and bridesma
Next, she called the groom and his groomsmen, making sure everyone
s are picked up their tuxedos the previous day. After that, she gave Pamela
of duties for the church since The Tie representative would be taking o
those chores while Noelle went for hair and makeup appointments with
other wedding party members.

he Finally, before leaving for the salon, she dropped by the Windmill. 7
lling place was empty, and she felt disappointed that Gil wasn't there. Part c
he hoped he might be, but it was Christmas Eve, and his parents were in t
so she really didn't expect it.

But, to her joy, she saw that at some point he and his crew had set up
auditorium for the reception just as she'd outlined on the chart she'd di
up for him. The tables and chairs matched the floor plan. The linens hu
evenly. The chairs were flush with the table linens as they should be. F
up and decorated the cake tables, put out the place cards, table number
seating chart, signage, and the photo booth, everything she'd asked him
and more.

long
vents,
thor
e Santa
Gil was a man she could depend on.

But Noelle already knew that.

She went to the salon, feeling far less stressed than she normally wo
weekend, have and in fact, actually had a good time listening to the other womer
be out laugh, and tease. Gil had her back. She wasn't in this alone.

and
corn
ily
The salon appointment was over by two and she hurried back to the
to get dressed. The burgundy dress fit like it had been tailored just for
the style suited her figure. The church was just a few blocks over and s
didn't mind walking.

ig, it
as
s time
This was it.

She touched up her lipstick, picked up the emergency bridal kits, and
walked out the door. To find Gil coming out of the B&B at the exact s
time.

kies. A
ing for
Noelle stepped off the last step of the stairs as Gil moved across the la
toward her. His jaw had unhinged. Gil snapped it closed, but he couldr

was up his eyes off Noelle. She was drop-dead gorgeous.

il She was in high heels that elevated her height. She held her shoulder
back, chin squared, and moved like a dancer. Her hair was upswept, sh
aids. off her elegant, swanlike neck and diamond studs glittered at her earlob
had prism necklace on a crystal chain nestled at her world-class cleavage a
her listpendant reflected a rainbow of light all around her like an angelic halo

ver But what struck him speechless was the dazzling smile on her face. I
n the heard a soft gasp, then realized it came from his own mouth.

“Are you all right?”

The “Um . . . Pamela called. She said you would need a ride to the church

of her “It’s okay. I can walk.”

own, “Not in those shoes.” Gil shook his head. “What, you’re afraid to ride
me?”

p the “No.” She laughed, but it was a nervous sound. “I just didn’t want to
rawn any extra work for you.”

ing “Bookworm, it would be my honor.”

le’d set He couldn’t stop staring at her. How did she get her eyes to look so
s, and lustrous? And her lips! They were perfectly outlined with a pink p
n to do liner and filled in with an even glossier pink that made him think of co
candy.

How sweet it is.

uld She smelled as good as she looked. Like cinnamon-sugar Christmas
i talk, cookies and vanilla buttercream icing.

“Thank you,” she said. “For getting the Windmill set up so far in ad
You were a godsend.”

B&B “Couldn’t sleep last night,” he said. “Figured I might as well make r
her and useful.”

she “I appreciate it so much.”

“Anytime.” He stuck out his elbow for her to take.

d She slipped her arm through his and a puff of pride passed through h
ame having her on his arm.

“You look amazing,” Gil said as they got in the truck.

wn It was only a four-block drive, but Pamela was right. Noelle couldn’t
i’t take to the church dressed like the Sugar Plum Fairy. But then it struck him
she deserved a carriage fit for a princess, and all she’d gotten was his s
old work truck. Gil wished he’d had time to wash and vacuum out his
vehicle.

“Thank you.” Noelle grinned. “Apparently, I clean up well.”

rs “That’s the understatement of the decade.” Yikes. That sounded rud
owing mean . . . It’s just that . . . I’m used to you looking official and efficien
bes. A tousled in bed—”

nd the “I know what you mean.”

. “It’s just . . . wow . . . I’ve never seen you so gussied up.”

He “The magic of a professional makeup job.” She rested her hands in l
and stared out the windshield.

h.” “Hey,” he said, his chest tightened with all the emotions he hadn’t h
chance to talk to her about.

le with She turned to look at him, her expression mild.

o make “I *am* sorry.”

wide “For what?” She seemed surprised.

encil “The way I acted the other night at the ice rink.”

ttion “You did nothing wrong. I understand. Your daughter comes first.”

“I overreacted. I was too harsh.”

“You weren’t.”

“I was and I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive. Please don’t give it a second thought. I’
moved on from it. You should too.”

He had a horrible feeling that he’d blown whatever chance he might
had with her. He wanted to say more, but they were already at the chur
and he was slipping into the reserved parking spot behind the building.

vance. Before he had a chance to get out of the truck and hurry around to o
door for her, she was already out and smoothing down the folds of her
nyself The wedding party was collecting outside before entering. Pamela Lan
clipboard in hand, directed people how to line up. Pamela spied Noelle
waved her over and Gil’s moment was gone.

Noelle went over to the woman and Gil trailed behind her, uncertain
him at he should be doing.

“We’ve got a huge problem,” Pamela said, drawing her off to one si
the wedding party wouldn’t overhear their conversation. “Huge. If we
t walk find a solution, we might even have to cut your segment from the show
that That statement would have defeated most people, but instead of shri
cruffy back, Noelle sprang forward, body alert and at the ready to tackle any
problems. Gil admired her resilience.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, knotting her hands into fists and rising

the balls of her feet. “What’s happened?”

e. “I “There was an accident.” Pamela shook her head.

t or Noelle gasped and her hand flew to her mouth. “When? Where? Wh

“The bus carrying the band for the reception was involved in a twen
pileup on the interstate just east of Dallas. There was an eighteen-whee
that turned over and spilled its contents on the road. The bus flipped.”

ier lap “Was anyone hurt?”

ad a “No one was seriously injured, but two of the band members have
concussions and one has a broken arm. They won’t be able to play toni
We’ve got to beat the bushes for a DJ and get all that set up ASAP.”

“Oh dear.” Noelle’s brow knitted as she massaged the bridge of her

Pamela swung her gaze to Gil. “Is finding a last-minute DJ somethin
can help with, Mr. Thomas?”

“I can do better than that,” Gil said. “I can put together a replacemen
that’ll be just as good as the band you hired.”

“Really?” Noelle’s eyes widened.

“Cash Colton is a good friend of mine,” he said, referring to one of c
music’s hottest stars. “He and his family just happen to be in town for
’ve holidays. They own a ranch on the outskirts of Twilight.”

“Oh my gosh, you are a lifesaver,” Pamela said. “That’s amazing.”

’ have “I’ll get right on it.” Gil pulled out his phone to start calling in the lc
ch, musicians he knew.

“Thank you. You saved my fanny.” Noelle leaned over to plant a kis
pen the his cheek, leaving her sweet scent lingering on his skin.

dress. As he walked away, he heard Pamela say, “Curry, you need to hold
dry, that guy. He’s one in a million.”

’ and

’ what

de so

can’t

’.”

nking

and all

up on

the balls of her feet. “What’s happened?”

“There was an accident.” Pamela shook her head.

Noelle gasped and her hand flew to her mouth. “When? Where? Who?”

“The bus carrying the band for the reception was involved in a twenty-car pileup on the interstate just east of Dallas. There was an eighteen-wheeler that turned over and spilled its contents on the road. The bus flipped.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“No one was seriously injured, but two of the band members have concussions and one has a broken arm. They won’t be able to play tonight. We’ve got to beat the bushes for a DJ and get all that set up ASAP.”

“Oh dear.” Noelle’s brow knitted as she massaged the bridge of her nose.

Pamela swung her gaze to Gil. “Is finding a last-minute DJ something you can help with, Mr. Thomas?”

“I can do better than that,” Gil said. “I can put together a replacement band that’ll be just as good as the band you hired.”

“Really?” Noelle’s eyes widened.

“Cash Colton is a good friend of mine,” he said, referring to one of country music’s hottest stars. “He and his family just happen to be in town for the holidays. They own a ranch on the outskirts of Twilight.”

“Oh my gosh, you are a lifesaver,” Pamela said. “That’s amazing.”

“I’ll get right on it.” Gil pulled out his phone to start calling in the local musicians he knew.

“Thank you. You saved my fanny.” Noelle leaned over to plant a kiss on his cheek, leaving her sweet scent lingering on his skin.

As he walked away, he heard Pamela say, “Curry, you need to hold on to that guy. He’s one in a million.”

Chapter 26

The wedding went off without a hitch.

Considering all the fires Noelle had doused over the course of the last weeks, she was surprised by how smoothly things worked once Gil managed to round up a spur-of-the-moment replacement band. He'd be playing the reception along with his friends and he'd gone home to grab his bass guitar.

Neither she nor Pamela risked telling the brides about the band snafu. They didn't want the twins distracted. It turned out to be the right decision. The twin brides and grooms had eyes only for one another. And everyone else thought she'd managed to coax Cash Colton to headline the band all afternoon.

Noelle was so busy in her role as wedding planner/maid of honor, she had almost lost track of Gil during the ceremony. He had his role to perform, she had hers, but they'd still never had the conversation they so desperately needed to have.

But she thought about him. A lot.

He'd been a hero. He'd rescued the show. Without him, the wedding reception would have fallen apart.

Beyond his invaluable help, she appreciated his apology for his curt behavior the night of the snow globe ice rink incident, even though it had been unnecessary. His compliments about her appearance brought a lump to her throat and a tenderness to her heart, although part of her couldn't help but discount his praise. She knew she'd just been wrapped up in a pretty little package. The Noelle underneath the makeup and fancy dress was nothing particularly special.

"Is everything okay?" Noelle asked Pamela.

Pamela stuck her thumb in the air. "All I had to do was following you

wedding planning bible. Great job, Curry.”

“If you need anything—”

“I won’t bug you. You’ve got a toast to give. Now go on, shoo.”

Noelle turned to follow the others.

“Oh, by the way,” Pamela called after her. “You look fantastic!”

Okay, from now on, she was wearing burgundy as often as possible. Grinning, Noelle hurried to help Sienna manage her train.

The meal of prime rib was fantastic. The Tie videographer went from table to table recording the conversations. The toasts were heartfelt, and no one messed up. The dual first dance between brides and grooms was as cinematic as it was sentimental.

Noelle danced with Cody’s best man, but her eyes were on Gil as he played “Can’t Stop the Feeling.” Too bad he was playing with the music. She would have enjoyed dancing with him.

A few minutes later, the song ended, and Gil took the microphone. “I wrote this song as a Christmas present to someone special and I have the brides’ and grooms’ permission to play it here for you now.”

He began to play unaccompanied. Just Gil and an acoustic guitar. The melody had a similar tone and mood to Fleetwood Mac’s “Landslide.” It was soft, gentle, and so very sweet.

“She was a shy girl, kept to herself, but across the street, there was a girl who caught her eye. She watched him from afar, as he grew into a man, dreaming of a day when she could take him by the hand.” Gil crooned into the microphone. His gaze was locked on Noelle.

Her heart started pounding and her chest tightened, and she found it hard to draw in a breath. Gil had written a song about her. She was so stunned she missed a few of the lines. Noelle blinked as he sang the bridge.

“They laughed, they loved, they grew together. They faced the world in hand forever. They were the perfect match, two hearts beating as one.”

She brought both hands to her mouth, overwhelmed and overcome. He was telling her that he loved her.

In a song.

In front of two hundred witnesses.

Someone swung the spotlight her way and suddenly she was bathed in white light. Everyone was staring. She was not a center stage kind of person. She moved her hands from her mouth to clutch her stomach. Her knees trembled uncontrollably.

“She’s not the girl she used to be.” Gil’s eyes were shiny, but she could barely see past the tears in her own eyes. “She’s a woman in love, standing brave and tall. And she’ll continue to bloom, oh, she’ll continue to bloom. Into an exceptional woman, with the love of her life by her side.”

Her brain couldn’t absorb it. It was too much. This wasn’t right. She was taking the limelight from the brides. She felt faint, dizzy. She had to get out of there.

Turning, Noelle flew out of the room.

one

emantic **H**e’d screwed up.

Badly.

Deep down, she was still that shy girl from across the street, no matter how many of the wonderful things she’d accomplished.

How inconsiderate he’d been. Even though the Buckhorns and Max had been behind him singing the song at their wedding reception, it had done too much for Noelle.

Had he completely ruined things with her?

Gil set down the guitar and left the stage, running after Noelle. Behind him, he heard Cash Colton say, “Now that was a love song, people. Give it up for Gil Thomas. I’m gonna ask him if he’ll let me record that song.”

Thunderous applause from the audience.

His song for Noelle would be a hit if Cash recorded it, but that didn’t matter. Nothing mattered without Noelle.

He needed to tell her how proud he was of her. How he wanted to be able to support her every step on her journey. How he was willing to do whatever it took to work things out with her. If that meant packing up and moving to L.A., then that’s what he’d do. Josie might even thrive in a bigger city where she would have more opportunities.

Now, in order to have a relationship with Noelle, he was open to change. He had to find her. Had to tell her that he loved her. Had to ask her if she felt the same way. He couldn’t go another minute without knowing the answer.

The band was playing Cash’s number one hit, the sound pouring out of the corridor. He looked left, then right. Which way had Noelle gone? If she had left the building altogether?

The auditorium door closed behind him, blocking out some of the scene.

uld ding om. He took a few deep breaths to slow his pounding pulse. *Chill*. He heard muffled voices coming from his office. Was it Noelle? If so, who was with?

The door was open. Not a private conversation, he assumed, or else he was not close the door? He moved toward his office, intending to just brief it out his head inside and see if Noelle was in there when he heard Pamela's "Noelle," Pamela said. "This is an amazing opportunity. You can't let pass you by. Say yes. Say you'll move to New York and become The Tie's new creative director."

Gil froze. He didn't mean to eavesdrop. That was certainly not his intention, but he couldn't seem to make himself back away.

Or even move.

ter all "But what about my own wedding planning business?"

wells d been "You can hire someone to run Once Upon a Wedding. If you take our offer, you can write your own ticket. With your organizational and people skills, you can be so much more than a wedding planner."

"I—I . . ." Noelle stammered. "I don't know what to say. This is so unexpected."

nd "Say yes."

ve it up Gil pulled a palm down his face. How he wished he hadn't overheard conversation. He couldn't tell Noelle what he'd come to tell her. That he loved her and wanted to be with her.

't Not now. Not when she had such a huge opportunity in front of her. He couldn't hold her back. He couldn't be the reason Noelle didn't live up to her full potential.

e there atever ig to where He had no choice. He had to step aside. Keep his mouth shut and let her go. With his pitiful heart barely pumping in his chest, Gil turned and walked away.

ange.

f she Noelle was blown over by The Tie's lucrative offer. It was an honor to be asked, but she simply didn't want the job. What she wanted was to find a way out and have that long overdue talk.

into "Thanks for your offer, Pamela. I'll take it under consideration."

had she "I can up the salary a bit if that'll nudge you in the right direction."

"The money isn't the issue."

ound. "What is?"

It's a personal matter."

"Aww," Pamela said. "The musician. I've got contacts in the New York music scene. Bring him with you."

"I'll give it some thought. For now, I need to get back to the wedding."

"It's almost over. Go get some rest. You've done an outstanding job."

"It's Christmas Eve."

"Merry Christmas, Pamela."

"You're not going to take the job, are you?"

Noelle shook her head.

"Giving it all up for love?"

"If I have that opportunity."

"Fine." Pamela laughed. "Go find him and tell him just how much you're giving up for him."

"Thank you for the offer—I'm very flattered."

"Yeah, yeah." Pamela waved her away.

Noelle returned to the reception. She found Benji and Spencer at the bar. "Have you seen Gil?"

"He left right after you did. We all assumed, after that romantic song, you went looking for him and you two were smooching up a storm."

"No. He didn't."

Noelle pulled out her phone. She was just about to text Gil when the doors to the auditorium burst open with a loud *bang*.

Everyone jumped and all eyes swung to the entrance . . .

As Crescenda, dripping in diamonds and wearing a designer gown, sashayed into the room.

The second she saw her mother, Noelle started grinning as everyone gawked.

Crescenda might be a showy, over-the-top attention-seeker, but she's here! She'd come to spend Christmas with her daughter.

Noelle zoomed across the room like a bee to a flower. "Mom!"

"Darling!" Crescenda threw her arms open wide.

"I'm thrilled you're here, but why?" Noelle asked, vaguely aware of her mother's bodyguards positioning themselves at the doors and the spectators gawking at the spectacle of Crescenda Hardwick in full bloom. "You thought you were spending Christmas with Basil in Kent."

Crescenda rolled her eyes and waved a hand. "I'm so over Oregon. The engagement is off?"

ork “When I told him I was going to spend Christmas with you, he gave ultimatum. Stay in England or lose the part. You know how I am with ultimatums.”

g.” “So, no Agatha Christie biopic?”

and “Seriously, other than the mysterious disappearing act that the woman pulled, she was so dull. All she did was write.”

“Well, she was a writer. What did you expect?”

“Something more exciting than one mere disappearing act. I mean seriously, what was the fuss all about? I’ve disappeared three times.”

“With you it’s a pattern. With Agatha it was an anomaly. But *why* did you decide to come spend Christmas with me?”

ou’re “Well, here’s the thing . . .” Crescenda reached up to toy with a lock of Noelle’s hair that had escaped her updo. “That young man of yours called and told me in no uncertain terms that I needed to be here with you for the holidays.”

open “When did Gil call you?”

“Oh, I don’t know . . . Thursday? You know how I am with time.”

g, he “Well, I’m thrilled you’re here.”

“Any man who has the guts to call your mother up and yell at her must love you very much,” Crescenda said. “Do not let him get away.”

doors “I think you’re right. And we’ll spend Christmas Day together tomorrow, but I didn’t know you were coming and for tonight, I’ve made other plans.”

“You’re running out on me? And after I came all this way and broke up with Oregano over you?”

else “Nope, I’m leaving you to your adoring public.” She pointed at Sierra and Sienna, who were practically drooling. “I’ll introduce you around and I’ll be on my way. Tomorrow we’ll have brunch and spend the whole day together. But for now, I’m leaving.”

Crescenda frowned. “What’s happening?”

“I’m setting boundaries with you, Mom.”

“It doesn’t feel like a good thing.”

her “You’ll get used to it,” Noelle said. “It’s part of the new me.”

ators
old me

„ **I**t was almost midnight by the time Noelle got to Gil’s place. She was breathless and a little shaky when she knocked on the door.

A few minutes passed and when Gil didn’t answer, her shoulders slumped.

me an He must have already gone to bed. But of course. It was Christmas Eve and he would have him up by dawn.

Sighing, she turned for the stairs.

The door opened and Gil poked his head out.

an He looked so sexy with his mussed hair and puzzled expression that she lost the words that had been on the tip of her tongue. His eyes rounded in surprise.

“Oh, hey,” she said.

“Hey.”

id you “You still awake?”

“Sort of.” He wore gray sweatpants and a navy blue Twilight, Texas shirt. His feet were bare.

led me “What are you doing?”

the “Putting together a bicycle.”

“Where’s Josie?”

“At the B&B with my folks. They took her over there for the night so she could do the Santa Claus thing here.”

“Do you need any help putting the bicycle together?”

ust “Know your way around a socket wrench, do you?”

“I could read the instructions.”

rrow, Smiling, he held the door wide. “C’mon in.”

ans.” She followed him inside and he closed the door.

up “You called my mother.”

“Are you mad?” he asked.

ra and “No. She showed up at the reception.”

then “Hey, what do you know? Miracles *do* happen.”

rest of “She broke up with her sixth fiancé over me.”

His eyebrows shot up on his forehead. “Really?”

“Well, in a totally Crescenda kind of way, but yeah. Thank you for calling me and putting her on the carpet.”

“You’re welcome.”

“She said only a man who loved me would have the guts to call her out.”

“You don’t say.”

“Does this mean you love me?” She lowered her lashes and cast him a sidelong glance.

imped. “Noelle, I’m over the moon for you. I tried to tell you that in the song I wrote.”

a. Josie “Yeah, I was a little overwhelmed.”
“Why is that?”
“No one’s ever professed his love for me in a song.”
“Good. I’m glad. I want to be special.”

she “Oh,” she said. “You are, but why did you wait so long to tell me?”
in “Because you’re headed for the stars and I’m just plain old Gil.”
“I’m not headed for the stars. I like keeping my feet planted firmly c
ground.”
He winced.
“What is it?”

i, T- “I gotta confess. I overheard you and Pamela talking in my office.”
She lightly swatted his shoulder. “That’s why you ran off without sa
anything?”
“You should take that job with The Tie. I don’t ever want to be the t
that stands in the way of your happiness.”

o I “You already are standing in my way,” she said.
“What are you talking about?” He angled his head as if he couldn’t t
her out.
“I don’t want to move to New York.”
“No?”
“Not in the least. In fact, I put in an offer on my grandparents’ old h
yesterday.”
“What?” A huge grin broke across his face. “Are you serious?”
“It’s on the market again and I love Twilight. It’s always felt like ho
“What about your wedding planning business?”
“They have weddings to plan right here in Twilight. I can fly back a
forth to take care of the weddings I already have scheduled in LA.”
“Really?” His eyes were shiny again like they’d been at the receptio

calling “Really. I want to be here. I want to be with you.” With other relatic
she’d thought about how much she’d have to give up for a commitmen
with Gil, she found herself thinking about how much she would get.

out.” He came closer and settled his arms around her waist. “I love you, N
I’ve been running scared, afraid of change, afraid to take a chance, but
I a run the risk of losing you. I know it’s too soon to talk about marriage, I
maybe, one day?”

ig I “I love you too, Gil. You’re my one and only. I’ve never loved any
but you.”

He kissed her then, long and deep, and then he let her go.

Letting out a shaky breath, she said, “Maybe we better finishing put that bicycle together before this starts to get spicy.”

“It’s almost done,” he said. “Just need to put on the training wheels. do that in the morning.”

“Are all the rest of the presents wrapped?”

on the “Uh-huh.”

“Well, come here then, cowboy. I’ve always wanted to make love underneath a Christmas tree.”

ying **D**awn roused them just before seven as the rosy glow crept through the curtains. Noelle opened her eyes, barely able to believe she was here w
hing Gil, and they’d finally sorted everything out between them and found t
courage to confess their true feelings.

figure “How are you this morning?” He grinned, pulling the lap blanket ov
them.

“It feels like I got run over by Santa and his reindeer.” She laughed, reaching up to touch a bow that was stuck in her hair.

“Mmm,” he said. “Now, that’s a package I’d definitely want to unw

ouse “Don’t get too frisky. There’s a seven-year-old who’ll be coming th
that door any minute.”

“One kiss?”

me.” “Are you absolutely sure I’m the one you want?”

“Noelle Curry, I love every single thing about you.”

nd She gasped, breathless with joy. Noelle met his dear gaze, stared int
eyes of the man she’d loved for a decade and a half. “Are you absolute
sure, Gil?”

nships, “It is the only sure thing I know, Bookworm.” Gil started humming
it, but song he’d written for her, the melody weaving around her soul.

Joelle. A helpless smile overtook her face as she traced his lips with her fin
The warmth of his skin melted away all her doubts and fears and in the
space left behind, a sweet, unshakable faith filled her up.

I can’t For indeed, she had truly found her home in Gil’s arms.

but At that moment, the door burst open, and Josie came tumbling in. “I
Daddy, did Santa—”

man Josie stopped in her tracks. Her eyes went wide, and her jaw flapped

as she stared at the big red bow on Noelle's head.

ting Feeling self-conscious, Noelle pulled the blanket all the way up to her chin, happy that in the middle of the night she'd gotten cold and put her clothes back on.

I can "Daddy," Josie whispered. "Did it happen? Did Santa Claus bring me a mommy for Christmas?"

"Yes," Noelle said. "He did."

"Oh boy." Josie jumped around the room. "Good thing I threw that coin into the fountain to make sure. Just wait until Silvey Zucker hears about this."

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"Oh boy." Josie jumped around the room. "Good thing I threw that coin in the fountain to make sure. Just wait until Silvey Zucker hears about this!"

Epilogue

One year later . . .

The morning sunlight glimmered off Lake Twilight as a rippling banner stretching across Ruby Street announced: Special Polar Plunge This Year December 24!

That was today, Christmas Eve.

Their wedding day.

At the marina beach, Gil, dressed in a resplendent black tuxedo, and Noelle, in her wedding dress, gazed into each other's eyes as they said "I dos" while family and friends watched.

Josie, Ebby, and Silvey were flower girls. Sienna, Sierra, and Benji were bridesmaids.

So much had happened in one short year. Noelle had closed on her grandparents' house. They'd renovated it and moved in together. Noelle had flown back and forth to LA until all her wedding obligations there had been fulfilled, then bolstered by her connection to The Tie, she sold the business for a ridiculous amount of money and opened another wedding planning business in Twilight that she operated out of the Windmill.

Cash Colton recorded Gil's song about their romance and titled it "Noelle." It shot to number three on the Billboard charts and stayed there for seven weeks. Gretchen married Tyler and Ebby became Josie's cousin and they were inseparable. On Thanksgiving, Gretchen announced she and Tyler were pregnant with twins. Gil's parents decided with more grandchildren the way they wanted to be closer and left Costa Rica for Twilight.

While Josie and Silvey would never be the best of friends—they were too competitive for that—they had learned how to get along and that was good enough. Noelle had hit it off with Joe Cheek’s wife, Gabi, and they were in a knitting club together that met every Wednesday night. Gabi introduced her to other women around town and Noelle had more friends in Twilight than she’d ever had in LA.

Crescenda was still Crescenda. Some things never changed. But at least she hadn’t gotten married again.

Everything was coming up roses for the Thomases and after so many years, they embraced their new abundance with gratitude and love.

“I now pronounce you man and wife,” the minister said. “You may kiss the bride.”

As the band played “Noelle” they stripped off down to their Santa Claus-themed swimsuits and, laughing, ran hand in hand into Lake Twilight. Noelle had gotten Noelle used to cold showers and they had fun splashing the members of the wedding party brave enough to join them in the water.

While everyone else hopped out and quickly ran back to shore, Gil and Noelle stood in the water, kissing in the circle of each other’s arms, abuzz with jubilant happiness as the sweet sound of Gil’s love song to his wife and the thumping of their hearts blended into the most perfect melody of Christmas joy.

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Crescenda was still Crescenda. Some things never changed. But at least she hadn’t gotten married again.

Everything was coming up roses for the Thomases and after so many lean years, they embraced their new abundance with gratitude and love.

“I now pronounce you man and wife,” the minister said. “You may take the plunge.”

As the band played “Noelle” they stripped off down to their Santa Claus-themed swimsuits and, laughing, ran hand in hand into Lake Twilight. Gil had gotten Noelle used to cold showers and they had fun splashing the members of the wedding party brave enough to join them in the water.

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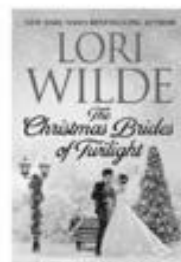
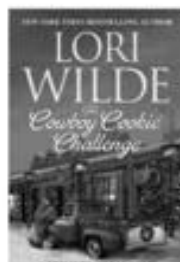
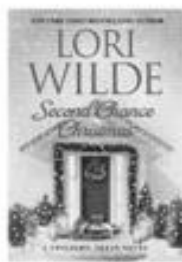
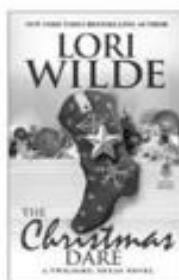
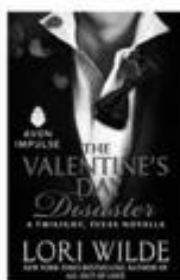
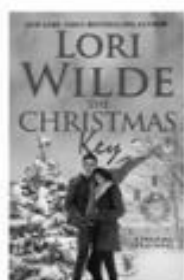
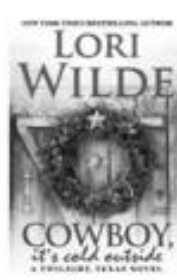
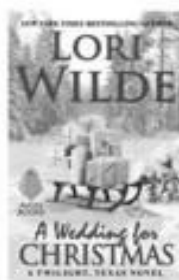
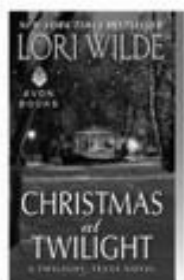


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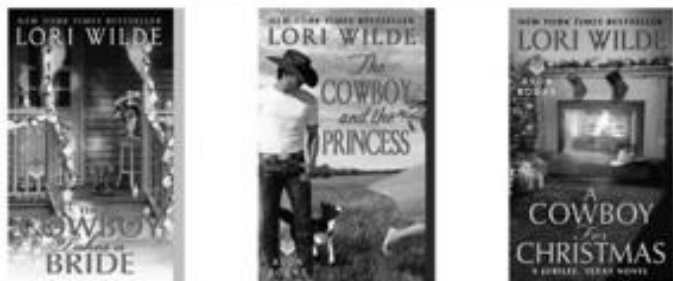
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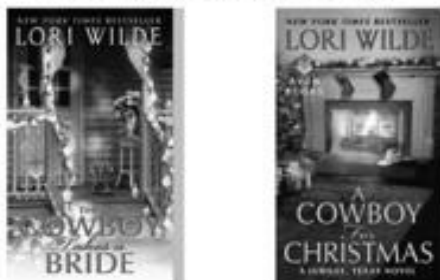
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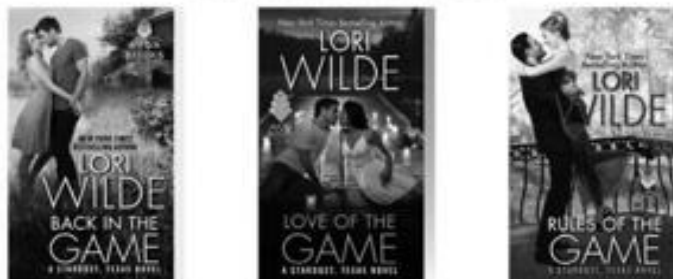
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